

Romans 5:6-11. You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹ Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! ¹⁰ For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! ¹¹ Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Summer Sermon Series: The Book of Romans

The Basics of Christianity, One Word at a Time: Reconciliation

Washington, Jefferson, Paul Revere, Lincoln, Roosevelt, Eisenhower... These are names that we immediately recognize as American Heroes, especially as we near the 4th of July holiday as we commemorate our Independence Day. Today, I want to bring to your attention a name that it is not so familiar, but it's a name that holds its place in the annals of American history. This man was not a founding father, or celebrated president, or a decorated general, but rather he was but a private who served in the Washington D.C. police department from 1945-1950. And while his actions may not be remembered annually or celebrated with a grand display of fireworks, his actions were nonetheless noble and significant. Leslie William Coffelt was an officer of the White House Police, who died defending President Truman against an armed attack on November 1, 1950 at the Blair House where the president was living during renovations at the White House. A few days later, Private Coffelt was buried in Arlington National Cemetery and the epitaph that was engraved on his tombstone still references his rare and noble act. "White House Policeman: Who Gave His Life in Defense of the President of the United States During an Assassination Attempt at the Blair House, Washington, D.C." ¹

While secret service agents are all trained to take bullet for the president, to this day, Leslie Coffelt is one of only four Secret Service members to officially put that training into practice. (The others being two men who were wounded during the same incident, some of you may remember a bit more clearly the fourth who was injured in this line of duty as secret serviceman Tim McCarthy was wounded in the 1981 assassination attempt on Ronald Regan.) I have no idea how many secret service agents and White house police and other guards have been trained for such duty and have been assigned to the president's personal detail throughout

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

the years, but only four men have officially taken a bullet for the president. And in the 241-year history of our country, Les Coffelt remains the only one to have been killed while defending the President.

It's a rare thing and therefore it rightfully seen as a noble and honorable act that this man carried out on that fateful day. Not everyone is cut out to serve in the way that Les Coffelt served, and then it had to happen that he was in that certain moment in time, standing in that certain place, and there he remained. He did not flee from danger, but according to his training he remained. He did not hesitate in his calling, instead he gave the ultimate sacrifice to protect the man who held the highest office in the land, and at the time, his act of bravery very much brought a sense of unity to the nation.

Such a thing is a rare thing. In our lesson for today, we see Paul reference the nobility of such an act. Very rarely, with much difficulty, a man might lay down his life for another. A man might possibly lay down his life to protect the president, or in times past a noble king, or another important or a worthy person. A person might give his or her life for a dear family member, a dear-dear friend. A person might sacrifice himself or herself for a faithful comrade in arms. But here is where things go from rare and noble to truly extraordinary and divine. ⁷ ***Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die.*** ⁸ ***But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:7-8).*** Paul takes this rational illustration, this human rarity, and he bends it and stretches it to the heavens, far beyond earthbound expectations, far by human limitations. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous, a good person, but God... ***God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.***

Christ died for us. The king of the universe takes on flesh not to save worthy and noble creatures, not just save good Christian folk² or the best of the bunch, but while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. So, great is the love of God, that he acts in this way towards sinners. For those who were careless and smashed and broke his perfect creation he promised a Savior. For sinners who day after day traded his own perfect will for their own flawed ideas he promised and gave a perfect substitute. For sinners who turn from his open and generous hands, who grumble, complain, rebel, who secretly and openly defy the will of God and grieve the heart of the LORD; for such dreadful sinners he gave his only Son. For those who defile and abuse the gifts that God gives, who trample upon his generosity, who neglect and reject his presence, he gives unending, unyielding grace. For the ungodly, who cared little for his word, who trample his love and care, who have by their sin rightfully incurred the wrath and anger of a holy God, he gave a Savior. Make no mistake about it, each one of us is included in this growing mob of sinners who are born into this world and who by nature rebel and reject God and his word. We cannot do anything to stop it. We are born in sin, by nature we grieve his heart, by impure thought, word, and deed we strain and break the relationship that mankind was created to have with God. It is for such wretched sinners, it is for us, that Christ steps in and intervenes.

