

MESSAGES from LIBERTY

“WORDS TO LIVE BY”

5. Love Story (Romans 5:1-8)

Pastor John Hart

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Becky & I came to Liberty Church when our children were already grown.

If you were part of Liberty back in 2006-2008, you might remember our youngest child, Emily, who attended Dublin-Jerome High School for her junior and senior years before heading off to college. Emily was a Vacation Bible School teacher and she periodically read the Scripture passage during worship.

And some of you might have vague memories of our middle child, Carolyn. She's got my red hair. She has a nice singing voice, and a couple of times when she was home from college, she did the “Special Music” spot during worship.

But very few of you believe Becky and me when we claim that we have a son, Brian. You've heard stories about him, but you've never actually seen him. The only “Brian sightings” at Liberty happened during our first four years here, when he came with our family to the 6:00 Christmas Eve service. But since none of you are allowed to come to the 6:00 Christmas Eve service, you still might doubt that we actually have a son.

Well, we do. Brian lives in Boulder, Colorado where he works with youth sports, mostly through the YMCA. Brian is taller and thinner than me, but otherwise he looks exactly like me. But even though he looks like me, Brian approaches life very differently than I do. Becky and I refer to it as “Brian-land”. I could try to describe Brian-land to you, but instead, I'm going to tell you a story.

Several summers ago, Brian was coaching a middle school baseball team. Brian thought he had drafted a pretty good team, and he had high hopes for them. But they lost their first game, mostly because of terrible fielding – ground balls went through their legs, they dropped fly balls, they missed the cut-off man, they threw to the wrong base.

Now, if I were the coach of this team, here's what I would have done at the next practice: fielding drills! I would have pounded ground balls at them, fungoed fly balls at them, put them in scenarios (runner on first, one out, line drive to right field) to make them think through what to do.

But that's me. Instead, Brian used their next practice to teach them ... trick plays. I'm dead serious. This is Brian-land. And here's what happened in the third inning of their next game.

With nobody out and a man on second, Brian gave his team the signal. Slowly, the second baseman and the shortstop started moving further and further away from second base, allowing the runner to take a bigger and bigger lead. Then, without warning, the pitcher wheels and throws the ball right at second base – the centerfielder has snuck in to cover and tags the runner out.

Later in the same inning, there's a man on third, one out. Brian calls time out and walks out to the mound to talk to the pitcher, and the whole infield joins him. While they're conferring, the pitcher slips the baseball into the third baseman's mitt. Brian returns to the dugout, the players return to their positions, the runner on third takes a lead – and the third baseman tags him out. Two outs.

Same inning, man on first, two outs. The pitcher throws over to first to keep the runner close. The pitcher throws over again. The pitcher throws over a third time. And as the runner is getting up from sliding back into the bag, the first baseman throws the ball back to the pitcher – except he fakes it, he buries the ball in his mitt. The pitcher goes into the stretch, the runner takes a lead off first – and the first baseman tags him out.

Three trick plays, three outs. Brian's team is so psyched that they score 10 runs in the bottom of the third, the mercy rule is invoked, and they win.

Now you know our son Brian.

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This morning, our “Words to Live By” come from the fifth chapter of Paul's *Letter to the Romans*. Listen to God's Word:

Since we have been put right with God through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Christ has brought us by faith into this experience of God's grace, in which we now live. And so we boast of the hope we have of sharing God's glory! We also rejoice in our troubles, because we know that trouble produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope. This hope does not disappoint us, for God has poured out his love into our hearts by means of the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

When we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. It is a difficult thing for someone to die for a righteous person — though someone might dare to die for a good person. But God proves his love for us in this — it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us!

Paul's Letter to the Romans is a long letter that is one coherent argument. This morning's passage comes at one of the hinge points in Paul's argument.

Paul has been talking about "justification by faith", that we have been put right with God, not by what we've done – that we've been good, that we've been religious, or that we bring something to the table. Rather, we've been put right with God through what Jesus has done for us. And Paul invites us to believe this good news, because in believing we are brought into relationship with God – a life of peace and grace.

But then there is a "but". Paul recognizes that life for the Christians in Rome was not all "peace and grace" – there was also struggle and suffering. So Paul marshals three points to address their suffering.

First, Paul says, "We rejoice in our troubles, because we know that trouble produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope" (v 3-4). This is one of my least favorite verses by Paul. "Trouble produces endurance which produces character which produces hope" – it sounds a lot like the father in the comic strip "Calvin and Hobbes", how doing unpleasant things produces "character".

Paul's second point to suffering Christians is this: "Hope doesn't disappoint us, for God has poured out his love into our hearts by means of the Holy Spirit." That when Christians suffer, through faith we also know God's presence, we experience God being with us – walking with us, holding us in our suffering. This is God's gift of the Holy Spirit, God living in our hearts.

But then Paul goes deeper. Beyond the character-building aspects of endurance, even beyond the experience of God's living presence with us in our suffering, Paul has something more important to say. And he can only share this truth by telling a story.

Because Christianity is a story. When you open the Bible, you don't find a list of spiritual truths, a list of ethical maxims, a list of religious principles that tell how to live a God-filled life. No. You open the Bible and you find stories. Stories about God. Stories involving all kinds of different people in all kinds of different circumstances at all kinds of different times.

