

Sermon Text for October 1, 2017

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Esther 4:9-17, Romans 9:14-18

"At the right time, at the right place"

I spent pretty much most of the week in Pittsburg at the Presbyterian Mission Network. It is a network of churches and individuals in our denomination who have some connection to Russia and the work of the church done in Russia. It is amazing how different things are in that country from when we left. When we were in Russia there was this incredible détente where the city of Moscow was full of expats, so Americans and Europeans who had opportunities to do business and diplomats who needed a pastor. So the church was full, our social ministries were bustling and we couldn't spend money fast enough as it came in. It was an amazing time with a whole slew of initiatives with people who were excited for what God was providing for them to do.

Now, the Moscow Embassy lost 800 people from its embassy, there are sanctions which are forcing international businesses from leaving Russia and they are being replaced by Russian nationals. It is a time of great fear and confusion and I spent quite a bit of time with the new pastor who is there and he was asking me for all sorts of insight and advice and I realized how different the time that I was there from now that he was there. I was grateful that we were there when we were there. It may not have been possible for us to stay in Russia with the current climate that was there. We were there at the right time and at the right place.

Has that ever happened to you in your life? You look back and you say: God sure put me there at the right time at the right place. Or, you are helped by someone and you praise God and say, He sure put that person there in my life at the right time and at the right place. Or something happens and you recognize that it happened exactly at the right time and the right place. Nothing happens by chance, you know that don't you? There is no such thing as chance, it is providence. The presence of God.

Today's Scriptures, both of them, really speak to us about how God seems to manage to put us at the right place and at the right time without us even knowing it until later, if at all.

Esther in our first Scripture is reminded that she has been put in a particular place and with a certain amount of power for a specific reason, ie - to save her people from a

destructive law. In Romans, Paul reminds us that each one of us is here upon this earth, has a certain position whether it be our job, our contacts with people, or very simply our attendance at church a very specific role and duty that we must fulfill and that is very personally our specific role.

As Christians who live in Strasburg and the surrounding areas, attend this church we are to actively search out what that duty is that God has for us, and act upon it as a response to the wideness of God's mercy that surrounds us. Let us together, with Paul, find out that each one of us finds ourselves now and today at the right time and the right place, but to do what is the question that we need to answer.

READ SCRIPTURE

The key word that Paul uses in these few verses in Romans is "mercy". In fact verse 15 is so repetitive in the Greek that two different words are used, but they both mean the same thing. I will have mercy upon whom I have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion. In these verses he repeats this over and over again as if we had somehow forgotten his promises in chapter 8 that we heard some months ago that the sufferings of this life can't even compare to the glory to come, that God makes all things work for God's purposes, even the worse of the bad, the promise that if God is for us, who can be against us, and again the promise that who can separate us from the love of Christ, for I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

There is one word for all of these promises, and that is mercy. The mercy of Almighty God as Paul describes it is overwhelming. We don't deserve it, we didn't earn it, God took the initiative and gave it to us through the love of Jesus Christ. Paul's emphasis is to show how God's mercy always wins and always works on our behalf.

In our Esther reading we understand how God's mercy is able to come into play by putting Esther at the right place at the right time. Here is this young queen, afraid for her life, not wanting to risk it, but her uncle reminds her that in the end God's mercy will win out. Now you may choose Esther, not to go before the king and speak on behalf of the king for your people, the people of Israel but know that this will not save you. You will die along with the rest of the Jews in this land, but God who is merciful will send someone else to take your place and save the Jewish people because in the end God will

still win, even if it is with someone else.

God's mercy reminds us daily that we are put on this earth many times to make life and death decisions so that God's kingdom can be reflected on this earth. How many of us feel strongly about God's love and his mercy that we are literally willing to die to show that this love is true and applicable to all of us today? So at this event they focused on Christianity in Russia from 1917-2017. Who knows why 1917? What happened in Russia in 1917? That's right, the Bolshevik revolution. In that revolution hundreds and thousands of believers were killed because remember what Marx said about religion? It is the opiate of the people.

In Romans, Paul makes the same point that we find in Esther that God's mercy always wins out so God puts people, puts us in positions where we can choose God, or not and until people choose God's will we will continue to be given that opportunity. He uses Pharaoh as an example of someone who could have easily let the people of God go, but by his hard heart all of Egypt and all of Israel were able to see the power and the love and the mercy that God has for his people and that love is extended not only to his people, this is the next step that Paul makes, but to all people who through Jesus Christ we see that God so loved the world.

So then God has mercy on whomever he chooses. He has chosen today to have mercy on you. He has chosen you as someone sitting in the pew who is at the right place at the right time. Each and every person here is called to serve God through the church in a specific way. As Esther hears, maybe it is for such a time as this that you were called to serve here in this specific purpose.

Paul tells us to take the initiative and seek out how to respond to God's mercy in your life so that you can be a brick that is helping to build up God's kingdom. I was amazed by the city of Pittsburgh. There is a very, very strong Presbyterian presence there. There is a very historic Presbyterian presence there. It was out of Pittsburgh that our mission agency began way back in the 1700s. We met at Eastminster this beautiful church with a huge pipe organ. I asked so how many people do you get on Sunday. Here is a sanctuary that seats probably 800 people. Who wants to guess how many people worship in a church a block away from a Presbyterian seminary? Oh, we get about 140 people. What has happened to our church today that our cathedrals are empty while our churches in the country are full? We have found ourselves in the right place in the right time.

How has God called you to serve the church? So many of you are serving this church and this community through this church and you are not recognized and your names are not on the front of the bulletin, I can't name them all. You have found that this is your time and your place to serve in a specific function.

But so many others of you are still wondering what your gift could be, what your calling is, what service can you afford. Paul tells us in Romans that each one of us, every single one of us, like Esther, is called to a certain task right here and right now. If you have been coming to church and enjoying the fellowship, it is time to get out of the stands and get into the game. It is time to take the initiative and actively get involved in the church and seek out for what you were called to do right now. God tells us that God's mercy is so great that I'm going to give you a chance to go out and serve the church in such a way that it will not only bring joy to others, but also to you as you serve.

May God bless us and keep us as we find how God has called us to this time and place to serve in work a way that reflects God's mercies on our life. Amen.