

THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT (A)

Romans 5:1-11
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In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Are you strong? Or are you weak?

Are you godly? Or are you ungodly?

I suppose we'd all like to think we're strong, and we'd all like to think we're godly. But in today's Second Reading, St. Paul tells us that Christ Jesus died **for the ungodly**.

Jesus didn't come to save righteous people. Jesus came to save sinners. Jesus called Matthew, a tax collector and big-time sinner to be one of his disciples, and he regularly sat at table and ate with many sinners. When those who boasted about their own righteousness — their own goodness — saw what Jesus did, they were upset. They couldn't understand why he would associate with such scoundrels. And when Jesus heard their objections, he declared,

*Those who are well have no need of a physician,
but those who are sick.*

Go and learn what this means,

'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.'

For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.

The Contemporary English Translation puts it like this:

*Healthy people don't need a doctor,
but sick people do.*

Go and learn what the Scriptures mean when they say,

'Instead of offering sacrifices to me,

I want you to be merciful to others.'

I didn't come to invite good people to be my followers.

I came to invite sinners.

"I didn't come to invite good people. I came to invite sinners."

Last Sunday we began a study of the book of Romans in the High School Sunday School class. — And by the way, if you don't already know it, you need to know that we have a great group of young people who gather on Sunday mornings. They participate and engage in thoughtful questions and answers. They take the faith seriously, they're eager to learn, and besides that they have a good sense of humor and they're fun to be with.

But anyway, we began a study of Romans, and right away in the first chapter, St. Paul gives quite a list of sins of which people are guilty, **and for which they deserve to die**. Paul first mentions sexual sins, and typically that's what many of us think of first. But then Paul goes on. He continues his listing of sins and sinners.

Paul speaks of greed, envy, and murder. He lists those who argue, those

who cheat, and those who are hard to get along with, because they say cruel things about others. Paul includes gossips and slanderers. He lists people who are insolent and conceited. And finally, he includes as well, those who are unreliable, and those who don't have any love or pity for others. St. Paul says that all such sinners deserve to die.

Do you see yourself anywhere on that list? I'm afraid I see myself only too clearly.

But here's the wonderful good news of the Gospel: If you find yourself on that list of sinners, ***you are the very one Jesus came to save***. "*God proves his love for us in that **while we still were sinners** Christ died for us.*" Jesus didn't wait for the Samaritan woman at the well to clean herself up first, **before** he would give her the water of life. No, he met her where she was — in her brokenness — and he loved her.

And so, St. Paul writes that because of this good news — because Christ died for the ungodly — "*we have peace with God.*" Because "*while we were [yet] enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son.*"

Now, one of the things we struggle with though, is that because we are reconciled to God, we are also called to be ***reconciled with one another***. And sometimes that is ***very hard work***. Often, is painful to ***ask*** a brother or sister for forgiveness. Often, it is so difficult to ***offer*** a brother or sister forgiveness. Nevertheless our Lord teaches us very clearly:

*If you forgive others their trespasses,
your heavenly Father will also forgive you;
but if you do not forgive others,
neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*" (Mt 6:14)

If you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive you.

In his powerful little book, *Life Together*, the pastor, professor and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes about the intimate and unbreakable link between our relationship with Christ and our relationships with one another. He says it so much better than I ever could, so I want to read an extended portion of his book.

Bonhoeffer writes:

*Without Christ there is discord between God and man
and between man and man.
Christ became the Mediator
and made peace with God and among men. . .
without Christ we also would not know our brother,
nor could we come to him.
The way is blocked **by our own ego**. . .*

*Christ opened up the way to God **and to our brother**.
Now Christians can live with one another in peace;*

they can love and serve one another. . .
*But they can continue to do so **only by way of Jesus Christ.***
Only in Jesus Christ are we one,
only through him are we bound together. . .

*He who looks upon his [Christian] brother should know that he will
 be eternally united with him in Jesus Christ. . .*

Look around you. We're stuck with each other! This is for ***all eternity!***

Back to Bonhoeffer:

*When God was merciful to us,
 we learned to be merciful with our brethren.
 When we received forgiveness instead of judgment,
 we, too, were made ready to forgive our brethren.
 What God did to us, **we then owed to others.**
 The more we received, the more we were able to give;
 and the more meager our brotherly love,
 the less were we living by God's mercy and love. . .*

Now Bonhoeffer didn't look at the world or the Church through rose-colored glasses. He had no pious illusions that there would ever be a church community that did not struggle with these matters. But Bonhoeffer had the keen insight to perceive that sin and struggle in the community of the Church become yet another ***opportunity*** for the power of the Gospel to break in and bring ***healing***, and ***reconciliation***, and ***new life***.

Again, Bonhoeffer writes:

*Even when sin and misunderstanding
 burden the communal life,
 is not the sinning brother **still a brother,**
 with whom I, too, stand under the Word of Christ?
 Will not his sin be a constant occasion for me to give thanks
 that **both of us may live**
in the forgiving love of God in Jesus Christ?*

*Thus the very hour of disillusionment with my brother
 becomes incomparably salutary,
 because it so thoroughly teaches me
 that **neither of us can ever live**
by our own words and deeds,
 but only by that one Word and Deed*

which. . .binds us together —
the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. (pp.23-8)

“Neither of us can ever live by our own words and deeds, but only by that one Word and Deed which. . .binds us together — the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ.”

That is the promise and the hope *to which we cling* in good times and in bad, in sorrow and in joy, in suffering and in rejoicing, in times of hurt and in times of pleasure, in times of unity and in times of dissension, in living and in dying. We cling to the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.