**By Which We Stand**

**FBC Albemarle**

**August 20, 2017**

Each week at our Rotary Club meeting, we recite the Pledge of Allegiance. Each time we say the pledge, we remind ourselves that our country’s flag stands for unity, liberty and justice for all. Each time I stand, place my hand over my heart and recite the pledge, it means something to me. As an immigrant, I knowingly and willingly gave up my citizenship to one nation and adopted my citizenship to America. So, when I say the pledge, I reaffirm the values of our nation and have a great sense of gratitude for those who have upheld these values over the past 240 years.

Yet, greater than my patriotism, I pledge my allegiance to God’s kingdom as a follower of Jesus.1 Peter 2 reminds us that we are aliens and strangers in this world. But we are also a “chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that we may declare the praises of him who calls us out of darkness and into the light.” (v. 9) Therefore, when we claim our citizenship in God’s kingdom, we have to stand by what the kingdom stands for. Through the person of Jesus, we know that God stands for love, forgiveness, grace, peace, unity, justice and everything that gives life rather than death.

As God’s people and as citizens of his kingdom, we have been given the responsibility to shine the light into darkness. What we witnessed in Charlottesville last weekend was evil and darkness. Hatred, racism, bigotry and violence have no place in God’s kingdom. They are filled with evil and evil has been defeated. As Christ followers, we are called to shine the light. We will talk more about this next week.

For now, let us be reminded that we are saints in whom Christ dwells and delights in. Therefore, we cannot wallow in sin and darkness. Just as Jesus showed compassion to the adulterous woman while calling out her sin, we are to show compassion while calling out sinful thoughts, attitudes and actions for what they are. The CHURCH must stand against evil and stand up for what is righteous in accordance to God, Jesus and Holy Spirit.

That is what Paul was imploring the Christians in Rome to do and in turn what Paul is encouraging us to do. Since we are justified by faith, Paul is saying that we live in a state of grace; a position where we are surrounded by God’s love and generosity, invited to breathe it in as life-giving air. As we do so, we realize that this is what we were made for; that this is what truly human existence ought to be like; and that it is the beginning of something so big, so massive, so unimaginably beautiful and powerful that we almost burst wide open just thinking about it! When we stand there in God’s presence deeply grateful for his grace, we begin to inhale his goodness, his wisdom, his power, and his joy. We realize that God invites us to become a true reflection of who God is or as Paul puts it, “we celebrate the hope of the glory of God.” (v. 2) So we stand on grace because of Jesus and his grace.

Through grace, we have a relationship with God that brings us peace. One commentary writer puts it this way: “God does not confer the status of righteousness upon us without at the same time giving himself to us in friendship and establishing peace between himself and us.” Through Jesus, we have direct access to a God who loves us and desires the very best for us. Through Jesus, we have direct access to God’s peace that transcends past momentary peace but provides peace that is everlasting, something we cannot explain or even comprehend.

Practically speaking, experiencing God’s peace does not mean that we live without conflict. Matter of fact, Jesus said the exact opposite. After telling his disciples what was to come in his death and resurrection, He said, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33) Just as Jesus faced trouble and conflict, we will also face trouble and conflict. The trouble might be in the form of evil that we have witnessed in our nation in recent days. The conflict might be in family relationships or relationships at work. The conflict might be within our own conscience. Whatever form it might be in, we don’t face these difficult times as those who are of the world. We know that Christ has overcome the world so that we may have peace and for us to live as “more than conquerors.”

Taking it a step further, Paul says that through grace, we can even REJOICE in our sufferings. The ‘sufferings’ Paul is referring to is better translated as ‘tribulations.’ Now, these are not the ‘trials and tribulations’ of our everyday existence such as our aches and pains, fears and frustrations or our disappointments of life. Rather, it is referring in particular to the opposition and persecution of a hostile world such as evil of racism, bigotry and violence that we witnessed last week.

Notice that Paul says to rejoice IN suffering, not so much rejoice THE suffering. You see, suffering is the necessary path we travel as we share the Father’s work in this broken and corrupt world. In suffering for the kingdom, we are transformed in his likeness because it produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. Here is the way it works: when we stand against the evil in the world, we will face opposition. When we continue to stand against the evil in the world, it produces perseverance in us. Learning to persevere teaches us God’s character and that character leads to hope of knowing that Jesus has already overcome the world. The more we suffer in the tribulations of the world, the more we are reminded of God’s love in our lives. Therefore, we can rejoice IN the suffering because we know how this story ends! It is a privilege to be able to serve God even when faced with suffering!

Finally, grace assures us of our redemption. Here is where I get uncomfortable because I have to place myself at the same starting place as the evil that is around us. Paul says, “Just at the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.” (v. 6) Before accepting the grace of Christ, I was ungodly, just as those who are filled with hatred, racism and bigotry. I was just as lost as the white supremacists and neo-Nazis that spew hatred toward others. Matter of fact, if I search deep inside, I might find remnants of filth that I have yet to turn over to God. Yes, I am a saint in Christ but I still have parts of my flesh that I have not relinquished to the Holy Spirit to take control of.

Paul declared that “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” This means that Christ died for you and for me. It also means that Christ died for our enemies. Christ died for those who have different ideologies than you or I might have. Christ died for those who live in darkness and are filled with hate. Everyone is in need of redemption and that redemption can only be had by placing our faith and trust in God’s saving grace in Jesus.

Over the last week, I have been deeply troubled by the condition of our nation. I have had a hard time trying to reconcile how such hatred can reside in our nation. I’ve been flabbergasted to see how some in our nation have such different ideologies that they would support Nazism. I can’t wrap my mind around how evil has entrenched itself in our culture and around the world. I’ve been angry with those who are filled with hate. I’ve been angry with our media who have tried to spin it one way or another. I’ve been angry with our political leaders on both sides who have tried to use this opportunity to gain political power.

Yet, this week, as I have reflected on the events, it has reminded me that I need to look in the mirror. I realized that only by God’s grace that I am not filled with evil and hatred. I realized that without grace, I would know very little about love and compassion. It could’ve been my face on TV or on social media showing the evil inside of me. While I was still a sinner, Christ died for me. When I was unlovable, God loved me still and offered me grace. So let us approach the evil we face by standing on the grace of Jesus and the hope we have in Christ.

The nineteenth-century Orthodox priest John of Kronstadt would go out into the streets each morning and lift up the drunken men who had slept in gutters, saying to them, “This is beneath your dignity. You were meant to house the fullness of God.” He did not say, “You rotten sinner, shape up!” Instead, he reminded them of who they were. They were designed to inhabit God.

Maybe this is the way we are going to bring about true change in the world. Maybe, it will take us, the Church, to go out into the streets filled with compassion and love and remind those who are lost in evil, “This is beneath your dignity. You were meant to house the fullness of God.” This is GRACE.