

Sermon Text for May 20, 2018

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Psalm 138, Romans 15:14-21

“I just can’t help myself”

Each one of us views life in a very different manner. Some of us see it as a party, others as a rollercoaster. If you had to give an image to what your life is like, what would you use? I think the image that you would use will refer to what your understanding of God and God’s role in your life is like. I can’t help but see my life as one good learning experience after another, even the bad experiences I hope I am able to take and learn from them.

Some of us have gone through tragedies that have shaken your view of God. September 11, 2001 was one such tragedy for our nation. Again, our perspective on life, and God’s role in our life is going to dictate our understanding of that event and God’s role and hand in that event. I can tell you that I know for a fact that God is, was and shall be present. If how we view life has a lot to do with how we view God, then I would tell you to turn it around. The way we view God will have a lot to do with how we view life.

We are here today in the midst of the aftermath of another school shooting. I can’t preach on it every Sunday, even though over the last 21 weeks there have been 22 school shootings, so I could, if I wanted to. If we define ourselves by our life experiences then we might define ourselves in light of the tragedies that take place in the world and in our life. Over these last two weeks this family has celebrated a wedding that was electric and full of fun and celebration. Today we are celebrating three baptisms, but in the midst of those life events which would turn us to see a God of love and comfort and define our relationship that way, a horrific tragedy strikes the nation, and strikes our families with a senseless death on the train tracks. How do we define our life?

Today, Paul is so excited to share with you the experiences in his life that taught him of God’s ultimate goodness and love for him that he just can’t help himself, he just has to tell the good news. As Christians we ought to be able to look back at our life and say, I just can’t help telling people about the love that I have for my Savior because he has done... this.

READ SCRIPTURE

In August of 1997 Stacy and I were sitting on the floor of the General Assembly of the Waldensian Church in Italy when it came time for the examination of the new

candidates for ministry in order for them to be ordained. It is a pretty hairy process. Each candidate is asked 3 questions, and then has 4 hours to go off and answer them, and then they receive more questions from the floor. This tall young German soon to be pastor was asked the question about his preaching method. Finally someone asked, well, why did you become a preacher?

He looked out at the assembly and said: I just can't help myself. I love Jesus Christ so much I can't imagine doing anything but telling the Good News. The assembly didn't like it because it wasn't intellectual enough and it was too emotional, but I thought to myself, right on. That is exactly our Christian understanding of why we love Christ, and it is not because we are afraid, or because we have a tradition to follow, but because our hearts are filled with joy for the love that Christ has for us that we just can't help ourselves.

On this Pentecost Sunday we aren't really covering the Holy Spirit like we ought to. But it is important to note that the disciples when they followed Jesus did not have it easier than we do as we follow our God through the guidance and the direction of the Holy Spirit. Jesus was as real to the disciples as the Holy Spirit ought to be to us. But if our life experiences don't point us in the direction of having a life changing relationship with our God, then the Holy Spirit is going to be a stranger to us as Jesus was a stranger to many when he walked on the face of the earth.

The psalmist in Psalm 138 takes us on a journey through his life experiences. I thank you for your steadfast love, you are always there. I called to you, you answered me and increased my strength of soul. I needed you, you were there. I am in trouble, you preserve me with the very same hand that created me. I can't help to praise you, sing your name, you have done wondrous things for me.

This is Paul's perspective on life as well. Now the Israelites could have said, God, life has been tough, our homes have been destroyed, we were taken into slavery, our enemies beset us, we are in a quagmire out of which we see no exit, but no. Paul could have said, I was beaten, tortured, arrested, and now I am in jail, but instead he says I just can't help myself, I have to preach the good news of Jesus Christ. I may have sung the blues in the past, but now papa's got a brand new song.

We find ourselves like Paul and the psalmist with similar choices. Our lives are lives strangely woven of choice and Providence, of joy and celebration of tragedy and

death. We can complain and be angry with God, or we can see how God is opening opportunities for us in the midst of the storm to proclaim God's name.

