**St. Paul’s Lutheran Church
Wildwood, Missouri**

**Fourth Sunday after Pentecost**

**June 14, 2020**

**Romans 5: 6-11**

Concerning Paul’s epistle to the Romans, Martin Luther once wrote, *“This epistle is really the chief part of the New Testament, and is truly the purest gospel. It is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but also that he should occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul. We can never read it or ponder over it too much; for the more we deal with it, the more precious it becomes and the better it tastes.”*

I think it is pretty safe to say that Luther was fond of Paul’s letter to the Romans. However, I also think that he is not just paying lip service here to the suggestion that we all memorize the entire book by heart. You see, Luther recognized that Paul, in this epistle, more fully explains the absolute love and grace of God than in any of his other writings. Because of that, every Christian, you and I, should read, mark, learn and inwardly digest all sixteen chapters of Romans.

Granted, that’s a pretty huge task, especially when, if you’re like me, you have trouble remembering your own phone number. But, as that ancient Chinese proverbs states, *“A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step.”* So, as a first step to understanding and memorizing the book of Romans, I am going to suggest that we begin with our epistle reading for today. My friends, I can find no better place to start then our text for this morning from Romans 5, verses 6-11. Why? Well, because in these five short verses, Paul shows us with great clarity the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ: we are truly saved by God’s amazing grace and not by anything that we have done on our own.

How does this text express the grace of God? Well, before we look at this, let’s be clear as to what exactly we mean by God’s *“grace”*. Most often we think of grace as the favor and love of God. But it is more than that. *“Grace”* is God’s undeserved love expressed toward us. And that little word *“undeserved”* is the key to this definition. Billy Graham speaks of grace this way. *“Grace is not sought nor bought nor wrought. It is a free gift of Almighty God to needy man.”* We do nothing to earn God’s grace. In fact, it can’t be earned by us at all. There is nothing you have of sufficient value to buy back the favor of God lost because of our sin. Instead, God is gracious toward us for one reason and one reason alone: on account of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God is gracious to you and me only because of Christ Jesus.

And that is the most wonderful and glorious point Paul emphasizes in our text by telling us that, “*For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.”* Now, by way of a translational note, “still weak” is too weak. Really, the word means to be “powerless.” And, with those two words, *“powerless”* and *“ungodly,”* Paul drives home his message and preaches what is really some very powerful Law which accuses each and every one us of being sinners. Jesus died for us while we were both powerless and ungodly.

First, let’s deal with the word *“powerless.”* Powerless means *“without power.”* Note that Paul does not say, *“When you had a little power.”* He does not say, *“When you had some strength.”* He doesn’t even say, *“With your last breath you were able to do this.”* No. He says when you had absolutely no power whatsoever. Zip. Nada. None. Zilch. You and I were in a state of complete and total helplessness when Christ intervened to save us, completely helpless.

How helpless? Elsewhere, in Ephesians chapter 2, Paul tells us that we were *“dead in our trespasses and sins.”* Dead. Actually, the word he uses there is *“corpse.”* As distasteful as it sounds, spiritually speaking, you and I were corpses with no life inside of us at all. And what does a corpse deserve? It deserves only to be buried. Now, the analogies that are in Scripture are important. They are there to illustrate a point and so let’s run with Paul’s analogy a little. Just what exactly is a corpse able to do? Have you ever seen a corpse get up and walk? Talk? Move about? No. Of course not. But, let’s keep this spiritual. Can a corpse pray? Sing praises to God? Call on him in the day of trouble? The answer to all these questions is obviously, *“no.”* So, what power lies within a corpse to save himself? None. In fact, a corpse is already lost because he is already dead. We were completely and totally helpless.

And this truth is a very hard for people to admit. None of us likes to admit we are helpless in any way and we certainly don’t want anyone’s pity. Most of us are too proud for that. For example, I haven’t had very good luck with church softball teams in terms of winning a lot. But, back at my previous congregation, I remember a game where the teams we played we played was literally killing us. Just about every player, every time he batted, hit a line drive in a hole. We all pretty much stood there defenseless and to be honest, feeling a little helpless. Adding insult to injury, it started to rain. Not only were we losing, we were now wet and losing.

Well, after they scored about twenty runs, their players switched and started batting left-handed. Talk about being insulted. I knew we were losing and the hope of catching up and winning was slim to none, but I remember thinking, *“Of all the nerve. Who do you guys think you are? I don’t want your charity.”* Then, in the middle of all my ill-thoughts concerning them, I overheard someone say to the umpire, *“I hate batting left-handed but the rain has made the right side of the plate a swamp.”* It wasn’t charity or pity; they simply didn’t want to stand in the mud! But here is the point, I didn’t like feeling helpless or powerless, in fact, I hated it and I certainly didn’t want anyone to help us or take it easy on us so that we could dig ourselves out of the hole in which we found ourselves. I wanted to do it on my own.

