

Sermon Series: (Read through N.T.) “From Bethlehem to Calvary to Heaven”

February 22, 2004 ~ Lord of Life Lutheran Church, Westfield, IN

Title: “I Am Not Ashamed”

Text: Romans 1: 16 - 17

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Jesus said to his disciples, “ Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old (Matthew 13:52)”. I begin today with this scripture passage mostly for my own encouragement. The words have guided me as I consider a second career in the ministry and pondered the style of preaching that God would have me do. For many years I have sat where you are and I believe that I have been given a unique perspective, that of both layman and minister. The most memorable sermons in my life are those mixed with “old treasures” and “new treasures”. Tell me what the bible says, both from the Old Testament and the New Testament, what it means and how it applies to me today. Give me a jewel that will carry me through the week and to life everlasting. Not a new teaching, but a fresh insight into an old treasure.

So let us consider today an “old treasure” of the Lord’s, in St. Paul’s letter to the Romans. The Book of Romans is the next set of readings in the “Read through the New Testament” series that we have begun this year. It seems fitting that we begin in the fashion of Paul’s greeting to the Roman Christians as follows. To all in Westfield, who are loved by God and called to be saints, “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Consider first some background information about his letter, which should be helpful in your reading this week. Rome was a huge city by even modern day standards and the capital of the Roman Empire. It was celebrated for its impressive public buildings, aqueducts, baths, theaters and thoroughfares. There was a well-established Christian church there, probably founded by Jews converted in the great outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost in Jerusalem. Paul had only heard of their faith, as he states in chapter 1, verse 8. Paul felt led by God to visit them and had strong desires to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ among them. He was probably writing from Corinth, to lay the groundwork for his visit to Rome and their support of his missionary journey to Spain. It is the longest and considered most important of his letters and therefore was placed first ahead of all his other letters in the New Testament. For those women, who may doubt the high regard and sense of purpose the Lord has for them as leaders in the church, I will add that a woman named Phoebe, a deaconess in the church at Cenchrea, was chosen to personally deliver the letter to the Roman Christians.

I have become convinced in recent times that we are a people motivated by nostalgia. We cherish remembering back to times gone by, when life was perhaps simpler, happy, and carefree. Consider the rise in number of antique stores brought on by all those baby-boomers, myself included, looking for replicas of items they once owned, but were either discarded or broken and long forgotten. There is even a popular television show dedicated to the discovery of antique treasures. In November 2003, the National Hockey League celebrated the opening of their 86th season by organizing their first ever non-exhibition outdoor game. The game was called the Heritage Classic and was planned to capture the memories from all those frozen ponds and lakes, where so many players learned to skate and fell in love with the game. It featured two of the leagues greatest teams, the Edmonton Oilers and the Montreal Canadians and required the transformation of the Edmonton Eskimo's Canadian League football stadium into an outdoor ice arena, having a seating capacity of 56,000 people. Season ticket holders were given first priority with the remaining seats assigned by lottery. Amazingly, a total of 750,000 entries were received by the deadline, and another 150,000 entries after that. Fans came from as far away as Japan and Finland for the game. Wouldn't it be awesome if a public reading of the book of Romans attracted such anticipation and excitement? Old treasures – new treasurers, let's discover more.

Romans is that kind of treasure. Granted, Romans reads more like an elaborate theological essay than a letter, but in first reading try not to get bogged down in deep theological thoughts. Skim off some of the cream first. Look for the jewels of scripture verses that are fundamental to our faith. The Roman people were generally well-educated people and could not be easily influenced in their beliefs. In the early chapters of Romans, Paul eloquently presents his case much like an attorney in a court of law, convicting us of our crimes before God. These include many of the verses you may have memorized as a child or as you came to faith. These are great Law and Gospel statements in pure form. Romans 3:23 for example, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by this grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus". Romans 6:23 for another, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The theme of Romans is stated in chapter 1, verses 16-17 "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by

