

Sharing the Glory
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Romans 5:1-5

George Buttrick, renowned 20th century Presbyterian preacher told about a time he was flying to a speaking engagement and working on his sermon. His seatmate asked what he was doing and when he responded, the man answered derisively, "Oh, religion! I don't like to get caught up in the ins and outs of religion. 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' The Golden Rule: that's my religion." Buttrick asked, "And what do you do?" "I work at the university. I'm an astronomer." "Oh, astronomy!" replied Buttrick. "I don't like to get caught up in the ins and outs of astronomy. 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star:' that's my astronomy."

The truth may be simple, but it is never simplistic. Religious fundamentalism finds fertile soil when complex realities are reduced to the lowest common denominator and made absolute. Indoctrination may make complexity easier to grasp and bestow some comfort in a world of imponderables. But it's a little like making a nursery rhyme in order to teach quantum mechanics. Instead, Christian faith that reflects its Creator delights in mystery, in nuance, in the human struggle to "work out salvation" in ways appropriate to the time. In fact, the Judeo-Christian religious tradition attributes near god-like status to humanity: made in God's image, we exercise sovereignty, freedom, and reason to live nobly and with purpose in this world. Not for heaven only do we seek relationship with God. It is equally for this time, the precious days and years of our earthly lives that we want to know the truth.

The apostle Paul's letter to the Romans lays out his theological understanding of the divine-human dance. Joined at the heart of creation, then separated at birth, God and humanity have had a hard go of it---drawing close at times and spinning away; conversing for

awhile, then turning away in silence; worshiping with glad hearts then skulking off in rebellion. But God remained ever faithful, and sent Jesus to be a real-life, human embodiment of divine compassion, wisdom and power. The breach between us, once gaping, has been closed; and we who were wrenched from the arms of the Beloved have been restored and reconciled. That should be a given. But instead, the church has sometimes made it an end – as if the goal of the Christian life is nothing more than for individuals to receive the saving truth. The apostle more than suggests it's just the beginning. Notice how the morning text begins with "therefore" – there's no question that we have peace with God. But so what? What are the consequences of salvation? How, then, shall we live? Listen for God's Word to you in the reading from the letter to the Romans, in the fifth chapter at the first verse. [ROMANS 5:1-5]

Recently I went to the hospital to pray with a church member before her surgery. Her family and I gathered in the pre-op area as various medical personnel performed the necessary preparations. The attending anesthesiologist came by to go over the procedure and then said it was time, and they would take her back to the operating room. I asked for just a moment to offer prayer. The doctor immediately replied, "May I join you?" -and took hold of the hands around the member's bedside as we circled for prayer. It was a holy moment that frankly has not happened too many times in my experience. The church member and her husband remarked later how meaningful it was for them that the physician had so clearly demonstrated his own reliance on divine help. It seemed to me a gracious affirmation of God's healing power exercised through human agency and medical knowledge.

Friends, this is the purpose of salvation: to live our lives immersed in God's grace, to share nothing less than the glory of God. If "grace" is a theme you've heard often from this pulpit, it's because I believe it's the simple truth. Simple; not simplistic. Grace is not primarily about going to heaven or eternal life in the hereafter. It's not about discovering the secret of success as defined by North American culture. It's about learning the truth: coming to understand the true

nature of human life. We are nothing less than a reflection of God's glory; this is both our character and our destiny.

In typical Pauline fashion, this reality shapes everything about our lives: even its challenges and suffering. It's not that Paul denies the pain and struggle that are part of every life; he's not proclaiming the gospel of the sweet by-and-bye: endure your suffering, and just hold on 'til heaven. We know how that message has kept persons enslaved, while it is God's intent that humanity live in freedom, liberated from every kind of captivity. Christian faith does not immunize us against heartbreak. But hearts overflowing with the love of God have a capacity to heal beyond human reason or righteousness. The hope that shapes even the landscape of tragedy is not wishful thinking or the Little-Engine-that-could positivism ("I think I can...I think I can"). God knows we can't – at least not all the time, and not on every mountain we'll encounter. Christian hope is trust that our lives – and in fact, the lives of every blessed person on the planet – are held by the God of love. Now, and forever.

....which makes the "now" every bit as important and joyful as any anticipated eternity. "Earth's crammed with heaven," wrote the poet, and the eyes of faith help us see it pulsing with divine beauty and purpose. It is God's gift to share the glory with humanity. And we, so blessed, are then called to share the glory of God with others; to do all we can to reveal the love that is at the heart of creation; to be the pitchers through which God's love is poured out into a world that seems parched for lack of love. That's why there's really no distinction between the church's work of spiritual renewal and its ministries of outreach; between spirituality and service. Both comprise grateful responses to the grace and peace we have with God; each offers a glimpse of God's glory, in which we all share. We might learn from the experience of one Fairmount family, who with their children walked our labyrinth when it was available in Andersen Hall. A few days later, their three-year-old daughter was walking in circles in the kitchen, singing to herself. Suddenly she looked up at her mother and said, "Mommy, sometimes when I'm

walking around the spiral and I get to the middle where the flowers are, I feel....of God.”

Friends, to know that you are “of God” --- does anything matter more? And to provide others’ opportunity to know that---is there any more important task for the church?

The sacraments provide more tangible, physical evidence of God’s glory. Through ordinary, everyday gifts -- water, bread, and wine, we are invited to enjoy spiritual gifts – God’s presence with us, the grace in which we stand, the hope that makes us brave, and the love which enables us to persevere. Though the Strawberry Festival is not a sacrament, it too offers a taste of God’s glory, in the sweet tang of sun-kissed berries as well as in the warm caring of the Fairmount community. We are here together in sunshine and in rain, on easy days of celebration, but also in those times of sorrow and suffering. Why? Simply, simply! – because “God’s love has been poured into our hearts.” How can we not?

“The glory of God is a human being, fully alive,” claimed Iraneus, an early church leader. The glory of God is a human being, fully alive. Rejoice, you glorious human beings.... and pass it on!

**TO THE GOD OF ALL GRACE, WHO CALLS US TO SHARE
GOD’S ETERNAL GLORY IN UNION WITH CHRIST, BE THE
POWER FOREVER! AMEN.**

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