

**PROVEN LOVE**  
**Romans 5:1-8**  
**Preached by Dr. Cahill**  
**Babcock Presbyterian Church**  
**Sunday, May 22, 2016**

“But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.”

This solitary statement is the sum total of the Christian gospel. Christ died for sinners in need of divine intervention. Yes, we have our better moments when we commit deeds of kindness and acts of love, but all of them put together are cancelled out by the times we obey our baser instincts and do things we shouldn't do and don't do things we should do.

The things we shouldn't do are called sins of commission. The things we should do but don't do are called sins of omission. Either way, given the chance, we, like sheep, tend to wander off, expecting to find greener pastures in the next field.

Think of the Prodigal Son. He was absolutely convinced he could make a better life for himself if he left his father's house and went out on his own. He didn't anticipate the consequences of running away and cutting corners. He had to learn the hard way that bad choices lead to bad ends.

Earlier in his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul assumed the role of God's prosecuting attorney, making his case against us.

“Ever since the creation of the world, God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So, they (“they” meaning us) are without excuse: for although they knew God, they did not honor him as God...but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise they became fools.”

Paul made the water tight case that ignorance is no excuse because we're really not all that ignorant. Whether we like it or not, God encoded into our DNA the ability to know right from wrong.

As I sometimes say to the young men I visit at the Baltimore County Detention Center, “Before you did whatever you did that landed you here, didn't you hear that silent voice telling you, ‘Don't do it, get out of here, go home.’”

The more honest boys readily admit they did hear that voice. At that moment, they knew the difference between right and wrong but they did it anyway. They know they can't justify themselves. They know they're guilty. They also know they deserve to be punished, even though they don't want to be punished.

Can you blame them? If you and I are honest, we're really no different. Maybe we don't break society's laws but we do break God's law. Likewise, we deserve to be punished but who wants to be punished?

The New Testament scholar William Barclay told a story illustrating God's proven love and self sacrifice. I've shared it with you before but it bears repeating. It takes place during the Russian Civil War, almost one hundred years ago.

The White Russians were fighting for a constitutional monarchy and the Reds, the Communists, were fighting to establish a totalitarian dictatorship. The White Russians were losing. The survivors hid in the forest with their families. It was winter and rations were low.

One night, a young lieutenant approached the commander and said, "Sir, someone is stealing food from the commissary.

The commander declared, "This cannot stand, whoever is caught stealing from the commissary will be punished and receive twenty lashes."

The next night, the young lieutenant reported, "Sir, we caught the person stealing from the commissary."

The commander was visibly shaken. He loved his men and hated the thought of having to punish one of them. Even so, he repeated, "The guilty one must be punished, twenty lashes."

"But, sir," the lieutenant protested, "it's your own mother."

"Justice must still be served," the commander insisted, "the punishment is twenty lashes... but I will take the punishment."

"But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Question: why did Christ agree to take the punishment we deserve? The only answer we can come up with is God's ways are not our ways. In Gethsemane, Jesus begged his father to find another way. He knew his father in heaven could've chosen a less costly way, but he didn't. Again, God's ways are not our ways.

So, since the cross remained the instrument to justify us, all we can say is this: Besides being the personification of perfect love, God is also the personification of perfect justice. Therefore, God can never tolerate injustice. God can't and won't pretend we never sin. That means someone must be held accountable, otherwise God's justice would be rendered unjust.

Thankfully, God hates sin but still loves sinners. So, to certify us as justified, God allowed us to give Jesus our worst so God could turn the tables and give us back his best. Think

about that, God used our sins to forgive our sins. How else do you explain Jesus' plea from the cross, "Father forgive them because they don't know what they're doing."

"They don't know what they're doing?" Doesn't that contradict what Paul wrote to the Romans, "Ever since the creation of the world, God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood...so they are without excuse for although they knew God... they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened..." (Romans 1:20-21.)

The religious leaders and the Romans knew exactly what they were doing when they tried Jesus in a kangaroo court and then nailed him to the cross but they didn't know who they were doing it to. They believed Jesus was an imposter. If they realized they were nailing God in the flesh to that cross, they would've been terrified and begged to be forgiven.

What about us? Are you terrified if not horrified when you realize your sins nailed Jesus to the cross? After processing that terrible admission, here's something else to ponder: Are you grateful when you realize Jesus was taking the punishment you deserve?

Listen again to the final two verses in this passage from Romans because it ties everything together.

"For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation." (Romans 5:10-11)

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Paul declared that despite our voracious appetite for sinning, through Christ we are reconciled with God. Mind you, we broke the relationship, not God, but God initiated the process of reconciliation, not us. "While we were still sinners Christ died for us."

According to the Church calendar, today is Trinity Sunday. On Trinity Sunday all we can do is acknowledge and bow down to the unexplainable mystery of three distinct personalities in one God. But there is something we can say about the Trinity that keeps it from being a complicated theological doctrine and becoming a life affirming reality.

Let's begin with this. It's helpful to know that God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost enjoy perfectly balanced relationships with one another. God the Father loves the Son and the Holy Spirit. God the Son loves the Father and the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit loves the Father and the Son.

There also appears to be a perfectly balanced division of labor between the three to make things happen for our good. The three cooperate and complement each other, making our salvation possible. The Apostle Paul wrote,

“Therefore, since we are justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ... because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” (Romans 5:1,5)

This is the only time there’s any mention of the Holy Spirit in this passage. Usually it seems God the Father and especially God the Son, get all the attention while the Holy Spirit is almost forgotten. Yet, the Holy Spirit is working continuously, unseen and unheard in the background, quietly reconciling us to God through Christ. All three persons in the Trinity play critical roles to secure our salvation to make friendship with God possible.

Don’t be troubled if you can’t understand the Trinity. After all, it’s not meant to be understood. But you can be overwhelmed with gratitude for God revealing himself through Christ and empowering us through the Holy Spirit so we can know, love and enjoy God forever.

Knowing God leads to intimacy as you experience being one of God’s beloved children, which then motivates you to repent. By grace, you are turned around and transformed, led away from the desire to sin and the desire for Christ. By giving Christ authority over your life, you enter into that same redeeming relationship shared between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Remember, Christianity is essentially all about the quality of our friendships in this life and the next. Even though we were still sinners, God through Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit frees us to be friends with God, which guarantees our humanity and motivates us to share our humanity with neighbors who need to know the power of God’s love as much as you do.

Again, understanding the mystery of God, being able to recite chapter and verse the theological underpinnings of our faith isn’t necessary to bring Christ’s love to the world. All that matters is you and I allowing Christ and his love to live in and through us. That’s what the early Christians banked on. God through Christ and the Holy Spirit transforming the world, one life at a time, through their discipleship.

God proved his love for us when he sent Christ to die for us. Now it’s your turn to return the favor. Die with Christ so you can be raised in power with Christ, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.