faith.” Let’s dissect these verses a little bit to get a better understanding of Romans. What does “I am not ashamed” mean? Another translation of the original Greek language may be stated, as “I will not be scandalized”. Today’s English Version translates this text as “I have complete confidence”. Paul is saying that he is totally convinced that what he is about to say will stand the test of time. In today’s language, Paul is convinced it will stand up in court. The Supreme Court wouldn’t even hear an appeal in this case. What about your confidence? Do you have the same certainty about the truth of Jesus Christ? Are you proud of Him in front of your friends? Do you live each day for Him? I would like to honestly answer yes to all these questions, but I know that I can’t. The truth is there are times when we are embarrassed to say we are Christians. When the crowd around us is joking back and forth and the topic suddenly goes off-color, we suddenly become timid and avoid speaking the truth about who we are in Jesus. Thank God, that even when we are embarrassed of Him, he is not ashamed of us. Paul writes in 2 Timothy 2:8-13, “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God’s word is not chained. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him. If we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us. If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.” What a promise this is to treasure!

Back to the theme verses of Romans 1:16-17, we get a sense of ethnicity about the Roman church, as made up of both Jews and Gentiles. There are some issues that Paul is concerned about and needs to address. Because of these ethnic differences, no doubt tension existed among them at different times because of differences in customs and opinions about their beliefs. Those referred to as “judaizers” in the New Testament, brought about one of the more common problems in the early Christian church. Judaizers tried to influence the church to revert back to the traditions of the Elders, those 613 man-made laws of the Pharisees, that Jesus was continually preaching against, as we read in the Gospels in previous weeks. Paul is going to make clear that it not what you do that makes you righteous before God. His statement, “The righteous will live by faith” is a quotation from Habakkuk 2:4, where the Lord spoke through his prophet Habakkuk. Paul used Old Testament scripture to support his statement. Later on in Romans 3:21-22, he states “But now a righteousness from God, apart from the Law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes

through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.” Paul continues in Romans 4:3, using Old Testament scripture again in his support, in discussing the faith of Abraham, he quotes Genesis 15:6, where it states “Abram (Abraham) believed God, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”

Are there judaizers in the church today? Not with respect to all the laws of the Pharisees perhaps, but certainly in respect to man-made laws. Even within Christianity today, some groups or denominations have gone beyond the idea of “salvation by grace” and added on certain behavior requirements. You can often hear it in Christian broadcasting and read it in Christian publications. They say if you do this and this, or follow all the things on this list, then God will be pleased with you. Satan continues his subtle attempts to trick us into believing our own goodness. This even creeps into the local church, when certain rules of behavior become the accepted norm. Worship style, church organization, manner of dress, mandatory attendance and giving, are some examples where grace may be abused. These are attempts to put conditions on God’s love and they are simply unfounded. God’s love is unconditional. He loves us solely on the account of Jesus Christ and what he has done for us. God is pleased with us when we believe this (period, exclamation point). He treasures us.

The correct understanding of Romans 1:16-17 was pivotal to Martin Luther’s assurance of his own salvation. Prior to this, he could not escape the consequences of his sin. “The wages of sin is death,” both physical death and spiritual death, total separation from God. He had read about the “righteousness from God” many places in scripture, but had always understood it in light of God’s Law. It convicted him because he knew that he always fell short of what the Law demanded. It was while reading Romans 1:16-17, that he finally understood the “righteousness of God” in a different light. This was in light of the Gospel, the Good News that the penalty demanded of all people for breaking God’s Law, was paid for by Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross. Jesus suffered physical death and separation from God on our behalf. When he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me”, he was for the first time alone and apart from the Father. Luther had finally realized that the verse was not talking about his own righteousness earned by keeping God’s laws, but about a righteousness freely given by God to all those who believe in the accomplishments of Jesus Christ. God’s grace through faith, what a rare treasure indeed!

