

TO DIE FOR

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
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Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19

Romans 5:1-11

I am beginning today a series of sermons on Paul's letter to the Romans, based on a book by Fleming Rutledge entitled *Not Ashamed of the Gospel*. Romans is the longest of Paul's letters and certainly among the most important. Written at the height of the apostle's career, it conveys the full richness of his experience of Christ as well as the full maturity of his thought.

The lectionary plops us down in the fifth chapter Paul's letter to the young church in Rome, where we read:

While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

Paul is dictating to a secretary,¹ which is the way most of his letters were written, and you can often see how his thoughts tumble over each other. For instance, in this passage, Paul begins by declaring that “Christ died for the ungodly.” Then he starts thinking, “What did I just say? Died for the ungodly? Who would die for an ungodly person? Most people wouldn't even die for an upright person. Well . . . maybe a person might conceivably dare to die for an especially saintly person” (“although I doubt it,” you can almost hear him thinking). If you look at those two verses, 6 and 7, you can see how he's thinking out loud. Verse 7 has parentheses around it, so to speak. The question is, who would die for what? What is “to die for”? Who is to die for?

I think we can all grasp the extraordinary significance of someone dying for someone else. I think of Steven Spielberg's movie about World War II, *Saving Private Ryan*. It's the story of a squad of soldiers who are sent out, in the days after the Normandy invasion, to find one Private Ryan, the fourth son of an Iowa family whose three brothers have all been killed in combat. General George Marshall has decided that Private Ryan, who is somewhere behind enemy lines, is to be brought home at all costs. The mission is very costly. There is lots of devotion and sacrifice and incredible courage as the squad carries out its assignment. At the very end, many of the GIs are dead, Private Ryan will be saved. He comes upon the captain of the squad—the Tom Hanks character—who in civilian life is a high school English teacher, a father and husband, lying mortally wounded. The captain says to Private Ryan—the last words of the film—his last words, “Earn this.” Earn it. You have been given a very precious gift. Your life has been bought at a very dear price. Others have died so that you might live.

¹ Romans 16:22.

Dying for others, dying for one's country, dying so that others may live: this is a routine description of what soldiers do. Many military memorials contain Jesus' words from the Gospel of John, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."² It is universally acknowledged that such ultimate sacrifices are worthy of remembrance and reverence.

But in today's text from Romans, Paul is more radical than John. Paul goes beyond the idea of dying for one's friends, for one's family, for one's countrymen, for one's comrades in arms. Paul does not say that Christ died for his friends. He says that Christ died *for the ungodly*. He says that Christ died for us *while we were his enemies*. He says that *while we were still* [or *yet*] *sinners* Christ died for us.

Notice that little word *yet*, or *still*. While we were still sinners he died for us. That word carries a lot of freight. It means that we hadn't made any progress toward being sinless. Have you got that? A lot of religion is based on the idea that people can make progress toward being sinless. The Old Testament shows us that it's not true; the people of Israel flunked the Covenant, over and over and over. We can indeed make progress against our drinking or smoking or road rage or racism—and the Holy Spirit works in us to do that—but we remain sinners. The Presbyterian *Brief Statement of Faith* puts it this way:

[W]e rebel against God; we hide from our Creator.
 Ignoring God's commandments,
 we violate the image of God in others and ourselves,
 accept lies as truth,
 exploit neighbor and nature,
 and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.
 We deserve God's condemnation.

In this life, there never comes a time when we can stop saying, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Jesus, you may recall, told us a parable about that prayer. St. Luke tells us that he told it to "some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." Here's the story:

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. (In order to get the point of the story, remember that the tax collectors were despised on two counts—they were collaborators, and they took profits for themselves.) The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income to the poor." But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" Jesus, looking straight at the self-righteous people who were listening, said, "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other."³

Jesus got killed for telling stories like that.

² John 15:16.

³ Luke 18:9-14.

People don't like to think of themselves as sinners. Let's get rid of all that gloomy talk about sin, people say. Nobody wants to come to church to hear about sin. We're all Pharisees of one sort or another, you see. That's why we resist the gospel which tells us that "While we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for [us]." We don't like that part about being helpless, so we substitute another gospel, the gospel of "God helps those who help themselves." As many polls have shown, vast numbers of us in this country think that comes from the Bible. It can't be said too many times: it does not come from the Bible. The Bible tells us exactly the opposite: When we could not help ourselves, Christ died for us.⁴

"God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us . . . therefore, we are now justified by his blood." This word *justified* is the same word that Jesus uses in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. "I tell you, this man [the unrighteous one, the ungodly one] went down to his house justified rather than the other." This word *justified* is central to understanding the Christian gospel. Think of a person who is suggesting a certain action, a questionable action. He consults another person, who says, "How are you going to justify that?" It means to make something right, or at least to make it *seem* right. In Paul's letters, God is the one who justifies, and traditionally the church has used legal metaphors to explain the action. God in the role of judge pronounces a verdict of acquittal on a guilty (or sinful) defendant.

