

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

Rev. Dr. Bart Roush

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Romans 8:28–35, 37–39

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

God of mercy, you promised never to break your covenant with us.

Amid all the changing words of our generation, speak your eternal Word that does not change. Then may we respond to your gracious promises with faithful and obedient lives, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God’s purpose. For those whom God foreknew God also predestined to be conformed to the image of God’s Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom God predestined God also called; and those whom God called God also justified; and those whom God justified God also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? God who did not withhold God’s own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will God not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Romans, while still a letter written by Paul to a particular faith community, may be the most comprehensive theology that Paul writes. It was this book that Martin Luther was reading, that began to make him ponder and worry about some of the teachings of the church. It was his study of Romans that eventually led him to nail his thesis on the door of the Wittenberg Chapel enumerating where he thought the church was going astray.

Luther was specifically worried about a works-righteousness; the idea that our salvation depended upon our own acts. He was concerned that people were being taught and believed that we received God’s grace only by doing certain things, and that we had to receive enough grace to find favor with God. As Luther read the book of Romans, he became troubled by this idea and thought the teaching of the church was diverging from what he read in scripture.

Specifically, in the third chapter, Luther read these words, “But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

And these words in chapter five, “Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”

These passages articulate what became known as the Five Solas of the Protestant Reformation. They were an articulation of what salvation is based on. Sola means one or alone in Latin. The Five Solas are, *sola Gratia, sola fide, solus Christus, sola scriptura, soli deo gloria*. Salvation by grace alone, By faith alone, in Christ alone, according to scripture alone, for God’s glory alone.

Adults on Wednesday nights have been studying some foundations of Presbyterian theology, and our very first session, our starting point was to talk about grace. This is because our understanding of grace impacts every aspect of our faith and life.

To understand our salvation by grace alone is the foundation for everything else. Grace alone, salvation not through any merit of ours, not through our acts or works, but through our faith in God as the author of our salvation in the work of Christ as attributed in scripture, salvation through grace alone.

This pondering by Luther, and his call for correction, well, it started a reform, something bigger than him. Luther did not intend to start a completely different version of Christianity, he only intended to correct the church. But based on his writings, others took up his understanding and it rocked the world, a movement started that became known as the Protestant Reformation. Luther’s ideas were taken up by John Calvin, a French theologian, Geneva, Switzerland, and then by his student John Knox in Scotland, from which the modern Presbyterian Church is derived.

This idea of grace alone says that we are made right (or justified) with God by the work of Christ, which imperfect humans receive by faith alone. And when we understand justification, we experience peace with God and growing confidence in living for God.

This really is a radical notion, as I have said, it is foundational in our faith, and allows us to be who God made us to be and lets us know God is for us. It affirms the words we heard earlier in our reading in chapter eight, “that nothing can separate us from God’s love in Jesus Christ.” Not any external thing, not death or life (which about covers it) but he goes on just so we get the point, nothing now, or nothing in the future, no matter who is president or governor, not our boss or our teacher can take away God’s love for us. God’s love isn’t dependent on our greatest moments, or our lowest moments, nothing in all creation, nothing, absolutely nothing will take God’s love from us. It is a gift freely given no matter what.

And this means God wants us to be uniquely who God made us to be. God wants us to live fully into our authentic selves. God’s freely given grace means at least two things:

1. You were created in God’s image.
2. If God meant for you to be like everybody else, God would have made you that way.

We have been looking at Oak Grove’s values these last several weeks, and this week the value we are talking about is, “Authenticity.” We have defined authenticity in this way: “We believe all people are made in the image of God, and that the community of faith should be a place where people can honestly express their true and whole selves in healthy ways.”

The more we as Christians own our worth based on God’s incredible love for us, the more we can begin to see ourselves as worthy, not based on performance, certainly not based on perfection, but based on position. Upon whose we are, God’s beloved children.

The author and theologian, Henri Nouwen, wrote, “Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the ‘Beloved.’ Being the Beloved constitutes the core truth of our existence.”ⁱ

When we understand justification, we experience peace with God and growing confidence in living for God. Our understanding and trust in justification then allows us to move into becoming, into a process of sanctification. Sanctification is the theological word for the process of becoming more our true selves and more Christlike.

When babies are born, they are a lot of work. They can’t feed themselves, talk, hold up their own heads. Despite all of this work, all the attention that is needed, parents love them in the middle of these phases. And there is also the expectation they will grow up. You expect growth.

Similarly, although God lovingly pursues us and rescues us just as we are—mess and all—God doesn’t want us to sit there forever. While Jesus never asks us to hide who we are and what we are dealing with, he does ask us to lay those issues down, and surrender to being renewed and transformed. (Romans 12:2)

Paul says in Romans 12, before he describes the characteristics of a mature Christian, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.” An authentic person is one who is both privately and publicly putting off the old self

and, by God's grace, putting on the renewed self. And we hold one another in community, in healthy ways, accountable for our authentic selves.