² Schroeder, Jonathan; Planning Christian Worship (Year A)

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: ***While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*** He intervenes and spares us as he gives his own life for those who deserved nothing but death and condemnation. He steps in our place, and takes our punishment. God's Son is separated from God so that we would never have to be. At just the right time, he steps in and with unflinching grace, he steps into the line of fire and takes on the punishment that we deserve. This is the Savior's calling, this is his noble task, that he fulfills at just the right time, at just the right place, where God's justice and his mercy so violently intersect. Jesus Christ takes on the wrath of God as he hangs on the cross shouting out under the agony that each one of us deserves. ***My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? (Matthew 27:46).***

Why? Why would he do such a thing? There's only one answer. God loved us. God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son. (John 3:16). Not that he overlooked all the transgressions like some doting grandfather who just overlooks everything. No this is a God who knows our sin, he knows our guilt, our natural worth, and yet he still makes this effort. He comes and pays for the guilt of our sin. He dies for us. He lays his life down for our own. Our sins separate us from a holy God. Our sins deserve eternal punishment, banishment and suffering in hell. But God's great desire is that we should not perish apart from him, but his good and gracious will is that we would live with him now and forever in heaven. God's great desire is to have a relationship with us. And that's the beauty of our word for today. Not that atonement or righteousness were overly theological terms. But our word for today puts an emphasis on the personal aspect of God's work for us. God speaks to us concerning his grace in personal terms. He speaks to us in a way that expresses his relationship with us. Our relationship with God was broken on account of the curse of sin but now it is restored through the grace of Christ. Through Jesus blood we are reconciled to God. Enemies no more, no we are his beloved. Spared God's wrath and eternal death, we are enabled to live in the joy of this reconciliation, this restored relationship. Despite our unfaithfulness, we are invited and welcomed and treated as his beloved bride. In his grace, in his love, our sin is paid for, God's wrath subsides, and we are at peace with God. That is why our LORD Jesus steps in so that we might be reconciled to him.

Reconciliation is term that a person might use to speak of estranged parties, a husband or a wife, being restored in their relationship, and often this is only possible because one stepped forward and admitted their guilt, their wrong doing.³ However, what it is so incredible about our reconciliation with God is that he did this while we were still powerless. It is not as though we made some noble gesture to God. It is not as though we apologized and begged for his mercy and we showed that we could behave and then he responded with his good favor. Instead we see the grace of God shining through in all its undeserved wonder that while we were still sinners, while we were still powerless God saved us. We did not meet God halfway, we could not and so God sent his son for us, plunged him into our human existence, plunged him into the depths of punishment or agony to pluck us from the grips of hell. This is gospel in all its glory. ***While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*** In the book of Ephesians Paul explains it this

³ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 791). New York: United Bible Societies.

way. ***As for you, you were dead in transgressions and sins... But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved...⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.¹⁰ For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2:1,4-5,8-10)***

And now only by the grace of God, now this is the highly honored state in which we live. We are reconciled to God. Sinful rebels are not only forgiven and spared from death, but we live as beloved children of the king. Enemies of the divine, now we have been made new to live and serve in God's kingdom. By his grace alone we are reconciled to God and as his beloved he protects us and cares for us as souls made worthy and blessed by the blood of Christ. He who spared us from the wrath of God, who died in our place will certainly care for us through this life, and bring us to a place of glory in the next, for he is the one who was raised to life to assure us of our eternal salvation. ***¹⁰ For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!¹¹ Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.***

Rejoice, you have a right relationship with God. Rejoice and live for him who died for you and was raised again. Leave rebellious ways behind and live in thankful obedience knowing that you have been reconciled to God, you have been given new life and peace with your merciful LORD.

On this weekend in which we take time to celebrate the freedoms that we enjoy we are certainly also very thankful of the sacrifices that were made and continue to be made to protect those freedoms and the peace that we enjoy. Today as we consider the peace that we enjoy with our God we once again recall how that peace came about. Jesus Christ, stood in our place, stepped in front of God's wrath, not for worthy and important folk, but while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. So that those who were by nature enemies of God would not only be spared from death, but through his innocent sacrifice are sins are wiped away, his perfect righteousness is credited to our account, and we are reconciled to God. Objects of his wrath no more, we are the objects of his affection, who have been set free to live in the peace that this good news brings, both now and forever. ***Rejoice in God through our LORD Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. Amen.***