

**St. Timothy's Lutheran Church
Pastor Jonna Bohigian**

**September 30, 2018
Romans 3:21 – 31, 4:13 – 25**

An Undeserved Gift

When Alek and I got married, we had a number of serious conversations, including, but not limited to: how will we deal with conflict in our families; how will we prioritize one another so that our work doesn't eclipse our care for one another; and how can we live simply so that we can pay off debt and give generously?

I suppose this is one of the benefits of getting married a bit later in life; you have lived long enough to hear your friends' stories and know what you want to do differently. One thing *I* wanted to do differently was to manage conflict in a healthy way. When I was on the phone with a close friend last week, I was reminded that this idea came from her experience.

"How is your relationship with your mother-in-law?" I asked. "Oh, not very good. I have realized that with us, *less is more*," she said. "That's too bad. I'm sorry to hear that your relationship hasn't gotten any better." "I know. I've just come to accept that she won't like me, and there's nothing I can do to change her mind."

I recalled a photo album story from years past. Her mother-in-law had excitedly brought out a photo album to show her. The album included everyone in the family, multiple times over, everyone *but* my friend and her family. The *one* picture of her family had someone's head cropped out. When she tried confronting her mother-in-law about this deliberate meanness, she defended herself by saying that they weren't *around* enough to take pictures of. Besides, she was a "good Christian woman," and she would *never* do anything like *that*.

My friend couldn't understand this meanness nor why she would defend herself by saying that she was a "good Christian woman." What did *that* have to do with anything? Wasn't that an oxymoron, a "good Christian woman"?

After all of these years of heartbreak, she shared something I'd never heard her say before. "I want to forgive her. I'm not ready to yet, but I want to forgive her. Pray for me."

Since last week, I've been thinking about that comment, "I'm a good Christian woman." Is this statement to distinguish between a "good" Christian woman and a "bad" Christian woman? Or is this distinction perhaps between a "run-of-the-mill" Christian woman and a "good" or "superior" Christian woman?

In our vocabulary, we use the word "good" frequently. *He is a good person.* *This is good pizza. She has a good job. I may not be perfect, but I'm a good person.*

We often use "good" in our vocabulary, yet Scripture is clear. "No one is good but God alone," Mark 10:18 and Luke 18:19. "There is no one who does good, not even one," Romans 3:12. "All our righteous acts are like filthy rags," Isaiah 64:6.

I hate to break it to you. You will never be a "good Christian woman," nor will I. We don't have a leg to stand on, in and of ourselves. No one is good. You're not good. And I'm not good.

Now, the church in Rome was a mixed group of Christians. Some were converted Jews, and perhaps the majority were converted Gentiles. They hadn't been Christians for long, and it seems apparent that there was some confusion regarding their "goodness." Some of the converted Jews believed that because they

were God's chosen people and had received the Law of Moses, they were good and right with God.

In his letter, Paul writes that the converted Jews are not better because they are God's chosen people who received the Law. Why? Because simply *having* the Law doesn't make a person right with God. Nor does a person become right with God by obeying the Law, because no one can do that but Jesus alone (Matt 5:17). “Therefore no one will be declared [right with God] in his sight by observing the Law; rather, through the Law we become conscious of sin” (Rom 3:20b).

What Paul says *here* is what Lutherans describe as the second use of the Law. The second use of the Law is to be a mirror, a “perfect reflection of what God created the human heart and life to be.”¹ When we look at what we were created to be, we become aware of our sin and look to Jesus.

Neither Jew nor Gentile is better. For “*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (Rom 3:23).

“*But now* a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify” (Rom 3:21). Now, *all people* can be made right with God. The Jews have a way to be made right with God, and the Gentiles have a way to be made right with God. It is not by trying harder to be good and to obey God; all are made right through the work of Jesus on the cross. *Jesus* makes us right with God.

In verses 25 and 26, Paul writes about sin and God's justice. Imagine with me a courtroom. A defendant is declared “guilty” of crimes he committed. The judge

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law_and_Gospel

knows the defendant is guilty, but she lets him off. No punishment can make things right with the plaintiff, so the judge lets him off. Though the judge does this, the crimes have still been committed. Everything is *not* ok. Something *else* must be done.

God is just, and He can't let sins go unpunished. *No* one can pay the price; *no* one can make things right, except for a *perfect* person. So God sent His only Son, Jesus, to pay the price of our sin. He sacrificed His Son so that the penalty would be paid and we would be made right with God.