There has always been debate about the word *justification*, so central to St. Paul's teaching. Does it mean to make things *look* right, or to *really make* things right? Some have said that Paul's concept of justification is a legal fiction, a declaration of "not guilty" even though the accused person really is guilty. But that doesn't get at the core of what Paul means. Paul means that the righteousness of God is actively transforming, that it actually *makes right what is wrong*, and that that was what Christ was doing when he died for us all.

Paul's gospel is more radical than Luke's. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is wonderful. It has comforted me many a time, and it teaches us how to pray. But taken by itself it might tempt us to divide up sinners into two camps. You have the good sinners, like the repentant tax collector, who beat their breasts and can't even look up to heaven, so great is their remorse. But then you have the bad sinners, who do not repent and show no remorse. What about them?

Here's where Paul's word *ungodly* comes to the fore. Remember we said earlier that Paul doesn't say Christ died for his friends? Paul says Christ died for his enemies. "While we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son." Nothing is said about repentance, nothing is said about remorse. Repentance is not the condition for our restoration. Remorse and breast-beating are not the conditions for our restoration. There are no conditions for our restoration. Here is the gospel: "While we were still sinners Christ died for the ungodly. While we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, saved through him from the wrath of God." Remorse and breast-beating are not the conditions. They are consequences. They are *our response* to this good news.

⁴ Paraphrase of 5:6.

Remember the question we asked at the beginning? Who would die for an ungodly person? Who is the ungodliest person you can think of right now? Vladimir Putin? Kim Jong-un? Can you imagine asking American troops to go and give their lives for one of those tyrants? It is too crazy even to consider. Yet that, Paul says, is exactly what Jesus did. He died precisely for the sort of person that would crucify the Son of God and mock him while they were doing it.

You see, Christianity at its deepest center is not religious. The Cross is too offensive to be religious. Paul was the first person to put that into written words. He referred to the Cross as a *scandal*.⁵ If you look up “religion” in the dictionary you will notice that all the definitions are about us—human beings. We are the doers. Systems of belief, worship, prayer, rituals—these are things that *we do* in seeking after God. But the story of the Bible is not the story of our seeking after God. It is the story of God seeking after us. “Adam, where are you?”⁶ Those are the first words Adam heard after he rebelled and plunged the entire creation into Sin and Death. The work of redemption is God’s and God’s alone. That is our great confidence and our great hope. God has done a work which is so comprehensive that it is able to rectify the greatest wrongs. In the ultimate courtroom, we are justified by the love of Christ which not only acquits us but sets us on the path to God’s righteousness.

This means that our standing before God is completely changed. It is no longer what it was. It is no longer that of his enemies. Imagine that you have had your life saved by a person that you once persecuted or despised. It would radically change your attitude to that person. Now imagine that that person not only saved your life but actually stepped into a lethal situation—between you and your certain death—and died instead of you, taking your place. Can it be doubted that your life would be changed?

“That’s what has happened to us as a result of the Cross of Christ. Listen to Isaiah:

He was despised, he was rejected by men...but...upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.⁷

“Listen to Paul:

While we were enemies [enemies of God, enemies of one another] we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son. How much more, surely, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life!⁸

“By his death, by his life. Think of the twelve apostles, with him in the “upper room” in Jerusalem for a last supper together. They are we; we are they. Enemies seated around the same table, fed by the same bread, sharing the same cup, falling asleep, abandoning him, running away to hide, denying him three times—yet reconciled by his death, saved by his life. There is nothing in the world’s religions that is remotely like this story of the self-giving of the Son of God to effect *the salvation of the ungodly*.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 1:23. The Greek word *skandalon* is more offensive than our word ‘scandal,’ which has a slightly titillating sound.

⁶ Genesis 3:12.

⁷ Isaiah 53:3, 5.

⁸ Romans 5:10.

“What is “to die for”? We are.

You are.

To the Lord our God, Alpha and Omega, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.