

Romans 8:1-11 4 Pentecost 8/10/11 Pastor Bill Uetricht

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Never has been! Never will be! Nada! None!

Paul’s words from the letter to the Romans in the Greek really are much more dramatic than how they appear in the English. In the original text of our second lesson for today Paul started his sentence with the word “No”, as if to say, “Don’t even think about going there,” “Don’t even start going down that path.” No way is there **any** condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Nada! None!

Do you hear this? Do you get it? To be in Christ is to be in a relationship with God where there is now therefore no condemnation. Paul has been busy in the book of Romans trying to establish his theological agenda. He has been busy trying to defend himself against his enemies who are claiming that his grace and love-centered approach to the Christian faith is not very Biblical, that it neglects tradition, particularly the tradition of the law.

While not throwing out the law system, Paul claims that the law truly is not capable of changing people, not capable of giving people freedom. The law, he says in today’s reading, has been “weakened by human flesh.” That is to say, the law, which he would agree is a good thing, is always being manipulated by people for their own purposes. An approach to life that is based on the law, based on the rules, on moral or social expectation, on should’s and ought’s will always be tainted by the people who are announcing, interpreting, or imposing the law. And therefore, the law will never truly set people free. Actually, what the law system will do is to entangle us further in it. Life lived on the basis of the law will lead to guilt, which will lead to condemnation, which will not set people free. Those of you who are

alcoholic or have dealt with alcoholism in your family, have you ever noticed what condemnation does to the drinker? Often, it does not set them free from alcoholism. It may serve to get them to drink more.

Paul says that in the system of love, the system of God experienced in the person of Jesus Christ and him crucified, there is now therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Nada! None! God has condemned sin, not us, Paul says. He has taken on the power that makes life so difficult, so ugly, so complicated, the power that causes us to find ourselves willing the right things, but not doing them. Love has taken on sin. Paul wants us to live not under the system of law, but the system of love. This system, which is God's free gift to us (that is to say, not about us) is able to set us free, able to change us. And it changes us not by condemnation, but by love. There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Nada! None! This is the good seed that has been sown in our lives.

So tell me, why do we hang on to the condemnation? Australian thinker William Loader says that Paul "would see no liberation in people with plagued consciences." We don't get very far being preoccupied with our inadequacy, being obsessed with the trauma and the mistakes of the past. But why do we hold on to them? Why do we hold on to the condemnation?

I am always convinced that you and I do the unhealthy things that we do often for a reason. We get something out of our unhealthiness. We get something out of the condemnation. I asked a couple of our staff members this past week what they think we get out of condemnation, why we hold on to it. What they suggested that was most convincing to me is that hanging on to condemnation enables us to stay in the familiar. Being stuck where we are may not be healthy,

but at least it is familiar. To be set free from guilt and condemnation might mean that we will need to change, that we might be taken to unfamiliar territory. We know what it is like to be crippled by our inadequacy. We know what it is like because of our sense of inadequacy to stay on the fringe of communities. We know what it is like to allow condemnation, guilt, and shame to keep us from active engagement with other people, with groups, with communities. We'll just stay on the fringe, thank you very much, whining and complaining about "them" all the time while we are out there on the fringe.

We know what it is like to be maimed by our past choices and by what has been done to us. They have tossed us on the couch, and we rather like it there. There's little risk. There's little we need to do. What would happen if we got empowered? What would happen if we weren't the emotional cripples that we are? We might have a job, a responsibility in the community. We might find ourselves standing up in front of people, reading, leading worship. We might be looking for a new career. We might be going to places like nursing homes and funeral homes and poor people's homes, and maybe other countries. We might be serving people. Oh please, bring on the condemnation! The land it brings us to is so much more familiar.

A lot of times, as I said a couple of weeks ago, people think that the Lutheran view that life is primarily about love and grace is an invitation into ease. Nothing is really further from the truth. Being freed up from condemnation is not easy. Love and grace take us into the realm of the unfamiliar. Love and grace sow seeds into us that produce fruit that may not always initially taste so good. God's love and grace take us to love and grace. And those lands sometimes are not always familiar places. They can be scary places. They can be

messy places. Love and grace scatter us into the world, into the lives of other people. And other people are not always mathematical equations to figure out. They are much more complicated. Their situations cannot always be addressed by a simple word or rule. Their situations may test our willingness to hang out in the land of uncertainty, in smooth and rocky places.

It's interesting how Jesus in the beginning part of our gospel lesson depicts God. God, he says, is like a sower who sows seed everywhere, on good and bad ground. According to Jesus, he's like a crazy farmer who scatters seed on well-prepared soil, on soil that isn't the best, and even on the Wal-Mart parking lot. Our God scatters love and grace everywhere. Freedom from condemnation is scattered everywhere. And you get the sense from Jesus that *everywhere* is where those who follow him will go. Those who follow him won't stay stuck on the couch; they won't remain crippled by their sense of inadequacy, by what they have done or what has been done to them. They will be taken to the rough and smooth places. Love that flows from him will set them free to go out into all of the world with the message that there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Nada! None!

And guess what? As we go out we are going to have a good time. We shall go out with joy and be led forth with peace. The mountains and the hills are going to sing to us. The trees are going to give us a standing ovation. This ministry and mission will be fun. Truthfully, life is a whole lot more fun when it's not about condemnation. And get this through your skulls, thick as they may be, "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Nada! None!