So then there is *nothing* for *anyone* to boast about. *No* one can obey God enough; *no* one can be good enough. But God, in His justice and His love, made the way for you and for me.

For many of us here today, the news that we are sinners and are made right with God through faith in Jesus is *not new*. We know that we cannot earn our salvation, yet we continue to try to prove ourselves, to be better than others, to be "good Christians."

Why is that? Why is it that we try to prove our "goodness," when we know that it's not about being good? Nothing we *do* can make us good.

Have you ever noticed *busying* yourself so that you don't have time for introspection? Have you ever noticed yourself *talking* to avoid someone questioning you? Have you ever noticed *sharing* your failures or successes with others so that *they* don't identify your failures *first*? Have you ever noticed yourself *asking* someone about him/herself so that the focus is off of you?

Perhaps Henri Nouwen was right. "The greatest trap in our life is...self-rejection...When we have come to believe in the voices that call us worthless and

unlovable, then success, popularity, and power are easily perceived as attractive solutions. The real trap, however, is self-rejection.”²

He goes on to write, “I am constantly surprised at how quickly I give in to this temptation. As soon as someone accuses me or criticizes me, as soon as I am rejected, left alone, or abandoned, I find myself thinking: ‘Well, that proves once again that I am a nobody.’ Instead of taking a critical look at the circumstances or trying to understand my own and others’ limitations, I tend to blame myself – not just for what I did, but for *who I am*.³

Dear church, know that you “are intimately loved long before [your] parents, teachers, spouses, children, friends [and pastors] loved or wounded [you].”⁴ No matter what you have done or will do, know that you are loved by God. He knew that you could never pay the price and make things right with Him, so He sent you Jesus.

You are the beloved of God, blessed to be a blessing for the world.

A story of blessing from Nouwen’s *Life of the Beloved*. He writes, “Shortly before I started a prayer service in one of our houses, Janet, a handicapped member of our community, said to me: ‘Henri, can you give me a blessing?’ I responded in a somewhat automatic way by tracing with my thumb the sign of the cross on her forehead. Instead of being grateful, however, she protested vehemently, ‘No, that doesn’t work. I want a real blessing!’ I suddenly became aware of the ritualistic quality of my response to her request and said, ‘Oh, I am sorry,...let me give you a real blessing when we are all together for the prayer service.’ She nodded with a

² Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*, 31 – 32.

³ Nouwen, 32.

⁴ Nouwen, 36.

smile, and I realized that something special was required of me. After the service, when about thirty people were sitting in a circle on the floor, I said, 'Janet has asked me for a special blessing. She feels that she needs that now.' As I was saying this, I didn't know what Janet really wanted. But Janet didn't leave me in doubt for very long. As soon as I had said, 'Janet has asked me for a special blessing,' she stood up and walked toward me. I was wearing a long white robe with ample sleeves covering my hands as well as my arms. Spontaneously, Janet put her arms around me and put her head against my chest. Without thinking, I covered her with my sleeves so that she almost vanished in the folds of my robe. As we held each other, I said, 'Janet, I want you to know that you are God's Beloved Daughter. You are precious in God's eyes. Your beautiful smile, your kindness to the people in your house, and all the good things you do show us what a beautiful human being you are. I know you feel a little low these days and that there is some sadness in your heart, but I want you to remember who you are: a very special person, deeply loved by God and all the people who are here with you.'

"As I said these words, Janet raised her head and looked at me; and her broad smile showed that she had really heard and received the blessing. When she returned to her place, Jane, another handicapped woman, raised her hand and said, 'I want a blessing too.' She stood up and, before I knew it, had put her face against my chest. After I had spoken words of blessing to her, many more of the handicapped people followed, expressing the same desire to be blessed. The most touching moment...came when one of the assistants, a twenty-four-year-old student, raised his hand and said, 'And what about me?' 'Sure,' I said. 'Come.' He came, and, as

we stood before each other, I put my arms around him and said, 'John, it is so good that you are here. You are God's Beloved Son. Your presence is a joy for all of us.

When things are hard and life is burdensome, always remember that you are loved with an everlasting love.' As I spoke these words, he looked at me with tears in his eyes and then he said, 'Thank you, thank you very much.'"⁵

You are the beloved of God. He loves you very much. Amen.

⁵ Nouwen, 69 – 72.