

The Right Time

Romans 5:1-8

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I was never a huge fan of the 1965 classic film *The Sound of Music* (one of my many cultural deficiencies), but as I was reading our passage from Romans 5 this week, the famous song from that movie, “My Favorite Things” came to mind.

Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens,
Bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens,
Brown paper packages tied up with strings—
These are a few of my favorite things.

You’re humming it right now, aren’t you? 😊

I don’t spend much time thinking about roses and kittens or kettles and mittens (I do like getting brown paper packages because it usually means a new book has arrived!), but Romans 5:1-8 contains some of my “favourite things” when it comes to the Christian faith.

Five words in particular.

Faith. Peace. Grace. Hope Love.

We’ve likely heard these five words more times than we could possibly count, inside and outside the church.

But it’s very easy to just assume we know what they mean or import all kinds of our own meanings into them. And over time, these powerful, transformative, life-giving words become fuzzy, imprecise, and untethered from Christ and his kingdom.

So, today I am going to play a kind of word association game. I want us to look at these five words, the associations that might come to mind in our culture, and how the gospel of Christ redefines them.

Faith

In our culture, the word “faith” often refers to a rather benign belief that things will work out in the end (mostly for us).

Just have faith. Things will be ok. So we say.

Or it functions kind of like the word “spirituality.” It’s a word that we think sounds good and that we think conveys depth and moral character, but it doesn’t have much concrete shape to it.

It’s used to separate us from those who don’t believe anything. There are “people of faith” and other people.

But the truth is that everyone exercises faith in something. Even the most hardened atheist is required to take some things on faith.

So, the relevant question isn’t, “Are you a person of (generic) faith?” but “What is the object of your faith?”

Or “In whom do you place your faith?” And why?

For Paul, the word faith has a very specific object. It is faith *in Christ*. Faith in the incarnation, teaching, death, resurrection, ascension and reign of Jesus.

It is faith in the one who lived and died in our place so that we might live.

And it is not just faith *in* Christ but the faith or faithfulness *of* Christ that saves us. Our faith ebbs and flows; God’s fidelity to his creation is sure and strong and does not change.

Peace

The absence of war. Swords into plowshares. Lions and lambs. *Shalom*. We all want peace.

But in Romans 5, the word “peace” is followed by two more words: “with God.”

Paul is not talking about world peace or about nonviolence as a political strategy, important as these things are.

He's talking about peace between God and *us*.

Which is a rather more personal and therefore uncomfortable topic. Because it implies that peace with God is something we need.

Sometimes, when I'm talking to someone who has little use for church or for creeds or doctrines or any of the formal aspects of Christianity, I hear people say a funny thing: "I'm good with God."

That's quite a thing to say, I often think. Is it true?

This isn't what the Bible says. It isn't even what basic observation of the world and of our lives bears out.

If we're honest and paying attention, we quite quickly see that we are by nature turned inward.

Not all the time and not to the same extent. But we all miss the mark of what we were made to do and to be. We do what we ought not to do, and we fail to do what we ought to do. All of us.

Which leads us to another uncomfortable word: sin.

"Sin" language is not popular, inside or outside the church, I know.

It is thought best consigned to the past with our unenlightened ancestors who didn't know about brain chemistry or the social roots of human behaviour.

"Sin" is a word that makes us feel icky and guilty about ourselves and we've mercifully moved beyond all that by now.

If we do behave in ways that we regret or that lead to destructive consequences, we park the blame elsewhere. We were acted upon by all kinds of factors beyond our control. We couldn't help ourselves. It was the devil... or our genes... our bad socialization... or bad teaching from our church... or politicians... or big corporations... or _____.

There is often some truth in these explanations. Sometimes even a lot of truth.

But we are also sinners. At the root of who we are is a love of self that stubbornly and consistently overrules love of God and neighbour.

We are bent inward. Each one of us instinctively, like Adam, is prone to wander... prone to leave the God we love, we sing in the famous hymn, "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing."

"Sin" is an ugly word, I know, but we need ugly words to explain ugly realities.

We are estranged from what we were made for. We are not naturally "good with God." We need peace with God.

Grace

We sometimes view the grace of God as kind of a blank check. God is like a kindly parent who trudges around behind us, patting us on the head, assuring us that we're ok, cleaning up after us while we pretty much do whatever we want.

But if we've read our bibles at all, if we've paid attention to the story of Jesus, we know that grace is not divine good-naturedness or indifference toward human sin.

It is costly in every way. It cost God everything.

Grace, if we understand it correctly, is scandalous. It is not a reward based on merit but the outrageous good news of the gospel that God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

I forget where I heard the following helpful summary, and I've probably used it before, but the best things are worth hearing more than once. I use it out at the jail pretty often.

Justice is getting what we deserve.

Mercy is not getting what we deserve.

Grace is getting what we don't deserve.

Hope

Hope is another word that can easily become rather nebulous and undemanding once we get our hands on it. Perhaps you're noticing this trend with all these words by now.

But it's interesting to pay attention to how hope is produced, according to Paul.

It begins with boasting in suffering, of all things. In the first century, suffering would have been literal as they were a persecuted minority in the vast Roman Empire.

We may not all suffer persecution like this for our faith, but into each one of our lives some suffering will inevitably come. And this suffering can either make us bitter and angry, or it can drive us toward hope.

