**Second Sunday in Lent**

**February 28, 2021**

**Text—Romans 5:1-11**

In December of 1997, the world was rocked by the release of the movie that would go on to become, at the time, the highest grossing film in history. The name of this movie was *Titanic*, and it was a story of adventure and romance set aboard the first and last voyage of the RMS Titanic in 1910. Many of you here have probably seen this movie before, and if you have not, you might want to cover your ears, because I’m about to drop a couple of spoilers. The first of these is that at the end of the movie, the ship hits an iceberg and sinks. The second is that Jack, the male lead of the movie, dies. After the ship sinks, Jack and his romantic partner Rose are floating in the frigid waters of the Arctic Ocean. If they want any hope of survival, they need to get out of the water, or they will freeze to death. So Jack finds a piece of debris and helps Rose to get on top of it. But when he himself tries to get out, he finds that the debris is too small to support both of them. So he remains in the water, hanging on for dear life. Eventually, Jack succumbs to hypothermia and dies, but Rose, because of Jack’s self-sacrifice, is able to live. She gets the attention of a nearby lifeboat, which rescues her, and she goes on to live a long and fulfilling life.

Stories like this of self-sacrifice tug at the heartstrings, because they show how courageous people can be when someone they love is threatened or when innocent people are in danger. Think of all of the first responders who gave their lives during 9/11, trying to get into the towers and rescue people who were trapped. We rightly recognize such people as heroes, because they gave their lives to save others. And in the right circumstances, all of us here would probably be willing to make such sacrifices as well. My mom always told me that she would throw herself in front of a bus for me, and now that I have a family of my own, I know what she was talking about. I’d like to think that I would be willing to sacrifice my life for my wife and kids, and I’m sure all of you spouses and parents out there would be the same way. When someone we love is threatened, there is a lot that we are willing to give up to make sure that no harm comes to them.

But what about for people we don’t have a particularly good relationship with? What about your coworker who pesters you constantly? What about the kid who bullies you in school? What about that estranged family member who did so much to hurt you? How willing are we to make sacrifices for those kinds of people? I would guess that we would probably be much more hesitant to give anything up to save someone whom we might consider an enemy. Sacrificing yourself for a friend or loved one is one thing, but sacrificing yourself for an enemy? That’s a completely different story. You can certainly imagine a father giving his life to save his children, but not to save the burglar who broke into his house. You can imagine Allied soldiers in World War II giving their lives to save their comrades in arms, but not to save the Germans or Japanese. Similarly, U.S. soldiers today wouldn’t give their lives to save terrorists from Al Qaeda or ISIS. That would just be ridiculous. So, self-sacrifice may be a great and heroic thing, but it has its limits. You only sacrifice yourself to save innocent people or someone you love, and definitely not for your enemies.

And yet, we have an example of someone who did just that. In today’s epistle lesson, we hear about somebody who gave his life to save not people who loved him, but rather people who despised and hated him. Hear again what St. Paul says in our text: “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” There it is. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the ruler of all creation, submitted himself to death in order to save his enemies. He died so that he could save sinners who had rebelled against him. He died so that he could save us. And yes, we were indeed enemies of God, as much as we might like to think otherwise. We were conceived and born in sin, just as all of our ancestors were. We inherited the original sin of Adam and Eve from them, and that means that we were naturally inclined to hate God and his Word. Even as cute little babies, we were still sinners, just like every other person on earth. There was nothing we could do to remove that stain of original sin from us, no amount of good works that we could perform to make ourselves righteous.

And even if it were possible for us to be perfectly good and righteous, we certainly haven’t come anywhere close to achieving that. We are not just sinners by nature; we are also sinners by our deeds. We constantly disobey and struggle against the Law of God. We do nasty things, say nasty words, and think nasty thoughts. We do not love God or our neighbor as we should. I sin every minute of every day, and so do all of you. Nobody is exempt; nobody is perfectly righteous. All of us, if we are honest with ourselves, will admit that. We will admit that we have not done everything that God wants us to do, not even close to everything. And that makes us his enemies. That makes us people who are unworthy to be his people or be called his friends. It makes us totally undeserving of his love. And it means that by rights, we should suffer in hell for all eternity. That’s where Satan and God’s other enemies will end up; why not us too? Why should we not be sent there? It’s where we deserve to go, after all.

But as the text says, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Think about that: while we were still enemies of God, he sent his Son to be crucified and shed his blood to save us. What could possibly have motivated him to do something like that? Why would he make such a sacrifice to save his enemies? Simply put, he did it because he loved us. Even though we had rebelled against him, even though we had sinned so much, he refused to allow us to perish eternally. He would not abandon the people he had created to eternal suffering; he would forgive them and save them from their sins. But his justice still needed to be satisfied. Blood still needed to be shed to atone for our sins. So God sent Jesus to die in our place: Jesus, the spotless Lamb of God, who never committed a sin once in his life, sacrificed himself to win forgiveness for us. Now, as our text says, we have been justified by his blood, which means that we have been declared to be not guilty. God’s Word creates reality, and by simply speaking words of forgiveness and absolution to us, he makes us into his perfectly innocent and righteous children. We still remain sinners in our thoughts, words, and deeds, but we have now been made into completely new people. We are now saints as well as sinners, and we are constantly being transformed into the holy people that God desires us to be. All of this has happened because God loved us even while we were his enemies. We may have been inclined to hate God and rebel against him, but he loved us, and he showed it by sacrificing his very own Son to save us.

Paul goes on in our text to say: “Since, therefore, we have been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.” Now that our sins are forgiven and we are reconciled to God, we no longer have to fear his wrath or being sent to suffer eternally in hell. Because Jesus’ death on the cross saved us from our sins, now his resurrection from the dead will grant us eternal life. We will rise again on the last day to be judged, and because Jesus’ blood covers our sins, he will judge us worthy to be brought into the everlasting kingdom of God. We have been made worthy of eternal life, not because of anything we have done, but because of what Jesus has done to save us. So, as the end of our text says, “we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.” We can now rejoice and be glad, because we will not be punished for our sins as we deserve. Rather, we will be treated as God’s beloved children, who are heirs of all of the blessings of his kingdom. There can be no greater cause for celebration than that.

In many ways, this sermon has been a simple recapitulation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: how he died on the cross and shed his blood to atone for our sins and grant us forgiveness. He took the wrath of God upon himself in order to spare us from punishment. This is the basic Gospel that we teach our kids in confirmation class, and it serves as the heart of the Christian faith. Although it’s always important for us to remind ourselves of how much Jesus sacrificed to save us, the season of Lent is really the best time for us to do that. Lent is the season when we focus on Jesus’ journey to the cross, and remember why he had to go there in the first place. Lent is the season of self-examination, repentance, and sorrow over our sins. But it is also a season of joy, because if it weren’t for the everlasting love of God for us, Jesus would never have sacrificed himself on the cross. He would have looked down upon us with disdain, refusing to associate with us because of our sin and rebellion against God. But Jesus isn’t like that. He isn’t like us: making sacrifices for our friends and loved ones, but refusing to do so for our enemies. On the contrary, Jesus’ sacrifice is for all people, because all people were his enemies. As Paul writes in Romans 3: “There is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” During this Lenten season especially, let us not forget the depths of God’s love for us, and depths of suffering to which Jesus was willing to go to save us from our sins. Let us be humble and repentant, but also joyful, knowing that we have been saved by the death of God’s Son Jesus Christ. For us who were once enemies of God, this is good news indeed. Amen.