

Sermon May 22, 2016

“An Unselfish God”

Scripture passages: Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Psalm 8; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15

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God delights in us—humankind.

This theme kept coming to me as I read our lectionary text this week.

Referencing Wisdom, the last verses of Proverbs 8 says, “Then I [wisdom] was beside Him [God], like a master worker I was His delight, rejoicing before Him always, rejoicing in His inhabited world, and delighting in the human race.”

Psalm 8 carries this theme forward by posing the question, “What are human beings that you [God] are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” This question is in itself an answer for the psalmist. God does care for the human race, and God calls us to be partners in caring for creation.

These works of poetry implanted within our Holy Scriptures remind us that God does not only care for us, but that God calls us to into relationship with God. God ask us to be partners here on earth.

This Sunday is known as Trinity Sunday, celebrating a doctrine that was long ago written by humans. I will confess to you, that at times I find doctrines of the Christian Faith challenging, for humans, not God, set them forth. However, the doctrine of the Trinity was created to help us understand God’s relationship to God’s self along with God’s relationship to us.

The doctrine of the Trinity, explains to us the dynamic relationship between God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. This relationship is intertwined into one being, but made of three characters; three persons, yet one substance. God has partnerships within God’s self. It is this understanding that allows us to recognize that our God is a relational being. If God within God’s self is relational—God must yearn to be in relationship to us as well.

Our Gospel lesson from John aims to convey this point. Jesus explains to his disciples that all the Father has now has been given onto Him. Then Jesus goes on to remind us [his followers/the church], that we are now a part of this partnership. Upon Jesus’ departure, the Father will send an Advocate to aid the people as they move forward. This advocate is the Holy Spirit.

Just as Wisdom delighted with God over the human race in Proverbs. Now God delights in the human race equipping us through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Our God is a living God—a God who is continuously at work in the world.

However, some days it does not feel that way. Life brings hardship our way. We loss a dear friend of many years, we receive difficult news from a doctor, the circumstances of life seem too hard to bear. We become hurt, sick, saddened and we are unsure of which way to turn. And the very thing we rely on most—our faith—seems to weaver.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, encourages us to not loss heart. Here Paul proclaims a stance that is counter-cultural to ancient Roman society recommending that our suffering is not a bad thing.

The Greek word here for suffering is *thlipsis*, which can be translated in a variety of ways. It can mean trouble, oppression, or suffering. No matter the translation one chooses, the meaning behind Paul’s words remain the same.

Paul is telling the ancient people, along with us today, that suffering is not a bad thing. Our ailments are not punishments from God. God by no means wishes harm onto us.

For our transgressions have been made right through the person of Jesus Christ, Paul continues. The letter to the Romans reads, “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

This passage continues to read, “And not only that, but we boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance.” This phrase is often taken out of context, and is easily misunderstood. It is often used, to remind those in pain to continue on for their pain will help them become a better person of faith.

Paul is not trying to convey that God delights in, or causes human suffering. Instead, Paul is neutralizing the situation suggesting that our pain is not a punishment, but it is not God’s will either. The fifth chapter of the letter to the Romans is suggests that the only good thing that comes out of pain is Hope. Hope in a God that is gracious and pours love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

Hope in a God who throughout the ages has called us into relationship with Him. Hope in a God, who is in relationship to us through the persons of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

However, this relationship is not a passive one, as there is a Greek verb that’s meaning is not conveyed well in our English translations. The word peace in the Greek, *eirene*, is an active word—a verb. A word that calls forth action. God is actively seeking us—even in the midst of our sufferings.

Our lives of faith are a two-way street. As we come across trials in our lives and turn to God—God is reaching out a hand beckoning us through the Holy Spirit to trust, clinging to hope as the future seems uncertain. It is this two-sided relationship that builds us up. While God does not cause or wish pain for our lives—God too does not let our pain go to waste. Go uses it for our betterment.

There is a popular saying, I am sure each of you have heard it before. It goes like this, “No Pain, No Gain.” This passage calls for that phrase to be reevaluated. I think it is better phrased, “Don’t waste the pain.”¹ Paul is asking us not to rejoice in the fact that we suffer, but to cling to the hope that there will be a day where we no longer are oppressed. Even better, God promises that one day we will share in God’s glory.

Moreover, we are sure of this hope because God has sent us Jesus and the Holy Spirit to help unravel the relationship that is fundamentally God. This relationship summons us forth into being partners with God.

This partnership is all fine and good, but how do we best live into this relationship God calls us into?

Over the past week, I have begun to meet many of you; at this point, I admit I am only scratching the surface as to who you are as individuals and as a church. Nonetheless, there are things that are fundamentally special to this community that I have picked up on over the week.

Last Saturday, in our discussions following the silent retreat I kept hearing a few main themes: the theme of answered prayer, the theme of God’s providence, and the theme of God’s love. Most importantly, I heard the theme of God’s call upon each of your hearts, and the collective call to this community. A call, I can attest, has faithful been heard and is lived out in your daily lives.

¹ David L. Bartett, and Barbra Brown Taylor. *Feasting on the Word, “Trinity Sunday.”* (Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox Press. 2010) pg. 39

This call into a dynamic relationship with God is what we celebrate when we celebrate the Trinity. We celebrate the ways God speaks to each of us, as we silence our selves to reflect upon scripture and pray. We celebrate the ways in which God makes God's self-known to us through each other—community. We celebrate the dynamic ways God guides our community into the future beckoning us to go beyond the church doors and journey outward to serve others in need. This Monday is an example of this faithful call. Members of this community will partner with other institutions in our city to gain momentum in brining a dream, which started decades ago here in this building—*The Healing Place*—to Lynchburg in order that people who have recovered from addiction have a safe place to live.

We believe in a God that continuously gives. A God that over 2,000 years ago send His only son into this world so that we might better understand God. A God that allowed, even our Lord Jesus to suffer, so that our sins may be forgiven. A God that did not leave us there at the foot of the cross, but called us forth by means of the Holy Spirit to create a community called church.

A God, whose calling did not stop 2,000 years ago, but continued in 1954 when Bev. Cosby saw new needs in Lynchburg to offer a church home to people of Christian traditions, yet who where devoted to serve God in all aspects of their daily life. A church that does not focus on itself but commits itself to the entire journey of faith: an inward journey of prayer, Bible study, and meditation; along with an outward journey that serves those society deems unworthy—but whom Jesus calls friends.

As Bev and David departed this community, this church leaned into prayer again. Prayer that brought me here to partner with you this summer.

God delights in us—a theme that emerges in our study of scripture—but is seen in our daily lives as well.

God is an unselfish being sending Jesus Christ, his only son to die on a cross and be resurrected in order that we might understand whom God is and the love God has for us. God's generosity does not end there God today grants us faith, peace, hope, and love in order that our journey may be a little less painful. Even more so, God calls us to be His creative partner here on earth granting us responsibility to tend to his creation and freedom to partake in creating ourselves.

I cannot think of any words that are more reassuring of God's benevolence towards us—God delights in humankind [us]. As we continue our partnership in ministry this summer, let us not forget that God is in our midst—God is the one whom has called us together—and God calls us into the dynamic triune divine relationship as well.

Let us go forth from this place clinging to the gifts God has given us faith, peace, hope and love; gifts that guide us into the future—even when that future may be uncertain.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen