

Sermon Text for July 8, 2018

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Genesis 3:1-7, Romans 16:17-20

“You can never be too careful”

This Sunday and next Sunday will be the last two weeks that we are going to be in Romans. We started on All Saints Day in 2016, so the last Sunday in October in Romans 1 and we will end in July of 2018, almost three years. I really hope you have enjoyed going through a book of the Bible and wrestling with it until it is done. We have gone through John, Genesis, the Apostles’ Creed, James, and now Romans. After this we will be looking at Acts of the Apostles and see what the early church was involved in and how the Holy Spirit, especially the Holy Spirit, shaped and formed the early church and ask the question, how can we be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit in our own church. While we were in Italy we were able to see the prison where Peter and Paul may have been held, just down the street from the Colosseum and on the edge of the forum. It was amazing to be able to step out with the youth and actually be in places where people of the early church walked and made decisions.

The sermon time is really a time of teaching and learning. It is the time when we are given hope and encouraged, but even more important than a feeling of satisfaction is what you actually learn. If all I am able to accomplish on Sunday after Sunday is to give you a feeling of enjoyment without any substance and truths to live by I would be failing.

In Romans, we saw substance, the real meat of the Gospel. We heard indisputable truths that are central to what we believe. We heard that we are saved by grace through faith and not by our works. We heard that all things work together for good for those who trust in God. We heard that we are convinced that neither height nor depth, nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Today, Paul tells us to hold dear to that which we believe. But in order to hold it dear we need to know what we believe. It isn’t good enough to know right from wrong. You can never be too careful in what you believe because right and wrong seem to change constantly in our society. What is accepted and not vacillates, but as we saw in Romans, God’s words and God’s teachings never fail. Let’s be reminded of that today.

READ SCRIPTURE

Usually for my sermons I have them chock full of examples that allows the 20 minutes to pass by with minimal distractions. But this week I guess I had a moment of

weakness or doubt and I said to myself: I bet you everyone knows I went sky-diving and the details of that experience. But what if I were to ask if anyone remembered the basic message of that sermon or even the Scripture of that sermon I guess far fewer would know. We have just gone through a stretch where five out of the last six Sundays I did not preach. It seems like a mini Sabbatical, except I guess in Sabbaticals you aren't really doing the work of the church, where I think spending 10 days leading 19 youth and adults may seem like a vacation to some, until you actually try it. So with this long stretch without me preaching, I guess the actual messages of the sermon seem further and further away.

Jesus, it is no wonder then, used parables, stories to teach lessons. We remember the Bible stories very clearly and usually the meaning behind it. Take our first lesson for this morning, the story of Adam and Eve and the fall. We know it, we've learned it, but what is the meaning behind it?

God creates the world, creates us out of love for him and each other. Tells us to live freely, but not to eat a single fruit from the forbidden tree. The serpent comes along, tempts Adam and Eve, notice that Adam is there all along. The snake states that it is better on the other side. We want to become like God, it sounds good. The result is shame and fear. We were able to see the Sistine Chapel in Rome and Michaelangelo's depiction of that scene where the snake is portrayed as a snake wound around a tree with the upper body of a person.

So many youth on the trip said that they felt God closest to them while they were looking at the incredible works of historical art which depict the scenes of the Bible. The Bible stories come alive on the Sistine Chapel, inside St. Peter's, on the streets with the statues and fountains of Bernini. The presence of the stories of the Bible are impossible to miss.

In this first Scripture, God's command was clear, direct, but the temptation to see for ourselves, to try it out, was too much. As a result the fall happened. Paul in our Scripture today draws our attention to those within the garden, those within the body of Christ who like the serpent would draw us away from the unity that we experience with God and with each other.

I urge you to keep an eye on those who cause dissension and offenses in opposition to the teaching that you have learned, avoid them. Paul is telling us today that you can never be too careful which is a very conservative approach to our Christian faith,

much more conservative than if it feels good, do it approach which I espoused not too long ago.

The freedom that we have in Jesus Christ is a result of his sacrifice on the cross that liberated us from sin and freed us to life as we never imagined. To even have fun, guilt free fun as a Christian, imagine living every day without fear and guilt as a Christian, that is what Christ provides.

Within that Christian context there are parameters, there are teachings, there is room to grow and learn. Paul's warning is to avoid those whose teachings go against God's word and God's spirit. God told Adam and Eve don't eat of that fruit, no reason why and provided many other opportunities aside from that fruit. The serpent taunted and coerced exactly the opposite.

Now in the Presbyterian Church we are used to debate and we pride ourselves about there being no sacred cows. We speak and question openly what our faith tells us about issues that our society struggles with daily. For some it is scandalous that there are some topics even open for discussion and dialogue. Issues of inclusion, justice, freedom, etc. Who we are as a body is a body that has no problem issues. But, there is a danger and you can be too careless in that type of an environment. Like Paul in Athens if all we do is spend our time without actually knowing what we believe then we become a debate society. But we need to know what we believe or we will latch onto anything that is new and think that is the best thing.

The Presbyterian way is one which is open to the movement of the Spirit, and yet is very rooted and secure in its beliefs. Part of that security and confidence brings with it a responsibility to correct that which is in error. If someone were to come and say that you can't get to heaven unless you are saved in a certain way, or say specific words, or do certain acts in certain ways, we know to avoid that and say that from our perspective there is only one way to the Father and that is through Jesus Christ, not through some human made religious rules and regulations that may deal with baptism or any other works that some say prove your worthiness.

You can never be too careful in taking for granted that everyone is out to bring others to Christ in a loving and caring way. Paul says in vs. 18 that those whose teachings do not conform to Scripture or are off base then their interests are selfish and they prey on the simple-minded. Now an easy target for this analogy are the televangelists who prey on the elderly who stay at home and give to the television set for

the blessings that those who are speaking on TV promise to them. But I find that the easy targets are usually too easy. You can never be too careful. Paul is encouraging us here not to be too simple minded, push yourself to learn more about Scripture and your personal walk with God.

This sermon and the study of Scripture is supposed to equip you in order to avoid simple-mindedness and bad theology. If you do not feel like you know your Savior and the plan that God has for your life you should be pushing yourself to try to learn and discover all you can so that you will not be lead astray.

Paul tells us to be wise and guileless. This should sound familiar if you look at Matthew 10:16. Jesus is speaking to his disciples before he sends them out into the world and to wander the countryside on their own to preach the Gospel and he tells them: “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” You can never be too careful in this world and the only way one can be equipped is to read Scripture and know what you believe.

We are almost done with our 90 Day Challenge. We will be starting it back up. Pretty soon, okay probably in about a year or so, we will have made our way through the entire Bible as a congregation. That is no small feat. It is hard to read through the Bible, but it is important to do so.

Theology matters in this world. It is not enough to be saved. Oh, that is important. If you do not know the love of Jesus Christ, you don't know anything. But that love allows you to live a life that ought to be guided by Christ.

The last verse gives us the hope and the confidence that we have heard and expect from Paul. The God of peace will shortly crush Satan under your feet. What an image of the snake being crushed. As the deceiver being crushed beneath your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen.