

Sermon Text for November 19, 2017

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

II Samuel 12:12b-15, Romans 11:17-21

"Humble Branches"

I need to share with you a phenomenon that I'm noticing in my circles. With my friends from Bible College and from college as you can imagine I have very different circles of friendship. But I have noticed that from Bible College a number of them have moved politically to the left. Within that context this year I have seen a break in relationships because of the political climate in which we find ourselves. 30 years of relationships have been broken, people have been unfriended and are no longer on speaking terms. It hasn't affected me personally, you know me, I won't ever unfriend anyone.

Within my own family I have relatives who this year have stopped talking to their parents because the parents hold up support for the current political climate and their children, all my relatives, can't imagine how they can support someone who, in their own words, is leading us closer to a reality that reflects the Third Reich. That is their words.

Just this year I saw within this congregation conversations on social media revolving around the political realities in which we find ourselves where people were angrily talking past each other. Just this year I have had members of the church come up to me and complain that I am too liberal and others complain to me that I am too conservative.

Three years ago when I wrote an enews article about some of the events happening in our country which concerned me and I said that I take the position of Karl Barth who said in the build-up to WWII that his task as a pastor was: "to do theology and only theology ... as though nothing had happened." That has been my approach, and I know that it has been disappointing for some of you that I don't speak out more strongly against abortion or that I don't blast the immoral actions of our President towards women and the poor. My goal as a pastor has been to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ as I understand it, and then to allow you to go and make up your own mind. If I see an injustice I try to speak to it, albeit subtly and probably with too much nuance for anyone to quite understand what I am saying and which side I am falling on.

But our task together has been and I pray will always be, to create a family, a community of people who have one goal in mind, being disciples of Jesus Christ even as we stand on different sides of issues. We are called to be one family and I will point out areas where I feel our society is trending that goes against Scripture. And when I speak out against the sin of

closing our borders, or making decisions based on color and class, or encouraging a way of living which is contrary to Scripture, I hope you understand that I am speaking on how I understand Scripture to be speaking to me. If you disagree with me then challenge me, but not by saying that you are patriotic and I'm not, but rather by saying that the Bible says something different from what I am saying.

At the root of all this is a lack of humility. It is an understanding that we think we are right and the other side has lost their mind. Last week we heard a sermon on predestination and I never even mentioned the word once. We talked about God who has chosen us by grace and that is supposed to make you feel good, it is supposed to give you a freedom that you've never had before to live your life for God because you want to because of what God has done for you instead of because you have to because of what God will do to you if you don't. I hope you had a week of absolute freedom. Grace is free, without a cost to us.

But be careful, because just as grace is free, it is not cheap. Christ had to die on the cross in order for that grace to be available to us. Grace may be free, but it is not to lead to arrogance. The God of grace is still in charge of God's creation, all of it, but we tend to forget it and take that freedom in Christ as freedom from Christ. Consider today a reminder that we are called to humility, what Paul calls humble branches which will help us keep our sights on Christ.

READ SCRIPTURE

There is something about sailing that gives you a sense of freedom and joy that is hard to find elsewhere. When I sail I like to go fast. And since I'm somewhat competitive, a friend of mine and I entered a sailing race on the St. John's River which started literally in front of the church where I served. I thought we actually had a chance. We were doing pretty well at the beginning of the race, keeping up with the crowd, but then my friend uttered the fateful words, Bob, do you want to steer?

Well, I took the course that had the most speed which tended to criss-cross the river. I think our boat got the closest to the shoreline because, yes, I was steering. But all the other boats quickly disappeared from sight because they were focusing on where they wanted to go. I just wanted to go fast.

It is so easy to be distracted from our primary goal and be enchanted by that which is not important and yet somehow pleasing to us. I was pretty proud of my speed, but when I looked up and saw all the other boats way ahead of me, I was taught a lesson in humility. We actually ended up in last place, and the marshall came over to our boat and asked if we were okay. Our favorite quote of the day as the boats flew past us was "how do they do that?". It was a lesson in

humility.