Paul explains more about grace in Romans than any of his other letters. It might serve us well at this point to try to gain a better understanding of “grace”. A simplified definition in

acronym form is this: G.R.A.C.E., God's riches at Christ's expense. It may also be defined as "undeserved love or merit". Bo Giertz in his book, The Hammer of God, illustrated grace in this way. He writes about a seasoned Pastor and his young mentor as they discussed the point at which a person comes to believe in Jesus. The young man found himself unable to explain his own conversion and nervously blurted out that for him it was when he gave his heart to Jesus. The seasoned Pastor sharply replied, "The heart is a rusty old can on a junk heap. A fine birthday gift, indeed. But a wonderful Lord passes by, and has mercy on the wretched tin can, sticks His walking cane through it and rescues it from the junk pile and takes it home with Him. That is how it is."

Old treasures – new treasures once more. A recent movie titled "Seabiscuit" may also give us insight into God's gift of grace to His people. Some of you have probably seen the movie. The story is about three men of different social backgrounds, living ideal lives according to their gifts and abilities. Charles Howard, an Easterner, is a natural born salesman, an entrepreneur, with a vision for the future. Tom Smith is a free spirit of the Old West, a man of few words, more comfortable outdoors and than in, with keen insights about horses and their abilities. Johnnie (Red) Pollard is a natural born equestrian, as comfortable riding a horse as reclining in an easy chair. Their personal tragedies are set against the backdrop of the much bigger tragedy of extreme poverty brought on by the Great Depression of the 1930's. Charles' only son dies in a car accident and his wife leaves him because she blames him for the accident. His automotive business plunges like the stock market. Tom suddenly finds the open range, the love of his life, fenced in by barbed wire. And Red, whose close middle-class family life celebrated enlightenment in the classic literary works of such authors as Dickens and Shakespeare, is suddenly abandoned by his family because they cannot afford to feed and provide for him. Like people all across the nation, their spirits are broken and their lives shattered, such that it becomes a struggle just to survive. They meet in California and begin to rebuild their lives around another broken spirit, a horse named Seabiscuit. Seabiscuit is a horse of superior bloodlines, but lacking size and confidence, was eventually abused by his previous owners and downgraded to a training partner for another horse, and only useful as a loser. In describing Seabiscuit, Tom once said, "he's so beat up that he's forgotten what he was bred to do".

I think the broken spirit of these characters gives us a glimpse of our own brokenness as the result of sin. Whether a little baby or child, born into a sinful nature or an adult caught in the

grips of a sinful life, we are all spiritually broken and in need of restoration. Sin permeates our existence and clouds the purpose for which we were first created. Restoration is what the movie *Seabiscuit* is all about. Restoration is what grace is all about. There is a great scene in the movie that I think would help us to understand God's grace. Charles is searching the stables for the ideal horse trainer, when he spots this man isolated from everyone else. When Charles first meets Tom, Tom is trying everything he knows of to heal a lame horse, rescued from destruction. (Use Video clip or explain dialogue: Charles is curious and asks Tom "Why are you fixing him"? Tom responds to Charles "Because I can, every horse is good for something." Tom adds "You don't throw a whole life away just because he's banged up a little.") Thank God that He didn't just give up on us, but instead sent his Son to restore his people.

Paul spends much of the first 11 chapters of Romans, explaining the sinful condition of the entire human race, the consequences of that sin, the impossibility of overcoming this situation on our own, the sorrow that we experience as a result of our failures, and the "righteousness from God" given to us in faith on account of the work of Jesus Christ. By faith, we are able to believe and thereby Jesus frees us from the punishment that God's Law demands. These actions of God in the life of a Christian are referred to in the Bible as "justification". In Romans 8:30-33, Paul states "And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified, those he justified, he also glorified. What, then, shall we say in response to this? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies." As those who are justified, we may be described as "just as if we had never sinned" or as having been "made right with God". What a comfort this is for the forgiven sinner. Not that our sinful nature is gone, but that we are no longer controlled by it. Paul states in Romans 8:9, "You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you."

