

WILL YOU GO?**MATTHEW 9:35 – 10:8; ROMANS 5:1 – 8**

by Elaine Poproski

Before I read our passage from Romans today, I want to tell you about something you might not know exists. I didn't know it exists until I found out earlier this year. Did you know that when slavery was a big thing here (yet another dark part of the history of North America), perpetrated by people in the name of God and Christianity, there was a special version of the Bible that was written for the slaves. It's called the slave Bible.

What they did when they put together this version of the Bible, is they left out all the parts they thought would give the slaves the idea that they could have freedom or peace or any of the wonderful things that God promises in his Word. There are some parts of the Bible that are mostly intact. The book of Romans is almost completely missing. They allow for two chapters of Romans: chapters 12 and 13.

As you read Romans, you're reading words that people thought were dangerous because they proclaim a hope and a freedom in the world. These are the words:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³ And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

⁶ For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. ⁸ But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

We are three weeks into a series I titled: *Sent Ones*. Here's the description: Jesus' disciples – those who've chosen to follow him and to name him the Lord of their lives – have been sent by him to be like him in the world. The journey isn't easy and not everyone will welcome Jesus' disciples, but we are called to go anyway.

At the end of Matthew 9, which I read at the beginning of our service today, we're told that as Jesus went about doing all the wonderful things that Jesus did, he was filled with compassion for the people. He saw that they were harassed and helpless. He saw that they were exploited by those who were supposed to take care of them – the priests, the teachers, the government. And he had compassion for them.

That's Jesus. He sees it all. Where we might turn a blind eye – choose not to see – Jesus sees. And he understands. And he is filled with compassion.

Can you imagine what it would be like if all Jesus' followers all over the world saw like Jesus sees? What would our world be like if all of us saw the exploited, saw those who are harassed

and helpless? What would our city be like – what would our neighbourhoods be like – if all Jesus' followers in this city had the same compassion as Jesus had?

“Look,” Jesus says to his disciples (then and now), “Look and see. There’s so much need – there’s so much work to be done.”

Up until this point in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus has been all alone. Sure, he has people around him all the time; he has his disciples and friends and others who were attracted to all the wonderful things he was doing, but when it comes to the work of God’s kingdom – the work of teaching and proclaiming the good news of God’s kingdom – the work of curing disease and sickness – the work of manifesting God’s kingdom in the here and now – Jesus has been all alone. He says to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful [there’s lots of work to be done], but the labourers are few.” He says to them, “Pray. Ask God to send more workers – more labourers – to join me in my work.”

The very next thing we’re told in Matthew’s gospel, in chapter 10, verse 1, is that *Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness*. In other words, first he tells them to pray for God to send more workers, then he says, ‘Guess what? God sent more workers! It’s you!’

These twelve disciples were the first to be sent. But they weren’t the last. This being sent is what it means to be a disciple. Being a disciple isn’t just a thing between me and God – “Oh, I believe a few things and I know I’m forgiven for my sins so I’m set.” Being a disciple – following Jesus – means we have to follow him wherever he goes. We are sent by him. Jesus’ disciples have been and continue to be sent by him to be like him in the world. But what does that mean?

We know that Jesus went around teaching people what God’s kingdom is like. So, if we’re sent by Jesus to be like Jesus, I think it means we are sent to be teaching people what God’s kingdom is like, just like Jesus did. Jesus proclaimed it – he spoke it – but he also lived it. He cured diseases and cast out demons; he touched the untouchables and loved the unlovable; he ate with sinners and challenged the status quo. We are sent by Jesus to be like Jesus.

You know, as I was thinking about this sermon and these words from Matthew 9 and 10 this week... When I prepare a sermon, I read the Scripture over and over again, and my question to God is this: What’s the thing you need us to hear this week? As I read this passage from Matthew 9 and 10 over and over again this week, and as I reached into some commentaries and into some other things that people had said about this passage, nothing inspired me. I don’t know if as a pastor I’m not supposed to admit that sometimes I read the Bible, and nothing speaks to me or inspires me, but I’m guessing that other people have that same kind of experience sometimes.

Sometimes we’re reading the Bible, we’re praying, we’ve done everything we can to put ourselves in a position to hear from God, and there doesn’t seem to be a thing that God has to say; it doesn’t seem like there are any particular words on that particular day. It might be that we aren’t really listening as well as we think we are. It might be that we’re distracted. It might be that we’re so confident that we already know all of it that we aren’t really listening. The more

familiar we are with the Bible, sometimes the harder it is to hear God because we've heard it all before, so we don't pay attention.

As a preacher, one of the worst things that can happen during the week, is to read the passage for the next Sunday and not be inspired – not have a sense of something God wants to say through that passage. I'm supposed to come here and have something. I'm supposed to come here and have a sense of something that God wants to tell us. I learned a long time ago that if a sermon doesn't first preach to me, I can't preach it to anyone else. So this week, as I read these words from Matthew over and over again, asking God, "What is it in these words that you want us to hear?" It was really frustrating to get nothing from God on the matter.

And then a question popped into my mind. It was more of a feeling of question, but the best I can articulate it is, Why are we sent? That's not quite exactly the question. I know why we're sent. We're sent to be like Jesus; we're sent to proclaim in word and deed the good news of God's kingdom. But why?

This is when Romans 5:1 – 8 stepped out of the pages of my Bible and got right in my face. I think that these words from Romans really connect with the idea of being sent. We can sometimes think about being sent in a legalistic way – Jesus said we have to go out and make disciples, so out of obedience I'm going to go. But the question for me is this: what is it that we're really offering? What is it that we're bringing with us when we're sent? This is where Romans 5 comes in.

Let's read these verses again, starting with verse 1 of Romans 5.

Therefore, since we are justified by faith...

Let me pause here for a minute. That word, justified, gets used a lot, especially by Paul, and often we don't really understand what it means.

To be justified is to be declared righteous – right with God. Imagine yourself standing in a courtroom. Someone has accused you of something awful. And the judge makes a ruling – you are guiltless; you are absolved; you are found to be acceptable. This statement that you are absolved – that you are guiltless – is declared as a fact of who you are. That's what it means to be justified, so what Paul is saying here in Romans 5:1 is that our faith has made us ok with God. Because of our faith – by which we mean our faith in Jesus' death for our sin... Because of our faith in Jesus, we have been found righteous, guiltless, acceptable with God.

Paul goes on...

we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ...

Because we have been declared to be guiltless and acceptable to God, we have peace with God. Our relationship with God is restored. There are no longer any barriers or any conflict or anything standing in the way of our relationship with God. There's something so very wonderful about that. We don't have to be anxious about how God will receive us. We don't have to worry about what God might do to us. Because of Jesus – through Jesus – we are at peace with God.

And not only that. Through Jesus we have peace with God, *and* we have access to God. It's not like God is way over there and we say, "it's nice that our relationship is restored." We can actually walk over to God any time we want.

Our small groups this week are talking about Esther. Esther was a queen, but she was less than the king. The king, in his throne room, had ultimate say over who was allowed in and who was allowed out. If someone walked into the throne room without an invitation, they were putting their life in danger. Just because a person was married to the king didn't mean they automatically had access to the king. But what Paul is telling us is that because of our peace with God we have access to God.

In those same small groups we're talking a lot about privilege. We're learning what the word means, and we're trying to understand how our own privilege might be used for God and God's purposes. One of the key ways we've defined what privilege is, is with the word, *access*. It's about access to something that others don't have access to. And that access often translates into more privilege and more power, usually. For instance, I grew up in a middle-class family. We didn't have lots of money, but we weren't short on money. This meant I had access to some things that cost money. I had access to music lessons and ballet lessons as a kid. I had access to university after high school. And because I had access to university, I had access to any number of jobs that came with security and benefits. That's what privilege is. It opens up doors for you that others might not be able to walk through.

What Paul is saying here is that because of this peace with God, because we are justified by faith, we have access to God. This is what he wrote:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have access to this grace in which we stand.

It's a sentence that makes a circle. We are justified by faith. We have been declared not guilty. We have peace with God because we're justified by faith. How? Jesus gives us access to God's grace, which is the same grace responsible for us being justified and having peace with God in the first place.

Verse 2 ends this way: *and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.*

Jesus gives us access to God's grace. That grace is how we are justified. Being justified means that we are at peace with God. Being at peace with God means we have hope – real hope, not wishful thinking, but the kind of hope that is rooted in truth and reality and the faithful promises of God. Being at peace with God means we have hope that one day we will share the glory of God.

We're told in Exodus 34 that Moses had met with God on top of a mountain and received the ten commandments. He spent all that time directly in God's presence. And when he came back down the mountain, his face glowed.¹ That glow was the glory of God. Moses had been so present with God that he actually glowed with the glory of God.

Paul wrote: *we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.*

We aren't boasting about our own faith. We aren't boasting about anything about ourselves. This isn't that kind of uppity bragging. The glow is the result of being in God's presence, which we can be because we have access to God, because we're justified by faith, and we've been made at peace with God. We boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God, which is ours only because of God's grace which justifies us and makes us at peace with God. We're boasting about God. It's like when you're really proud of someone and you want to tell the world about the marvelous thing they have done. That's what it means to boast about God.

It's tempting to read these wonderful words and interpret them to mean that since we're at peace with God and can hope that we will share the glory of God, life will be great. But this peace isn't about freedom from suffering. God never says that if we're his – if we have obtained access to his grace – that we will be spared the trials and tribulations everyone else suffers. If anything, especially for Paul's original readers, those who were at peace with God through Jesus endured more suffering than their friends and neighbours who hadn't gone that way.

What God does do is give us a different lens through which to see our suffering. Through the eyes of faith, we see God use our suffering to shape us to be more and more like Jesus. That's why Paul writes, in verse 3, that we boast in our sufferings. Again, we're not boasting or bragging about ourselves. Our suffering, or, more accurately, the way God uses our suffering, is why we boast. We're boasting about God.

We boast about God even in the midst of our suffering because we know that our suffering isn't evidence of God's absence. Sometimes we can't feel God's presence because things are so awful, but he is never absent. God is in our suffering with us. And because God is in our suffering with us, our suffering produces endurance, and that endurance produces character, and that character produces hope.

We're back to hope. This is why the slave owners didn't want their slaves to read Romans.

We boast in our hope of sharing God's glory – a hope that is ours because of Jesus. And this hope is the result of God showing up in our suffering and transforming our suffering into Jesus-like character. We are reminded in verse 5, this hope does not put us to shame. It is not wishful thinking. It is the kind of hope that almost shouldn't be called hope because there's a promise attached – a promise of God's faithfulness that has been demonstrated over and over again from the beginning of time. God will not let us down. Our hope, when it's in God, is never in vain.

Hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

We are sent into the world by Jesus to be like Jesus. Why? Because the world desperately needs to know how deeply they are loved by God. The world desperately needs that peace, that freedom, that access to God that Jesus so freely offers. Everything Jesus said and did pointed to God's love. All the curing of disease and casting out of demons, all the proclaiming and teaching about God's kingdom... It's all about God's love.

It's possible that some of us have been Christians so long, that we're no longer amazed that we've been declared guiltless and are thus at peace with God. It's possible that some of us have

lived in it so long, we've forgotten how extraordinary it is to live in the freedom of that peace with God.

But if you haven't forgotten, or if it's still all new and fresh for you, you know that this freedom – this peace with God – this grace of God that flows out of his love for us – this is why we're sent. Because this is not something we should ever keep to ourselves.

God is described relationally, as the Trinity. There's the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and they're all love and that love just bubbles over and spills out into the world and into us. When we are following God, when we are in God's presence, when we are sharing in the glory of God, that same love spills out from us – pours out all over everything. We need somewhere for it to pour out into, so let's go out where Jesus sent us, so the love can pour out over whoever happens to be in our vicinity.

Every time we touch the untouchable, speak to the invisible, love the unlovable... Every time we offer encouragement where there is discouragement, hope where there is despair, love where there is hate... We share the love of God – the peace of God. We proclaim the Kingdom of God. This is what it's about.

Paul wrote:

While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

That's why we have hope. And that hope is why we're sent. That hope is what we're sent to bring and to be.

In Matthew 9, beginning at verse 35 we read,

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.'

The disciples Jesus instructed to pray are the same disciples Jesus sent in answer to that prayer. Jesus still sends his disciples. Will you go? Will you go and be like Jesus wherever you are sent?

ⁱ Exodus 34:29 – 35.