The *Letter to the Romans* is Paul's telling of the Christian story about God and humanity:

- the story of God creating us as His precious creatures
- the story of us turning our backs on our Creator and going our own selfish and sinful way

- and the story of God winning us back by coming to us as one of us in Jesus.

And then Paul gets to the crucial part, the central chapter of this love story.

Romans 5 is not the first time Paul tells this story. In fact, you can't get very far in any of Paul's letters without hearing him tell this love story, using different words as he tells this story over and over:

God offered Jesus, so that by his death he should become the means by which our sins are forgiven. (Romans 3:24-26)

Just as all people were made sinners as the result of the disobedience of Adam, in the same way they will all be put right with God as the result of the obedient death of Christ. (Romans 5:19)

By the death of Christ we are set free, that is, our sins are forgiven. How great is the grace of God, which he gave to us in such large measure! (Ephesians 1:7-8)

At one time you were far away from God and were his enemies because of the things you did and thought. But now, by means of the death of his Son, God has made you his friends, in order to bring you holy, pure, and faultless into his presence. (Colossians 1:21-22)

So Paul re-assures the suffering Christians in Rome by telling them the love story, the decisive point of all the ways and works of God:

When we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. It is a difficult thing for someone to die for a righteous person – though someone might dare to die for a good person. But God proves his love for us in this – it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us!

How do you know that God loves you? How do you know, even in hard times, that the God you are dealing with is a God of love and grace and forgiveness and compassion? This is how we know – because we know this story: “God proves his love for us in this – it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us.” God shows his love, God demonstrates his love, God reveals his love – God *proves* his love – in the story of the cross of Jesus Christ.

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Let me tell you two reasons why I believe, in the deepest part of my heart, why these are words to live by.

First, “*God proves his love for us in this – it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us*” – these words focus us on the cross of Jesus, which is the absolute center of our faith.

We all know that the cross is the symbol of Christianity. But, unlike any other religion, our symbol tells a story. You see, the cross isn't some generic religious symbol that refers us to God or to Jesus. No – the cross points us directly to a specific story. The cross points soberly and graphically to Jesus' catastrophic, cruel and cursed death. Because while the cross is the absolute lowest point in the story of God and humanity – it tells about our utter rejection of God, our utter defiance of God, our utter disobedience to God – this lowest point is also the high point, the saving point, of our faith. Because the Good News is that, through the offering of His Son, through the crucifixion of Jesus, through the death of God – the holy God has put unholy, resistant, sinful people into a love relationship with Himself: justified, forgiven, reconciled. The cross is the absolute center of the Christian faith because it perfectly tells the story of the God who will stop at nothing to win people like us for Himself.

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And second, “*God proves his love for us in this – it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us*” are words to live by because they are the best words for us in our suffering.

When we suffer, when things go bad in our lives, we instinctively ask, “Why? Why did this have to happen? Why, God, didn't you prevent this from happening?” We think that if we could get a decent answer to “Why?” it would help us through our grief. But Paul takes a more helpful route.

Here's a good tip for Christian living. Whenever you are confused and can't get your mind around something about the faith, go to the center. There are all sorts of questions we struggle with as we try to live as Christians, and there are all sorts of answers to be found in the Bible. But the way to get the best answer, always, is to go to the center. And the Ground Zero of our faith is the gracious love of God for sinners revealed in the death of Jesus Christ.

To the Christian believers who are struggling and looking for hope, Paul goes to the center, telling them, “I know you're suffering right now, that you're hurting. I know you believe in God, and I also know that God seems very far away right now. But remember who we're talking about when we're talking about God. We're not talking about some passive onlooker in the sky. We're not talking about some remote figure who's mysteriously yanking the levers of fate. No. We're talking about the God who has proven His love for us, not in words but in fact. Fix your eyes again on the Cross, because it's there, and only there, that we see who God is:

- On the Cross we see the God who stakes everything for us.

- On the Cross we see the God who commits Himself completely to us.
- On the Cross we see the God who loves us further than it is possible to love.

Because, on the Cross, we don't see an abstract God who's "all-powerful" and "all-loving". We see a flesh & blood God who uses all of His power by putting aside His power to pour Himself out for us in sacrificial, redeeming love.

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Friends, the Gospel is a story. It's not a list of facts or truths – it's a love story. And the very center of this love story is: "God proves his love for us in this – it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us!"

And these – these are the central props in this story: bread as body, juice as blood. They point us to the same place, the same story, the same love. And the table's story, just like Paul's, is told in the present tense. Because when we eat and drink, we just don't remember; we re-focus. We re-focus on the center, the Ground Zero of God's love story, the gift of God's love for us proven in the cross of Jesus Christ. So that we may experience in the present the assurance of God's love for us – right now, whoever or however we may be.

When we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. It is a difficult thing for someone to die for a righteous person - though someone might dare to die for a good person. But God proves his love for us in this — it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us!

AMEN

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LIBERTY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
 7080 Olentangy River Road
 Delaware, OH 43015
 (740) 548-6075 / info@libertybarnchurch.com