Life in the spirit, a fine treasure indeed. We are no longer alone, left to figure it out or work things out on our own. We are not left to find meaning in our own existence, to struggle in a boring job, or an unfulfilled relationship, or even the addiction to the many so called "pleasures of the world". We no longer have to face this alone. Life in the Spirit gives us strength to overcome the world, to have purpose and meaning in life. We are special because God made us special. A boring job can have new meaning as we share our faith with others around us. Unfulfilled relationships become fulfilled relationships because of the forgiveness we share as

one forgiven by God. And little by little, we are able to forget the ways of the world and look to the way of Jesus.

After 11 chapters of theological discussion of how we are saved, Paul makes concluding remarks concerning life after justification. He states in Romans 12:1-2, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.” When God justifies us and gives us faith, he also gives us His Holy Spirit, to live in us, as the Bible says as a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance. The renewing of your mind is accomplished through the Holy Spirit. The work of the Holy Spirit is to point us to Jesus and to keep us mindful of God’s will for us. The Holy Spirit is a wonderful treasure that God gives us, so that our lives may continually be conformed to life in Jesus Christ. That is why Jesus said in our Gospel reading, in Matthew 10:39 “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” God not only provides life, but he provides it in abundance. These actions of God in the life of a Christian are referred to in the Bible as “sanctification”. It is that wonderful “seasoning” that God brings to the life of his people, that they may bring to others. Maybe, this story may provide new insight into an old treasure God has given to us in Romans.

I recently read an article in the November 2003 edition of “Readers Digest”. The article was first published in the October 28, 2002 edition of “Newsweek”. The title of the article is “Beautiful Music”. It was written by Dana Wall, the son of a man named Harold A. Wall. Dana fondly wrote about his dad, who once said that he could do anything he wanted to do. He recalled when his dad said that he wanted to be the first photographer in Sioux City, Iowa to develop color prints and so he did. Another time, young Dana needed a gasoline engine for his balsa-wood model airplane. His dad said that he could build it for him. Harold borrowed a friend’s motor, took measurements, made wooden parts, cast them in aluminum, and turned the pieces on his lathe until they fit. He purchased only a spark plug, the gas tank, and a rubber fuel line. When Dana was 16, his Dad looked at the violin that he was learning to play and said that he wanted to make one. He did and eventually became good enough to set up a shop to build and repair violins and the like, on a part time basis. When he retired from the local phone company, he worked full time at the shop. Dana recalled that his Dad often speculated about the superiority of Stradivarius violins. He read differing opinions about Stradivarius’ work, such as

the type of varnish used or the quality of work, but had discounted all of them. One day a friend of Harold's asked him what kinds of wood were used to make violins. Harold said that the tops were made out of spruce. His friend said he had an old chunk of spruce that he might be interested in. There was quite a history about it too. Harold's friend had found it when he was fighting below an ancient monastery at Monte Cassino in Italy, during World War II. His friend had lain in the mud for days entrenched, as the battle for the monastery raged on. When the battle was over, his friend had found the two-foot long piece of wood and strapped it in his backpack for a souvenir. He carried it for some time before the war ended and when he returned home, he put the wood on a storage shelf in his basement, where it had stayed for 20 years. Harold's friend gave him the wood to make a violin. It took him 12 months to make. When Harold first played it, the sound was so mellow and it lost little resonance in the higher notes, the mark of a superior violin. Dana said that it became his Dad's masterpiece, his treasure. Many of Harold's music friends would come to the shop to play the violin, but his Dad would never sell it. Harold became convinced, as some experts had, that the secret of the Stradivarius sound was in the wood itself. The abbey at Monte Cassino was first built in 529 A.D. and the last reconstruction had begun in 1349 A.D. Harold reasoned that Stradivari must have had access to spruce that had cured for centuries, perhaps ancient timbers from a ruined medieval castle or cathedral. Beautiful music didn't come just from the wood, but it came as a result of the "seasoning of the wood". And so it is with the Christian, it takes a "seasoning" that only God can provide, so that creation is restored and beautiful music may be played.

May you be so blessed as you read through Romans this week. May you also be so convinced of the truth of Jesus Christ, that you may claim as Isaiah did in verse 7 of our Old Testament reading, "Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced." May you apply this confidence as Paul did, when he wrote in Romans 8:38-39, where he states "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord".