

Romans 1:8-17 Prayer of Thanksgiving

⁸ First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. ⁹ For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, ¹⁰ asking that by God's will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you. ¹¹ For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— ¹² or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. ¹³ I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles. ¹⁴ I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish ¹⁵ —hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith"

Proclamation of the Word

Paul begins his letter to the Romans with a thank you to God. I thought if you don't mind, I will write out my weekly thank you notes right now. Is that cool with you guys?

Margaret, can I get some thank you note writing music?

Margaret looks so somber and serious.

Thank you... for all our choirs for faithfully rehearsing for many hours to lift our hearts through music. And especially to Margaret who learned the Jimmy Fallon music off *youtube* just for today :)

Thank you....to all who lead our 19 weekly small groups and help us grow as disciples.

Thank you... to all the ordinary saints who show up when we need to know we were not alone.

Thank you...Fort Hill for showing us how to serve our neighbors by repairing a roof, making disaster relief hygiene kits, gleaning fields, or sharing our money for missions.

Thank you...God for rain. Slip n' sliding down the Hill last night looked fun!

I walked in this morning I met Sabrina and her family. They have been our guests this week through Family Promise where neighbors take shelter in our churches as transitional housing. She handed me this Thank You note without knowing this was part of the sermon. She wrote:

Dear Fort Hill,

Thank you so much for taking the time to serve, setup/clean up, visit and give our yourselves from the heart to make my family feel loved and welcomed during this difficult time in our lives.

We are so appreciative of all the wonderful food and great conversation. It's hard to be sad when we are surrounded by so many positive faces and cheerleaders who are praying us on!

Than you all so much! May the peace and love of Jesus be with you all!

Peace,

Sabrina, and her boys

The Apostle Paul writes a letter to his friends in the church in Rome, and he begins with a thank you. Listen again,

*⁸ I thank God through Jesus for every one of you. That's first. People everywhere keep telling me about your lives of faith, and every time I hear them, I thank God. (Peterson, *The Message*, Romans 1:8)*

How would any of us know about the love of God in Jesus Christ, without someone to tell us and to show us? So thank you Fort Hill for the ways you live the faith.

Today is Reformation Sunday when we celebrate our heritage. Our past instructs us for fully living the faith today, otherwise we would have a dead faith. We have been working through the Fort Hill Faith practices, and today we "Share the Good News Joyfully because in order to grow we need encouragement." Paul writes to the disciples in Rome about "mutual encouragement." None of us has a private faith. We cannot be Christians alone. We need each other.

Some of us keep the faith we were given and never waiver. The faith that came at the Catholic altar, the Baptismal font in the Presbyterian church, or in the Baptist aisle- faith taken with our mother's milk, can carry us through life.

But what happens when you lose your faith or never have had a faith to carry you in the first place? What happens when that foundation won't hold?

Martin Luther sparked a Reformation by nailing 95 Theses to the Wittenburg church door exactly 500 years ago this Tuesday. He did this on October 31 because he knew everyone would be coming to the All Saints day worship on November 1. He saw abuses and practices that were not found in what he read in Scripture. We belong to this Reformed Tradition which we celebrate today.

Martin Luther loved the church which had nurtured him. He served in the monastery and then the academy teaching Bible, but he loved the church enough to want to improve and reform the church. The current state of the faith would not hold for him anymore. The faith of his childhood didn't carry him, not because it wasn't good, but because it wasn't enough.

Perhaps you have had a faith crisis, too. When the doctor in the maternity ward with coolness says, "I'm sorry but we have to keep your baby for a week or so, there are some problems?" That time of joy turns to terror. What now?

Or when our lives feel secure, but all of a sudden is invaded by the reality of disease, divorce, financial crisis, and even death. Then comes the question "what now?"

Or when the church, a community of grace, becomes a place of competition, rancor, or exclusion, merely reflecting the conflicts of the world's reality? What now?

Luther proclaimed what he read in the Word of God, "The righteous shall live by faith." So "Faith alone, not works, grace alone, not merit, Scripture alone, not tradition"- became the cry of the Reformation.

Not only are we saved by faith, but it is the only way we can truly live. The good news of the gospel of Jesus is that no matter what you have done or where you have been, God has made room for you. God's grace is sufficient. It is God's righteousness that saves us. Our lives are a joyful response of thanks to God. The righteous live by faith.

Bill Leonard puts it this way, "Faith is not just believing that something good is going to happen to you. It is believing and living the gospel when nothing good is happening to you. When there are no miracles and nothing is good and you have no place to stand, you go on faith, and God's grace is enough."ⁱ

This week I picked up the *Presbyterian Outlook* which focuses on Young Adults in this issue. I was shocked to find a story about one of our own. The article "Created for a Purpose"ⁱⁱⁱ is about Phillip Storie a current Clemson freshman who worships with us. He preached a sermon in his home church, First Presbyterian, Anderson, telling his faith story.

At 15, Storie was diagnosed with a congenital abnormality in his bone structure, which caused the bones in his chest to push in on his heart. Without the intervention of surgeons, the pressure would kill him. "It hurt just to breathe," Storie said.

He was only halfway through high school. When he first heard the news, he was angry and scared. So he prayed. Prayers helped him to make it moment to moment. But it was the tangible acts from others that helped affirm for him that God was listening to his prayers and that he was not alone. "Despite the fear and pain, I never felt alone," Storie said in his sermon to his church family. "God was always with me, and much like the bars supporting my chest, God, this congregation and my faith support me every single day. When we can't hear God and feel abandoned, our cloud of witnesses speak loud enough to drown out our fear and suffering.

Phillip goes on to tell that it was by going to Camp Buc that he learned to love the environment. So he is interested in studying renewable energy as an engineering student. He wants to work with a company that serves the world. In the article, Phillip gives credit for his faith beginning with his grandparents, his church, and his parents.

You probably have ordinary disciples, the saints, who have shaped you. We will give thanks for them next Sunday in worship. So I invite you to write the names of those who have died who shared the good news with you on this tablecloth. We will use this tablecloth for Communion next Sunday. After worship please feel free to do so.

Phillip says his parents went on mission trips and shared their faith with him. They fell in love with a mission partnership in Haiti. Then Phillip began going on mission trips with his youth group to Asheville, Charlotte, New Orleans, but it was in Agua Prieta, Mexico he saw what unquenchable joy looked like.

"The people there are in such a dark place," Storie said. "But they are so thankful, so grateful. That just blew my mind. As a kid, I used to see God as a giver. Now, I see God all around me in the world."

This summer, after he graduated from T.L. Hanna High School in Anderson, South Carolina, he spent three weeks in Mexico, serving the people of Agua Prieta through the Presbyterian mission Frontera de Cristo. He tutored some of the town's children in math, taught English to those who wanted to learn, worshipped with participants in a drug rehabilitation ministry and helped in their community garden. And he's not done. He plans on going back to Agua Prieta, and next summer he is going to Nicaragua as a freshman engineering student at Clemson University. In Nicaragua, he and other engineering students will go to a village where they will build a well so the people there will have access to clean water...

...Storie acknowledges, "I don't understand why so many bad things happen in the world. But I still believe. I still have faith. And because of that faith, I know that we are here to live and celebrate the Good News together."

Sometimes faith is forged in the darkest and most difficult places, but it leads to a beautiful, life-giving, joyful place. Keep telling your story and pointing to Christ.

Paul writes,

"¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith..."
(Romans 1:16)

Witnessing

We cannot prove God, but we confess that God is eternal, infinite, immeasurable, incomprehensible, omnipotent; invisible. But in the end we can bore God and ourselves with talk. Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way. "So live your life in such a way that others will want to know the One in whom you place your trust. A rose doesn't evangelize. It draws others to it by its scent and beauty." Salvation is less about a get out of hell free card, and more about being remade in the image of Christ who daily helps us live, BY FAITH. So witnessing is about rooting out unkindness, envy, greed, materialism, hate, and hurry, and instead planting the seeds of peace, love, kindness, joy in others' lives. We need to mutually encourage one another.

Frederick Beuchner, writes, "God cannot be expressed but only experienced. In the last analysis, you cannot pontificate but only point. A Christian is one who points at Christ and says, "I can't prove a thing, but there's something about his eyes and his voice. There's something about the way he carries his head, his hands, the way he carries his cross—the way he carries me." ⁱⁱⁱ

Share the Good News joyfully. And keep pointing to the One who carries us all...

ⁱ Bill J. Leonard, "A Place to Believe; Romans 1:16-18," *Review and Expositor*, 86 (1989). Much of the content on Martin Luther is taken from this article.

ⁱⁱ Charmaine Smith-Miles, "Created for a Purpose; Teenager Tells how Family, Church, and Service has Shaped his Faith" *Presbyterian Outlook*, October 23, 2017, 22-23.

ⁱⁱⁱ Frederick Beuchner, *Wishful Thinking; A Seeker's ABC* (New York: HarperCollins, 1973).