

Romans 5:1-11

Amazing Relationship

Passion is a word most of us equate with a strong emotion toward something. First thing that may come to mind is the act of passionate love making since movies, tv series, and books seem to always include those kinds of scenes and we are a very visual generation. We also talk about being passionate regarding something, it may be our vocation or a pastime. Some people are passionate about painting, creating, woodworking, gardening, music, specifically types of music. One might be passionate about the opera or theatre. There are those who have a passion for inquiry or debate. We give thanks for those who are passionate about finding answers to a cure for cancer or other debilitating illness, or those whose inquisitive minds search for truth in stories that comes to us in the news.

What struck me this week as I pondered this passage of scripture, this part of the letter to the Romans written by the Apostle Paul, was Paul's passion for God and for people and even more so God's passion for setting people right with God, not just in a particular time, but throughout the Bible, the passion that comes through from the beginning to the end of scripture. And this passion of God for people is most strikingly exhibited through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In fact, the story of the crucifixion, the sufferings of Christ between the night of the Last Supper and his death, is often referred to as the passion of Christ.

I have said this before...I have hesitated to use the letter to the Romans for the basis of a sermon over the course of the last eleven years of my preaching. This letter is so dense, so packed full of difficult passages, that to speak to it in 15-20 minutes within the framework of worship is not something I have attempted often. My hope in this month of October, as I use passages from this letter, is that your interest in learning more might be piqued. Even as I have spent time with a group in study this past month I have continue to want to delve further into Paul's words and understanding. What I took away from this particular part of the letter, as I prepared this message, was God's passion for us.

Now, for a moment, let's talk about gods. I cannot think of another story of gods (small g) that makes people the center or the reason for compassion. The gods of the Romans and Greeks, and any others that I have learned about throughout my years, even in different religions, all those gods are about doing what we have do to make ourselves right with them, most often in the form of a sacrifice. It is about appeasing them and staying out of trouble with them. It is about their power without much concern for people.

And as I write I am going to try and keep myself out of trouble but there are definitely some parallel lines to be drawn. In the case of God and people, it is true that we were out of align with God and the ancient Israelites were required to make sacrifices, never was it a sacrifice of another human being, but certainly animals and incense. But these things never did much to appease what was really wrong with the relationship. People could not live in a way that honoured God and each other. In Isaiah it says, “bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me.” Reading the first chapter of Isaiah will help one to understand that God was tired of Isreal continuing to live in a way that did not honour the relationship that God had established with Abraham way back in Genesis, nor honoured the law, what we know as the Ten Commandments. And Paul has gone to great length in the fist four chapters of the letter to the Romans spelling all this out.

Paul has also gotten to the point of sharing that despite all of this, God sent God’s self through the person of Jesus to make it all right. Or maybe better stated, to make us right with God. Now one thing that needs to be undertaken first the belief, the understanding, that it is by faith that we walk with God, that we live for God. It is also by faith that we believe that Jesus was both fully divine and fully human. This is not something we can explain, just as there are many things that cannot be explained. We take many things by faith, and this is no different. It is by faith that we believe in Jesus and that his life, death, and resurrection set us straight, or in the right, with God.

It is because of Jesus, and his passionate act to make us right with God, that we are able to persevere and become people who live in the world as image bearers of God. People who seek to do God’s will in the world. That will is, that everyone should be set right with God and living in that manner brings about a transformation and abundant life. Abundant life does not mean that you have all the material wealth you desire, but rather that you have peace, joy, love, and hope in abundance.

You see God did not come to us saying that you are blessed when things are going well and you have an abundance if wealth, though there are many who would say that a sign of blessing, that God’s blessing on you is when you have wealth and prosperity. And it is not that faithful people do not have those things. Rather God chose to meet people in suffering. God has chosen to meet *us* in our suffering. This is what we call the theology of the cross, as opposed to a theology of blessing. The cross is the sign that points to God choosing to be with us in suffering, which is where life seems to take all of us at some point.

It is why Paul can write that “There’s more to come: We continue to shout our praise even when we’re hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. In alert expectancy such as this, we’re never left feeling shortchanged. Quite the contrary—we can’t round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit!”

Being a human being means dealing with trouble and adversity, but this can hone us, strengthen us. It is not that we go about looking for ways to be tested, but when it comes, God and we ourselves can use it for developing in us patience, a passionate patience. Through those woes and being patient in coming through them, we are then tempered like steel.

Think about a blacksmith and how steel is tempered through heating and cooling, bashed about yet never taken to the point where the metal is useless. Rather the steel is crafted into something stronger than it was before. That is how patience and tempering work together to make us alert for whatever God will do next. And this does not make us weaker, but rather we become and are ready to continue to be forged into the likeness of Christ, living as image bearers of God in the world. Life, being what it is, gives us plenty of opportunity to work on the passionate patience and forging that will make us more resilient. Though not necessarily pleasant at the time, it actually makes us more ready to take on the next thing, ready to live for God. It makes us passionate for God and passionate for people especially those who struggle because we know what it means to struggle and be challenged.

We don't feel shortchanged in life when we live this way, in faithfulness to God, as Eugene Peterson writes in *The Message*, "we can't round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit!"

It is important to realize that we don't do any of this alone. This passage is full of the pronouns, "us" and "we". We face struggle and challenge together, in community, particularly the community of faith. I am often saddened when people say they don't want to come to church because it might hurt too much to remember others who were with them and have now passed on. Or they are worried they will cry in church. Church is where we are to be together to get through all of these things. We forge through pain and challenge together. This is what God intended for the church...a place where those who are feeling broken can find love, compassion, healing, and wholeness.

It is important to look at what is being said in verses 6 through 11. This is what brings us to the passion of God for people. God, "while we were still far too weak and rebellious to do anything to get ourselves ready...God put his love on the line for us by offering his Son in sacrificial death while we were of no use whatever to God." God has not waited until we had it right to make us right with God. God doesn't wait for us to believe. God has already gone ahead and done what was needed in Jesus to make it so we can be right with God.

And this is the reason we celebrate! We are invited into an amazing relationship with God, with others, and ourselves, through Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. It is why we use the words responding, restoring, and rejoicing as a reminder of all that we stand for. It is a reminder that we strive to be a community of faith that responds, restores, and rejoices. We do this first of all because of what God has already done for us and now how we are part of God's work.

Responding, restoring, rejoicing, all part of the amazing relationship we get to have as the people of God who have been offered the opportunity to have an abundant life, a grace-filled life. It is not a life devoid of suffering, but certainly one in which suffering can produce endurance, character, passionate patience, and make us as people forged in steel. Not hard like steel, but useful as a tool forged in steel. As N.T. Wright says, “true reflections of God, the true image-bearers, that we were made to be”¹ in Christ, with Christ, and through Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit!

¹ Wright. *N.T. Romans for Everyone Part1, Chapters 1-8, 20th Anniversary Edition with Study Guide*. 2004, 2023 Nicholas Thomas Wright. Study Guide 2023 Westminster John Knox Press. P61.