For Paul, hope comes at the end of an interesting sequence.

Suffering produces endurance. Endurance produces character. And character produces hope.

Hope is not vague sense that everything will be ok. It is something that can be (and often) is forged in difficulty. Hope is a muscle we can strengthen as we allow our character to be shaped by God through trials.

And this hope does not disappoint us or "put us to shame" because....

... the love of God has been poured into our hearts.

Love

The last word is one that we probably misunderstand and misuse the most.

For us, love language often functions as something like an emotional thermometer—it's a way that we take the temperature of our affections.

Or it's used as a slogan to be plastered online or on the back of our cars in response to tragedy or injustice. *Love wins. Love is stronger than hate. Love will conquer it all...*

And it *is*... and it *will*, but...

The question is always, how? *How* does love win? And what *kind* of love wins?

In Romans 5, Paul makes it clear. How does God demonstrate his love?

While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Not when we had cleaned up our act. Not when we had figured out our theology. Not when we were respectable church-going folks. Not when our politics were socially acceptable. Not when we were climbing the social ladder.

When we were still bent inward, hostile toward and estranged from God, *that's* when Christ died for us.

This is how God demonstrates love. By dying for those who wanted nothing to do with him.

God demonstrates love by laying down his life for us. When we were at our worst, God was at his best.

Next Sunday is Father's Day. And when I think of the kind of uniquely Christian love that we are simultaneously drawn by and called to as followers of Jesus, I always think of the story of the Lost Son in Luke 15.

This incredible story about a father whose love and longing persists for a son who was determined to do everything he could to insult, humiliate, and reject him. A son who wanted to live only for himself.

Francis Spufford, in talking about this parable, describes this love beautifully. He says, the Father's love is

a love that deliberately does not protect itself, a love that is radically unprotected on purpose, and is never going to stop to ask whether the younger son, like many junkies briefly boomeranging back to the nest, will tomorrow steal the silver spoons... **A love that does not come naturally** in a world of finite farms, and real inheritances, and exhaustible parents; a love which therefore can only be like a father running across the fields to kiss his ruined child.

But a love we might need anyway, if we're going to get beyond deserving. [Jesus] tells the story with the bad boy's viewpoint first, and then the brother's, so that those who hear it must become both of them... In every life, we have times

when we play both parts. We ruin and we build. We're chaotic and we're the anxious maintainers of a little bit of order in the face of chaos. We could only join the older brother in asking for fairness, nothing but fairness, if we didn't see ourselves at all in the lost boy.

Since we find ourselves in him as well, we too will need, at times, something far less cautious than justice. **We too will need sometimes to be met on the road by a love that never shudders at the state we're in**, never hesitates to check what it can bear, but only cries: this is my son, who was lost and is found.¹

This is what we, as Christians, mean by the word "love."

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In the song "My Favourite Things," Maria sings,

When the dog bites,
When the bee stings,
When I'm feeling sad,
I simply remember my favorite things
And then I don't feel so bad!

These five words function similarly for me. When I'm feeling bad—when things don't seem to be going my way, when I'm feeling anxious or afraid or angry or confused or just blah... I try to call to mind my favourite things:

Faith. Peace. Grace. Hope Love.

In what I hope is the best and truest sense of each word.

I remember that I am part of a beautiful story and that I am called to play a part in it. That no sad word is the last word. That healing and wholeness and redemption are possible. That my own sin is no match for the mercy of God. That life and light are truer than death and darkness.

¹ Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012).

And then I don't feel so bad.

Maybe you're wondering about the title of today's sermon: "The Right Time."

I took it from another phrase from today's reading that caught my eye:

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly (Romans 5:6).

At the right time.

I think Paul is talking about the timing of Jesus' arrival in the big, cosmic story of God that stretches from creation to new creation.

But I think that Jesus arrives at the right time in our own lives, too.

When we would settle for **faith** as a vague expression of spirituality or belief in a generic higher power, Jesus arrives, at the right time, and reminds that the object of saving faith is none other than himself.

When we are tempted to casually imagine ourselves as "good with God," Jesus arrives, at the right time, to remind us that while we are, indeed, special and dearly loved, we are also *sinners*, turned inward, bent away from God. Jesus reminds us that the deepest problem in the world is not global politics but human hearts, estranged from God, in need of **peace** and a peacemaker.

When we would make **grace** a cheap assumption that God will good-naturedly clean up all the messes that we leave behind, Jesus arrives, at the right time, to show us that grace was and is a costly gift.

When we would be content with a non-specific **hope** drenched in platitudes, Jesus arrives, at the right time, to show us how hope is forged. Suffering, endurance, character, hope. This is the road that Jesus took on our behalf and to show us the way. The Christian hope has always involved dying to self and rising to new life

When we would reduce **love** to the temperature of our emotional attachments when we would make it contingent upon moral performance and relational fidelity, Jesus arrives, at the right time, to show us a love unlike anything the world has ever seen—a love that lays

down its life for those who want nothing to do with it, a love that “never shudders at the state we’re in,” a love that stands with arms open at the gate, calling us home.

Jesus arrives at the right time (perhaps even this morning), to rescue these words from the many ways in which we make them less than they ought to mean, less than we *need* them to mean.

Jesus arrives, at the right time, to save us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