Paul begins in verse 14 by complimenting the Romans by telling them that even in the midst of trials and tribulations I am confident in you. You are full of goodness, and knowledge. You don't mind helping one another out. This sounds familiar. But it is not enough to live and act out the faith in which you believe. You need to be able to speak boldly about how good God has been.

In vs. 17 and 18 Paul is asking can I get a witness? Someone who can't help themselves because God has been good to them. Let me get a witness. Now didn't that feel good? Just think, it is that simple to be able to speak out loud to the world about the goodness of God just like the psalmist, just like what Paul made his life to be. We are not used to that.

But Paul in vs. 20 goes even further and states that if your life has been marked by recognition of God's goodness then, make it your ambition to proclaim the good news. Make it your ambition is another way of saying what drives you, what can you not help doing, what do you passionately pursue. In the Greek the word for ambition is *philoteomai* and it means literally to do everything possible, everything that you can to pursue a goal. There are no limits, you just can't help yourself.

What is your ambition? Be careful before you answer. What is it that drives you in life? I think the most common response is money. My doubles partner in tennis back in high school, probably one of my best friends in high school, went to Duke, hired by ESPN after college, and then I lost track of him. Apparently this friend of mine has been tremendously successful beyond imagination. There is a sports show that he created and produced and everything else called the Best d.... sports show ever. He's won a few Emmy's for 30 for 30, he is a multi-millionaire.

He e-mailed me and he asked me to call him a few years back, it was the first time we had connected since we camped outside of Cameron stadium waiting to get tickets for the Duke Caroline basketball game. Mark, I said, it sounds like you have been really successful. There was a tinge of melancholy in his voice, and he said, yeah, I made some decisions that I would pursue and make my ambition to make as much money as possible. I did that pretty well. But along the way, I had no relationships that meant anything. Now as I look back, I would have done things differently. Then he asked me, you have

also been successful, but what is it that drives you, how can you be so satisfied with where you are?

What your ambition is will lead you either to satisfaction in Jesus Christ, or as you look back over your life as the author of Ecclesiastes states, you will see a life of vanity, of chasing after the wind. Let me tell you, I am fairly ambitious. I will never leave 1st Presbyterian of Strasburg to go to a bigger church because it will help my career track as a pastor. I am not ambitious in that way. I will not be attracted to another church because of money, power, or numbers. God provides and always has provided for us from when we made \$800 a month as missionaries in Italy, to our exorbitant salary as Presbyterian pastors here at First Pres.

But I am ambitious, I think my competitiveness is part of that ambition. Wherever I find myself there is nothing that can stop me from preaching about the Good News of Jesus that I have read about in Scripture, that I have experienced first hand living all over the world, and passing that on to the future generations or to anyone whose ambitions may be leading them to a literal dead end. I just can't help myself, I love God too much for the focus to be on me. I love God too much to not be able to go and be in a relationship with every single person with whom I come into contact so that I can in some way share Jesus with them.

Paul ends by saying that as we look back over our life we should be so excited that we just can't hide it, we should be just about to lose control, and a part of us should like it.

Our goal as a church is not to increase in membership, although that is happening. Especially now as some churches are facing challenges in our area that the membership starts to get restless and look for other places to worship. Our purpose is not to take members, but as Paul states in these last verses, to reach out to those who never heard. I've had people come and talk to me and I tell them to go back to their church, talk to their pastor, and then come back if you want. They usually don't come back. But we are sent to the lost sheep of this world, those who have never heard, never seen the goodness of God that we know so well.

Brothers and sisters, can you help yourselves when you think of what God has done for you. If you want to spend this time to count your blessings. Think of your families, think of this family, think of where you are in life. Think of your health, think

of your spouse. Whatever it takes, know that you are blessed and you can't help yourself thanking God for it. Think of Jesus, how much he loves you. Lived, died, rose again. Look to Jesus Christ for your ambition, and then whatever may have driven you previously see it as something which must be secondary to your primary purpose which is being a disciple of Jesus Christ. Amen.