As humans there is so much that we pride ourselves in but one that is repeated over and over is our heritage. I am proud to be from Holland, as far as my roots go. You will never hear me say that I am proud to be from NJ. Many people are proud of their Lancaster County heritage. Others are just as outspoken in their black pride. Our heritage is very important to us. But it doesn't compare to the pride that the Israelites had in their heritage.

The Bible speaks of the Israelites as God's chosen people. Today, in this story of David, you know the story of Bathsheeba. Well, today, we have David's most difficult lesson in humility. His own son dies because of his sin. David is at the top of his career, but he thought he could somehow take in all of the river and still catch up. He was humbled.

The same is true in what Paul says. Here in these verses Paul reminds us of God's grace and love, but he also reminds us that the God who has created a people with the death of his Son is not a doting and permissive daddy, who greets the irresponsible activity of his children with blessed tolerance. God remains Creator and Lord, and we forget that at our own peril.

Grace demands the response of humility. Humility can only come about when you have trust in that other person that has your life in your hands. Look at Matthew 15:21-28. This woman humbly comes to Christ, faithfully recognizes her position in God's eyes. It was because of her faith, her trust, her humility that Christ let her in.

This is where Paul is today. God has chosen the Jew first and foremost. But the Israelites rejected Christ and as a result they were broken off from the tree. They were not humble branches because they were not able to listen to God and listen to God's son. In their place we were engrafted into the tree because of our faith in Jesus Christ. This is the grace that God allows us to be a part of God's plan and to be engrafted into the body, the tree of Christ.

But be careful, just as the Israelites were broken off because of their unbelief, we too can be broken off just as easily. A great quote is seen in verse 20. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. In the Greek it says, do not take an attitude of pride, but be afraid. Become proud is more like cop an attitude, think you are better than others, like the Jews, or like us in this country. But stand in phobos, in fear, be aware let your sense be heightened because of who you serve.

God's amazing grace demands humility. We see what happens in Scripture when people feel that they were too big for themselves, look at David. As individual's pride, I know, is an issue that we struggle with especially in perspective of those of us who think we have it together because we don't have an obvious sin or issue in our lives. Look at God's grace, be humbled, and

don't try to humble others but put yourself in light of God's son and see the humility that comes when we do that.

But Paul here was really speaking about a whole group of people, even race if we want to. You have heard it say that there is a crisis of faith that is taking place. That Christianity is losing its message and its hold in the world and no longer makes an impact on people and culture. If you were to look at the Christian church in America it is true, we are becoming more secular.

But look at Korea, Kenya, Brazil where the churches are trying to figure out where to put the extra 15,000 people that they are getting every week. I believe that God goes where God is wanted. As American Christians we have become too proud, like David who felt that he was able to tell his people and his God what God could and could not do. Maybe we are too proud in who we are instead of who Jesus is. Maybe we are too busy chasing down issues that affect us, instead of pursuing Christ in a straight line who can make those issues disappear with a stroke of his hand. There is a complicity now in evangelical Christianity which allows itself to overlook the issues which Jesus brought up because we are satisfied with our position as being in charge with the current political climate. We are willing to overlook societal moral sins as we turn our back on the most needy simply because we are now in power. I am an evangelical but I don't like how we are moving away from caring for the poor.

The humility that comes from a recognition of God's grace is one where you realize that God will direct your and sail if you allow the Holy Spirit to bless you where God would take you instead of trying to force God to go where you want.

We are at a time in the life of this church where things are happening very fast. I learned that the trimmer and the tighter the sail, the faster you go. But going fast isn't always the best way to go. Right now, the wind is blowing hard and it is a fun, exciting ride for some of us. The Holy Spirit is really trying to move this boat as fast as it can. Now all we have to do is trust that wind, open the sail, and humbly follow it straight to Jesus Christ. Let Christ be the goal. Amen.