

**11<sup>th</sup> Week after Pentecost, Proper 12 – Year A – July 27, 2008**  
**Genesis 29:15-28; Psalm 105:1-11, 45b; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52**  
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”Good name in man and woman, dear my lord, Is the immediate jewel of their souls: Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing; 'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands: But he that filches from me my good name / Robs me of that which not enriches him / And makes me poor indeed,” thus speaks Iago in Shakespeare’s play Othello. Identity theft has become a significant cause for concern in the U.S. It seems to be rampant. There are many who would like to steal our identity, for financial gain. But there are some aspects of our identity as Christians which even the wiliest of thieves cannot touch.

Overall the book of Romans is arguably the most influential letter ever written. Several key figures in the history of Christianity have been profoundly influenced by its message, including St. Augustine, Martin Luther, and John Wesley. In more modern times, theologian Karl Barth has also added his own commentary on Paul’s letter to the Romans. Today’s passage to the Church in Rome and to us is a summation of Paul’s teaching on what Michael Gorman calls “The cruciform character of justification by faith.” It begins in Romans chapter 5 with the theme of justification as reconciliation, where Christians are freed from sin and live under God’s grace through faith in Christ Jesus. As we have seen and will continue to see, in God’s kingdom, appearances are often topsy-turvy. What appears to be death and defeat in Jesus’ crucifixion becomes evidence of the immeasurable love of God in Jesus’ resurrection to new and unending life. In chapter 6 of Romans Paul focuses on the life of Baptized Christians, who are empowered by the Holy Spirit, dying with Christ, and rising to new life in God.

In Romans 7 and 8 Paul shares the difference between living a life guided solely by the world; and living a life where our souls are guided by the Holy Spirit. He deals with the realities of life in a fallen world, where there is suffering and pain; where death and disease are part of life. It has been said that Christians live as a part of the world, but apart from it as well. It’s a strange kind of tension in words, but what I’d like to propose is that, for you and I it is actually about living with integrity. The essence of being a follower of Christ and part of Christ’s Body is about becoming more genuinely human as God intended and as Jesus lived. In other words, our lives have a purpose and goal according to God’s plan, and in this sense the purpose is living into the fullness of our humanity, as children of God. As we heard last week in the parable of the wheat and the weeds, living as part of the world, means that we live right alongside those who pursue a different goal than the one purposed by God. Even as you and I are described as wheat growing and bearing fruit in God’s kingdom; even as we offer our gifts and talents in service to God, there are still people who are actively working to undermine God’s plan and presence, rather like an identity thief works to undermine a good name.

In order to get our hearts around Paul’s letter we need to get our heads into some of his technical language: words like “called”, “foreknew”, “predestined”, “justified”, and “glorified”. And I have to add two more to the mix -- sanctification and holiness. Let’s take them one at a time to reveal more fully God’s inspiration and gleaming light behind the legacy of Paul’s words. The reason Paul can speak with confidence about all things working together for good for those who love God and who are called according to God’s purpose, is this; however we perceive the world around us, there is a recognizable trail throughout the Scriptures, covered in God-shaped footprints, and brimming with the evidence of God’s handiwork. It begins with the call. God’s specialty, if you like, is creative life-giving. The act of faith in God is the act of receiving true life. And so God calls a small band of Israelites, in the line of Abraham, whose faith alone is reckoned to him as righteousness, to be the light, that is the living presence of God in the world for all generations and to continue to this day as faithful light bearers. In the same way, “foreknew” expresses divine election, God’s choice of a people whose mission was and is to reveal God’s plan and purpose, and God’s self to the world.

Paul is not using the word predestined or preordained in the same way that Calvin understood it thousands of years later. Calvin believed that God fixes the end of all humanity either to salvation or to

damnation. Predestination in Paul's use of the word continues the Biblical principle of election that is the gift to both Jews and Gentiles. Jesus' life, death and resurrection reveal that God's plan of salvation and redemption is available to all by God's grace through faith in Christ. The word 'predestined' is not narrow at all; it is God's roadmap of inclusivity, not exclusivity. God's grace is like a bottomless well of love, from which all are welcome to come and drink. We now come to justification, otherwise known as acceptance by God. For Christians our justification comes in God's eyes through faith in Christ Jesus. The kind of faith that as N.T. Wright suggests urges us to baptism through which we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. At the moment of baptism each tender new life in Christ begins the process of sanctification or transformation into the image and likeness of Jesus. God's purpose is that we become holy. As St. Peter writes in his first letter to the Church (1 Peter 1:14-16), "Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'"

Ah, such a tall order huh? And what if that is precisely God's point. I cannot be or become holy by my own volition or effort. You cannot be or become holy by means of your own strength or desire. You and I do not and cannot earn our salvation. It is purely God's gracious gift through faith. The mark of our gratitude is born in the fruits of the Holy Spirit evident in our changed lives. It is like growing into a strong and generous tree from a tiny seed, providing shelter and the opportunity for others to come to new life. As we are inwardly transformed to Christ-likeness, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we become more dependent on God, and less dependent on self -- that is our own ego. We begin to listen and hear more of God's voice gently guiding our thoughts and deeds, and much less of our own clamoring will demanding to be heard.

The word "glorified" is in the past tense. It's a done deal. Knowing that we are already glorified in God's kingdom brings us full circle. We literally live between two worlds: the kingdom of God that is, and the kingdom of God that is to come when Christ returns in all His glory to reign. It is the mind-bending 'now, but not yet' life in the world as part of the world, but apart from it. Paul's theology is quite dense and knotty in places, and can leave us bewildered and fumbling. A symptom of our busy, information-overloaded lives is that more often than not we just want to cut to the chase, and get to the bottom line. So for me, and everyone else that is feeling like that, the question comes down to two words: so what? What does it mean to identify ourselves as followers of Christ? Paul presents the same questions rhetorically as though he is the lead attorney in a major court case. If God is for us, who is against us? It is God who justifies, and so who is to condemn? Ultimately, who can separate us from the love of God in Christ? The answer is absolutely nothing, and no one can separate us from the love of God. As comforting as that piece of the Good News is, there is more in this part of Paul's letter. Paul's message is filled with his joy in love and service to the Lord. His gift is encouragement to the community of witnesses, liberated from sin and death, by the grace of God through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Our grateful response, and one of the greatest gifts you and I have to share, from the core of our identity, is a gift that no one can steal from us. It is the gift of hope. Hope that comforts in the trials of this life, and hope in life everlasting. A life without hope is like an empty shell, crumpling under the lightest of pressure. Like Paul, give freely of your hope in Christ, for it is Christ's good name that dwells like a jewel in the soul of every Christian and shines ever more brightly as we offer our lives in humble service to God.

Amen.