We are much the same way with God. No matter how deep the hole we are in because of our sin, we would like to think of ourselves as having some sort of power or ability to persuade God, even if it is just a little bit, to win back his favor. Like the Pharisees we read about so much in the Gospels, we would like to think that we are able to obey all the Law, or to be good enough to warrant God’s favor as a reward for our obedience. But, when Paul says we are powerless, he is calling us weak, helpless, feeble and unable to do anything for ourselves. Left to ourselves, none of us is able to do even one small thing to please God or to achieve salvation. Paul tells us in his other writings that we were unable to understand spiritual things, unable to see the kingdom of God or enter it and that we were unable to seek God. That is how powerless we are when it comes to saving ourselves.

And as if that is not bad enough, the second word used to describe us makes the picture even worse. We were not only helpless, we were also undeserving. Paul tells us that Christ died for the ungodly. In other words, he died for those who were without God. The very basis of the word ungodly is not a judgment upon our bad behavior, it is an assessment of our spiritual condition. Being ungodly means that there was no relationship with God whatsoever. No. Let me take that back. The relationship that we had was completely hostile. Paul tells us that we were his enemies. Enemies! Warring factions. We Despised God and he had nothing to do with us because of our sin. Paul doesn’t paint a very complimentary picture of us, does he?

Nevertheless, that is how we were and all of this leads us to conclude that we are undeserving of God’s favor, totally and completely. God’s love and grace are not dependent on anything in us because there is nothing in us worth loving. That is, there is nothing in you that forces God to love you. But, here is the amazing part of God’s grace. Even though we were powerless and even though we were undeserving of God’s grace. . .he shows it to us anyway. This is the ultimate point that Paul is trying to make in our text for today. Yes, we were most unlovable, most unlovable indeed, but God in his grace and mercy chose to demonstrate his love for us in this, *“while were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*

My dear friends in Christ, what makes this text so wonderful, so glorious and so uplifting is that Paul, in a most simple formula, spells out the heart and essence of the Gospel. We were all sinners and Christ still died for us anyway. He didn’t wait for us to become good. No. He died to make us good. This is the gospel pure and simple. This is the joyous message of the Gospel which Christ brought to the world. Jesus saw me, he saw you, with all our warts, sins and moral failings and he died for us anyway.

How unusual is this? How amazing is this grace of God which he bestows on us so freely? Well, Paul makes this analogy. *“Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die.”* It is a rare circumstance that anyone offers his life as a substitute for someone else. Yet we might be able to imagine someone dying for a good person. A classic example of this is the soldier who throws himself on a grenade to save his buddies. But notice what Paul is saying, even with that, the very best of cases, the supreme act of giving one’s life for another is by no means a certainty. It is at best a mere possibility.

But Christ did not die for his buddies. He didn’t die for his friends. He died for his enemies. Keeping with the soldier analogy, it would like a soldier who was taken captive, and was beaten and tortured by his captors. Then, when his rescuers come to get him and in the fighting they throw a grenade this same captive soldier throws himself on it to spare the lives of the ones who had beaten and tortured him. This is what Christ did. He made the sacrifice when were helpless. He died for us when we were most undeserving. He loved us when we were most unlovable.

How do I know this? What is the proof? Well, Paul tells us you’ll find the proof at the cross. God’s answer to you about whether or not he loves you is the cross of Jesus Christ. With the outstretched arms of Jesus nailed to that tree you find the full measure of God’s grace for you. You will hear the amazing grace of our Savior as he looked upon the ungodly mass of sinners crying for his death and pleads with his Father, *“Forgive them, for they know not what they do.”* Or, when he looks at the ungodly thief who moments early mocked him and reassures him, *“This day you will be with me in paradise.”* Till the very end, Jesus forgave his enemies, even with his dying breath.

My dear friends, it is the same for us. Christ died for you and me, his enemies and this is God’s grace, won for you by our Lord Jesus Christ. You didn’t earn it. You didn’t deserve it and you couldn’t buy it. Nevertheless, God gave it to you anyway, freely and without merit on your part. So, on your rode to memorizing all of the book of Romans, let Romans 5, verse 8 be the first step on that journey, “*But God shows his love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”* In Jesus’ name. Amen.