

Third Sunday in Lent – Epistle

The Boast/Boost of Faith

Romans 5:1-11

Third Sunday in Lent

Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

1Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. 3And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that sufferings produces endurance, 4and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

6For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person-though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. 8But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. 9Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. 10For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. 11But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Diagnosis: Exacerbating the Wrath of God

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Called to Justify Our Existence*

While the postmodern world would like to believe that there are no universals, especially in light of the diversity of our human existence, that belief is more wishful thinking than fact. For, as Paul pointed out early in his letter, evident in the diversity of human existence (especially in the diversity of human sinfulness) is the universal fact that all are called to justify their existence. That call echoes throughout the public square, as is evidenced by the public process of “passing judgment” (2:1), and has its origin in the God who is the creator and ruler of heaven and earth, whose lawful purpose is to hold the whole world “accountable to God” (3:19).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Boasting/Boosting Our Strengths*

Given the fact of God’s universal call to justify our human existence, it is understandable that people try all kinds of ways to fulfill it. We call those attempts “religions” or “faiths.” And while the world is also filled with a diversity of religions and faiths (theistic, spiritualist, naturalistic, secularist, etc.), there is a universal core they share too—even as they vie with one another as though they were in opposition. That universal core is the assumption that people must have the innate “strength” (intellectually, religiously, morally, genetically, culturally, etc.) to justify their existence. Why else would God issue such a call? At the root of all religion, therefore, lies a primordial “boast” (or faith) in our human strength that subtly boosts the significance of those strengths beyond all proportion, as though they are what we are to look to, trust in, for the justification of our existence.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Exacerbating the*

Wrath of God

No matter how well intentioned, our human religions and faiths not only end up “looking for justification in all the wrong places,” in our strengths, but they also exacerbate the wrath of God. Because the truth of that wrath is unnerving, for the most part, it remains concealed. Indeed, the most desirable place to reveal it is in correlation with the gospel, that is, preaching. Nevertheless, as Paul explains, God’s wrath is real; it is “out there” in the world apart from the gospel. Its concealment is not based on conspiracy, but our “suppression” (1:18) and its “naturalness” (1:20). The wrath is apparent in the silence of God, that is, “God giving us up” to the selves we boast in (1:24, 26), and, of course, to the reign of the great universal silencer, death (5:14). In these, we behold the impotence of our strengths to justify our human existence and God’s justification (rightness) in vanquishing that existence as no longer worth keeping around.

Prognosis: Exercising the Grace of God

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Christ = Access to the Grace of God*

The surprisingly new thing that we encounter in Jesus Christ, is not the truth of God’s wrath and our enemy status with God, but that sinners and enemies of God have “access to God’s grace” (5:1). This grace, which battles against God’s wrath and which reconciles/justifies us to God as keep-able (worth keeping around), comes at a great cost-the death of God’s Son, the cross of Christ (5:10). The question that emerges is this: Is God justified in dealing with sinners this way? Paul probes the depth of our human reason and concludes that: “perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die” (5:7). But this is not the logic of the gospel. The logic of the gospel is that “Christ died for the ungodly” (5:6), for “the weak” (5:6), for those who had not the strength to justify their existence. Paul,

therefore, has only one conclusion. God in Christ is “proving” (5:8) something new to us. God is proving/justifying that a universal “love” now exists for the ungodly, and that it exists exclusively in Jesus Christ. That’s because Jesus-and Jesus alone-has conquered God’s wrath (5:9), and overturned the universal sign of that wrath, death, in his death and resurrection.

Step 5: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Solution) – Boasting/Boosting/Believing in Christ

With this new turn of events, a new human religion or faith now emerges on the scene, one that is at its core different from all others. In receiving access to God’s grace through faith in Christ, we boast not of our strengths, but of Christ, who is our strength. Our boasting of him is an act of faith that boosts Christ and his reconciling death to it proper proportion: as our peace, our justification, our reconciliation, our salvation before God. Another word Paul uses to describe this boast of faith is “hope”: the “hope of sharing the glory of God” (1:2). To have hope in Christ is to boast in the promise that we are already right before God on account of our faith in Christ, even though we still await the final consummation of that promise. Christian faith, therefore, boasts of its hope in Christ. For that reason, Christian religion or faith, especially, its music and sacramental practice, will be sure to boast of the depths of God’s love in Christ by recounting/boosting the new logic of “justification by his blood” (5:9). For it is the gospel content of that boast/faith (i.e., Jesus Christ boosting us from enemies of God to the reconciled friends of God by his blood), that fills our boast and informs our hopes.

Step 6: Final Diagnosis (External Solution) – Living Our Justification

For those who boast in Christ, a new twist on living also emerges. Instead of striving to justify our living, we now live

our justification. For Paul, that life is characterized by the phrase "we boast in our sufferings." The sufferings we endure in Christ by faith are not signs of our defeat, but part of the process of the cross working in our lives the new life in Christ. Suffering becomes the trademark of our life and the tool through which God remakes us. Although the process of the cross is circular, beginning and ending in hope, its outcome is productive, that is, character building. "Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us," but reinvests us hopefully into the process of further dying and rising in Christ. This is all the work of the Holy Spirit, pouring the love of God into our hearts (5:5), transforming our character into that of the image and likeness of Christ. That's where the call to justify our existence leads when it is fulfilled by faith in Christ-to a new existence. At least, that's our boast!