

Paul Inner: I began by wishing them grace and peace— should I say more to emphasize?

Paul Written: Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace, this grace in which we now stand.

Paul Inner: And what more can keep them going?

Paul Written: And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.

Paul Inner: But they'll know life is not always wonderful...

Paul Written: Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance produces character; and character produces hope.

Paul Inner: Brilliant, if I say so myself. Even the bad times can build up our hope!

Paul Written: And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

Paul Inner: Now, what more can I say to describe the love of God, to paint a picture of it... what could I speak of from my own experience? There I was, never knowing the living Jesus, and thinking I was so righteous in becoming a persecutor of his followers...

Paul Written: You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Paul Inner: I'm sure I'm right... It's a much better way to understand why he died. He must have been a sacrifice—like the lambs in the Temple offered to God—a sign and symbol of mending the covenant relationship. Why would he appear to me, his enemy, unless his death was meant to tell me something about my life?

Paul Written: Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

Paul Inner: Like me, they should be proud to be counted in as God's friends now!

Paul Written: Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

(Creative Reading of Romans 5:1-11 from Spill the Beans Curriculum, Issue 15, using the New International Version Translation of Scripture)

I'd like this sermon to be a bit more participatory than usual— in order for the Gospel message delivered to us by Romans to sink in, I think everyone here needs to do

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a bit of work—I want you sit with a word for a bit and figure out what it means to you — powerless. All of us, powerless.

Most of us are quite capable people who exercise a great deal of power in the world... but even we are powerless over something... usually over many things, even the most essential things.

We find ourselves unable to do that which we want to do, and unable to stop doing that which we don't want to do. Putting down the bottle or the extravagant dessert. Admitting a mistake to a loved one. Living within our means. Overcoming persistent pain. Powerless.

Even when we do everything right, we often find we are powerless over outcomes. We don't always get the job, or the scholarship, and sometimes things end up in shambles. Powerless.

You provide a good home for a child who still goes off the rails by getting in with the wrong crowd or addicted to drugs or pregnant way too soon... Powerless.

You spend a lifetime working hard, saving, investing, and then when retirement comes – a health care crisis or a global economic crisis take it all away... Powerless.

Or lift your eyes to the country and world at large: We find ourselves unable to stem the tide of devastation that we are watching unfold— the unfathomable suffering, the abuses, the rising temperature of our planet. Powerless.

What does this mean to you? Please take a few minutes— perhaps write on the back of your bulletin... how do you know that you are powerless?//

All of us, powerless. Powerless over the forces of sin and suffering. Powerless over our own salvation from all that leads to death and destruction. How does it feel to sit with powerlessness? Most of us resist it pretty strongly. It doesn't feel good. But if we want to hear the radically good news Paul is proclaiming in the 5th chapter of Romans we need to start here, we need to start with an awareness of our own powerlessness. In the preceding chapters of the letter Paul was inviting his readers to just this— he was declaring in strong terms that Jew and Gentile alike are all sinners who fall short of the

glory of God, unable to fulfill the law of God— convicted by that law over and over again— powerless.

And then, and this is much clearer in the Greek than in the English, Paul speaks of the power that has acted on our behalf— while we were still sinners, while we were still enemies of God, while we were still powerless, — in the Greek, chapter five begins with one word that it takes at least three to render in English— the thunderous declaration “Dikaiothente” “Have been justified” or “Having been made righteous”. Paul says that this is done, it is accomplished, “it is a state of being, the condition of [our] lives... a state of affairs that has happened to [us].” (Jervis)

Paul says we are justified by faith, we are made righteous, made right by faith. Who's faith? Not primarily ours— first and foremost by the faithfulness of Jesus who was willing to die for humankind; faithfulness consisting in emptying himself, making himself powerless for us, and the faithfulness of God who raised Jesus from the dead to demonstrate the power of salvation available to humankind. This is the faith that justifies — it takes faith to trust in this gift of justification. As Paul says elsewhere, the message about the cross, this image of a God made powerless, it's foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God. This is a given, a done deal, Jesus acted on behalf of humanity and Jesus acts on behalf of humanity when we are unable to act on our own behalf. It's God's business. We may be powerless, but God is not.

When we can come to believe, come to faith in this gift of justification, when we surrender our hearts to the care of the God who justifies, surrender to submission to our Lord Jesus Christ— we receive peace. When we are sitting with powerlessness we don't feel much peace, but when we realize that there is a power greater than us... who has already worked and is yet working on our behalf... it's like we're given a key out of our tight cramped cages of powerless existence, into the wide open space of grace... space in which we can stand, space in which love is poured into our hearts— the very love that acted for us is gifted to us so that we might love others— help others find

their way out of their cages and into the glorious space of grace. How many people in this world are in need of access to grace? Maybe they don't know it, but it's the difference between perpetual struggle and meaningful help— who doesn't need this? The love of God, God's ownself in the Spirit, has been poured into our hearts that we might witness to the meaningful help available.

And the greatest fruit of justification is hope. Confident trust in a better future— hope in the fullness of salvation that is yet to be fully realized. Maybe our justification is done, accomplished, but it's sure hard to see what that means most of the time. Salvation has an “already, not yet” character to it. Justification isn't the end of the story, it's just the beginning. The hard thing about faith is that we are asked to trust something we cannot see, to pledge allegiance to the One whose power looks so much like weakness and powerlessness and sure defeat— even those who have surrendered to God's care and realized the gift of justification— even we still suffer. But when we center our hearts on an affirmation of this freely given gift, and receive hope, even our suffering is transformed. Suffering becomes fuel for hope instead of its destruction.

Vaclav Havel, former president of Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic, frequently imprisoned as he fought against the effects of Communism, wrote in *Disturbing the Peace*:

Hope is a state of mind, not of the world. Either we have hope or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul, and it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, and orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons... Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously heading for success, but rather an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. The more propitious the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper the hope is. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.

I wanted to start today with all of us sitting with powerlessness because I want us to realize that it is not about us. We can't have hope, deep hope, if it's all on us... but we can have hope in the God who acts on behalf of people who so often turn ourselves against God; we can have hope in the God who loved us us enough to become powerless and even die for us; we can have hope in the love that has been poured into our hearts... that love that is the power of resurrection, that power that brings life out of death, power that truly does change things... most notably us.

Resources in addition to scripture that influenced or were cited in this sermon:

L. Ann Jervis. Commentary on Romans [3:28-30] 5:1-11. [http://](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3881)

www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3881 (The Havel quote is from this commentary.)

“God's Love Poured Out” on the I Love to Tell the Story narrative lectionary podcast, episode 365, http://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?