

“While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

Romans 5:1-8

A sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

As we move into the season of Pentecost, we ask ourselves: What is the problem? That is what Paul describes in Romans 1-3. The problem has two levels. On one level is idolatry. The other level is sin and death. We have the problem that we think we can judge sin. This is not about judging sin in others; we think we can judge sin in ourselves. That is the original sin and that is the problem. We can't imagine that we're the problem. We judge ourselves, and we imagine that we are O.K. Paul expressly says “No” in 1 Cor 4:3-5: “I do not even judge myself. . . It is the Lord who judges me.”

There are two ways we try to get out of this. The first is “good works,” and last week in Romans 4 :5 we learned about Abraham and the God who justifies the ungodly. But people say there must be some place for “good works.”

The second way we try to escape from the problem is by talking about something that is different from what God thinks. We look at this great blessing of the Gospel and ask ourselves: “Why don't people crowd into church? Why aren't the churches full because of this astonishing gift, this astonishing Gospel about life in him, life now and forever. Where are the people? How come? Is this really important?”

This is something we can only look at from a human point of view. What we see from this viewpoint is a basic optimism and a trust in works. Three points.

First is the basic optimism of the Western world. This optimism goes back to the beginning of the Renaissance and humanism, to the emphasis on the human being and what we can do and to the advances in technology which people thought meant advances in everything. The idea of progress flourished especially in the Nineteenth Century and in the Twentieth Century up until 1914. Then all of a sudden the whole Western cultural sense of progress collapsed because in spite of technological progress, human nature did not change.

A symptom of how this idea of progress has flourished in the last fifty years is seen in how a particular woman from the Fourteenth Century has been lifted up. She is Julian of Norwich. She lived about 1380, a hundred years or so before Luther. She lived in eastern England as a secluded nun, but she wrote some things that modern progressives have lifted up, most notably this line: “All shall be well and all shall be

well, and all manner of thing shall be well." Her optimism is picked up again and again in our day.

Out of this idea of progress certain false religions have risen up among us. Three examples. First, there is the false religion of psychology. Modern psychology really begins about 1880 but the new view of the human being goes back to humanism and the Renaissance. This view says: We can do it; we can manage it. Basically it is a restatement of the story of the Tower of Babel. It's confidence in human potential. We see that around us all the time.

The second common false religion is multiculturalism. This is the belief that there are many kinds of views and they are all equal. There is no way of distinguishing. We just take all of them. This is hot tub religion. Sit around and cook together. Every ten years the worldwide Anglican Communion meets for three weeks toward the end of July. A few years ago the Bible study for their gathering focused on the "I am" sayings in the Gospel of John. The head of the Episcopal Church USA at that time was Kathryn Jefferts Schori. In one interview she was asked about their Bible study focus on: "I am the way and the truth and the life." Her answer: "That's one point of view, but there are others."

The third false religion is the idea that we are kingdom builders, that it is our job as the church to build the Kingdom of God on earth and we can do it. There are many other false religions or spiritualities. Environmentalism has become one. It has been said that in California a new fad, a new spirituality, or a new religion develops every week. Like cotton candy. It's big and sweet and mostly nothing. Long ago when Burma Shave signs were popular there was one that went: "Used umbrella for parachute; now reject every substitute." Umbrellas don't work as parachutes. There are counterfeit religions all around, and people buy into them: "Look at us. We can do it. We can make it happen."

It is a blessing and a curse in the fact that the church is no longer established. For 1700 years in most of the Western world, except in the United States, church and state have been together and therefore the church had a certain foundation in society and in the law. Of course that has not been true for two hundred years among us. The separation of church and state is now becoming true for Western Europe and Canada. As a result, religion is a matter of PR and sales. Because people want to promote their cause, they project a certain image they think appeals to others. They are not asking about Truth but seeking numbers.

Second, as we look at our world from a human point of view, we see underneath the optimism there is a deep pessimism. There's a sense of meaninglessness, of relativism, nihilism. Why bother? Where's it all going? Then people join causes and projects to find meaning. There is the denial of death, which was captured so well by Ernest Becker in his book, *The Denial of Death*. Becker showed how we are always denying that death will come; death will come to others but not to me.

Third, from a human point of view, is the idea that all religions are equal, everyone is saved anyway, and the only advantage Christians have is that they know it earlier. When we talk about these things, people say: "God is love." When they think of John 3:16: "God so loved the world," they mean: "God so tolerated the world that he gave his only begotten Son." God is the big sugar daddy in the sky who pats us on the head and says: "That's all right; I accept you." God is the great psychiatrist in the sky who accepts you, but these are the things you had better do: Be tolerant, caring.

It used to be that there were widely accepted taboos in society, such as: You don't talk about religion and politics. Now the one taboo is: "You don't talk about the fact that the Lord is Lord, that he does not tolerate evil, and there is a judgment." That is impolite, taboo, to say in our society. We do not do that.

From a human point of view perhaps these three reasons – an underlying optimism, a deep pessimism, and third the belief that everybody is saved anyway – are why people do not flock to the churches and say: "What a glorious message the Gospel is, and I want to hear it all the time."

The Apostle Paul as he writes in Romans finally comes to end of his discussion at the end of chapter eleven and he writes in 11:33-36:

"Oh the depths of the riches the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and inscrutable his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?' 'Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen."

In other words, we can't solve the problem of evil. He works his way. As it says in the text for today (Romans 5:1-8), his way is through the cross. The whole question is: Do we deny or diminish the cross? Most of the things mentioned earlier (a basic optimism, underlying pessimism, and the belief that everyone is saved anyway) are **ways of overlooking, denying, and diminishing the cross**. Paul writes in Romans 4:5 about how the Lord "justifies the ungodly." And today in Romans 5:6-8: "While

we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly . . . God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." Not for those who do good works, but for the ungodly. Because of what Christ has done on the cross, we have salvation.

John 3:16 begins: "God so loved the world. . ." and goes on in verse 18: "He who believes in him is not condemned, he who does not believe is condemned already." There is a strong note of God's Lordship and that he does not just wink at sin and death. Rather, he solves them through the cross. In Peter's sermon in Acts 4 it says: "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (4:12). First we have to get the gospel straight. That is not to be diminished or forgotten.

Then comes the problem of Gospel-plussing, that is, the idea that it is the Gospel plus good works. Or the Gospel-plus a spiritual experience or conversion experience. Or the Gospel-plus the authority of a particular church or priesthood. With any "plus" the cross is no longer all-sufficient, and the Gospel is diminished.

Our task is to lift up salvation in Christ alone, by the cross alone, which gives us certainty because it doesn't depend on us. Then we have the freedom of being the children of God in him. Amen