This renewal is not done alone or in a vacuum, but in a grace-filled community. There are times when our authentic selves may not always be our best selves. Should we be true to the self who has low blood sugar and feels like a piece of garbage? The self who wants to punch the driver who cut us off on the highway? The self who says, "Forget everything, except what makes me feel good"? The self who doesn't do repentance, discomfort, or a crucified God? With Jesus, we can stop pretending to be good all the time; We can even stop pretending to be "authentic." We can actually be authentic; to be the true person God made us to be because we are loved. We are loved because of grace.

This is the good news of our faith, we do not have to earn this grace, it is freely given. When we understand this, we can then be set free in joy to be more fully who God made us to be, and to become more and more Christlike.

Brené Brown, who has spent the past ten years studying authenticity, writes in her book, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, "Authenticity is the daily practice of letting go of who we think we are supposed to be and embracing who we actually are." She says, choosing authenticity means:

- cultivating the ability to be imperfect
- allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, and
- setting boundaries.

"Vulnerability is the source of authenticity", Brown explains in her book *Daring Greatly*. But being real doesn't mean flaunting the details of your private life. Rather, sharing your story with only a select few is

wise, not closed-off. Healthy vulnerability recognizes when to share and when to remain silent. This helps you strike the balance between guarding who you are at your core and expressing it.

Those who have a strong sense of their own identity and the ability to express it always have healthy boundaries. Brown says, “Setting healthy boundaries is simple: it comes down to letting others know what’s okay and what’s not.”

Brown uses the acronym B-I-G to explain why boundaries are important: we must set *boundaries* to maintain our *integrity* and still make the most *generous* assumptions about others. In this way, we express our authentic selves by sticking to our principles, while also being as compassionate as possible. Healthy relationships are required to be our authentic selves, and it allows others to be their authentic selves.

C. S. Lewis famously said, “Friendship... is born at the moment when one [person] says to another ‘What! You too? I thought that no one but myself...’”ⁱⁱ Without authenticity, these moments are impossible. Authenticity makes way for compassion by expressing trust and allowing us to connect with others over shared experiences. When we begin to live authentically, we recognize our worth, express vulnerability, and set boundaries. Only then can we turn outward and express compassion.

People crave authenticity. People want honesty, vulnerability, and healthy boundaries. They want healthy relationships where they are affirmed for who they are, and held accountable to their values, ethics, and their purpose. Living in these ways allows then for us to turn out toward others, to have compassion and care, to make a difference in the world.

There is plenty of research that shows the millennial generations, and those younger are moving away from the church. The research also suggests that what these people want most out of church is authenticity. Authenticity in word and deed. They want accountability and action. Not judgement and condemnation. They are seeking a place to belong first. They are not interested in what we believe if they don't feel they belong, that there is a place for them, that our actions reflect our values, and that we are actually doing the work of justice. They are not interested in hiding who they are in order to fit in. And they can smell anything that is disingenuous or dishonest a mile away.

If you watch the Super Bowl later today, and you pay attention to the commercials, you will likely see at least one, maybe two, that are compelling, maybe a little surprising, and that will be about Jesus. Perhaps you have seen one of these ads already. They highlight the struggles, doubts, and difficulty of being human, and they remind us that Jesus was fully human and because of this, "He Gets Us." That is the tag line of the commercials, "He Gets Us."

It's a compelling message, but there is also something unsettling about them. Plenty of people are skeptical about them, and it turns out there may be reason for this skepticism. It has never been clear about who is behind this ad campaign, but people are savvy, and have begun to ask questions. It appears that many of the people behind these ads do not reflect the values the ads appear to espouse. When you dig a little deeper, many of the congregations and people behind the ads are conservative organizations who are anti-LGBTQ equality. In addition, it is estimated that almost a billion dollars will be spent on this overall ad campaign, money that critics, rightly say could actually go to help marginalized and oppressed persons. ⁱⁱⁱ

The desire for action, accountability, and authenticity isn't just a generational thing, it isn't just for someone under 35. We all want to be ourselves, to be accepted and loved, to have a church that says we are not perfect, but we are beloved. We aren't perfect, but we belong. We aren't perfect, but we will work hard to make a more-perfect world. We don't always get it right, but we will try to be the best versions of ourselves, and we will help one another do that. We are who we are and that is a beloved child of God.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? God, who did not withhold God's own Son but gave him up for all of us, will God not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

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Amen.

ⁱ Henri Nowen, "You Are the Beloved"

ⁱⁱ C.S. Lewis, "The Four Loves"

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/11/us/he-gets-us-super-bowl-commercials-ccc/index.html>