September 30 – October 1, 2017
Pastor Mark Toone
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

The God Who Gave Up

Romans 1:18-32

I want to thank Pastor Ellis for the masterful job he did last week on a very difficult and controversial text. If you missed it, you really ought to go online and listen to it. It is key to understanding Paul's argument as we chew our way through this thick piece of theological steak called "the letter to the Romans." Ellis got to preach on the perennial crowd favorite: "the wrath of God**."** Who *doesn't* want to hear a good message about the wrath of God?! I appreciate his courage in dealing with this passage while I was out of town performing a wedding. And I can't tell you how hard I looked for anyone who wanted me perform a wedding out of town that weekend. So thanks, Ellis, for covering for me.

As a reminder, Paul is writing to a church he didn't plant and to people he mostly does not know to remind them about the incredible the "good news": the gospel of Jesus. Remember verse 16? *"I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for salvation to <u>everyone</u> who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."* This good news is about salvation available for *everyone*. This was revolutionary, and it's time to give you a little more historical context for *how* revolutionary it was.

Let's start with a survey. When I describe you, raise your hand. How many of you would say you are lifelong Presbyterians? How about lifelong Lutherans turned Presbyterian? Methodists? Episcopalians? Catholics? Raised in the church. Comfortable with traditions, rituals, certain ways of doing things. This would be my category. We build beautiful sanctuaries and pipe organs. We are touched by traditions like St. Andrews Sunday. I'm going to call us **Traditionalists**. Traditionalists experience God more fully within some structure and order and a sense of heritage.

Now, raise your hand if you were raised in a non-denominational church. Came to Christ in the Jesus People movement. Had no church background but came to faith later in life. You *weren't* raised with tradition and rituals and certain ways of doing church. You might build a warehouse instead of a sanctuary or choose an electric guitar over a pipe organ. You prefer greater freedom over structure. We'll call you the **Non-traditionalists.** Non-traditionalists experience God more fully within greater freedom.

Chapel Hill combines both of these groups…which makes us a rich and diverse Christian community. But…imagine this. Gig Harbor City Council passes a law that **bans Christian Traditionalists from the city**; by law we must move to Tacoma. Suddenly, Chapel Hill is

made up of only non-traditionalists. The church is now led and shaped by those who prefer freedom over structure; who have less interest in tradition & rules.

But…five years later that law is rescinded. Yeah! We get to move back…and after five years we traditionalists get to return to our Sweetheart Church. What will we find? How will things be different? Do you suppose there'll be any tension? Any changes? Any challenges as we try to bring Traditionalist and Non-Traditionalists into a common understanding of what it means to follow Jesus together?

That is exactly what happened to the Church in Rome. Acts tells us that both Jewish and non-Jewish Romans were present on the day of Pentecost about 25 years earlier. They probably returned and planted the church together. Jews, the traditionalists, and Greeks, the non-traditionalists.

For 19 years, they did church together. Jews, who came out of a scrupulously religious and moral background, and Greeks who came out of an idolatrous culture that was notoriously immoral. Jews had strict rules about religion, food, behavior, cleanliness. Greeks had very few rules. The Jews tended to be cliquish, keeping to themselves, and the Greeks were very much a part of the culture from which they came. But for 19 years these two different groups hammered out how to live together as followers of Christ

Then, in 49 A.D., Emperor Claudius got fed up with the trouble-making Jews and kicked them all out of Rome. All Jews—including Jewish Christian—were banned from the city. Suddenly, the church was comprised only of Greek Christians…non-traditionalists. For five years, they "did" church by themselves, without the structure, the tradition, the heritage, the rules that came from their Jewish brothers and sisters. Then, Claudius died and the Jewish Christians were allowed to return …only to find a church very different from the one they left. One of the reasons we will hear Paul refer repeatedly "the Jew and the Greek" is that he is trying to reconcile these two very different groups of Christians.

Last week we heard of God's wrath against sexual idolatry. For Paul's Jewish readers, this would have made complete sense. Every one of them would have been nodding in agreement because the Old Testament is clear that sex belongs between a man and woman in the covenant of marriage. The Greeks, however, came from a different background. Homosexual behavior was a normal part of Roman culture. So when Paul uses that as an example of idolatry—of how people worship the creation instead of the creator—he would have had two different responses. The Greek believers might have struggled with a teaching so counter-cultural to Rome, while the Jewish Christians shouted, "Amen… preach it, brother Paul! Preach it!"

But then Paul continues with a *huge* list of other sinful behavior that *also* incurs God's wrath; sins less obvious but every bit as corrosive to the human soul. Things like covetousness and envy and strife and gossip and haughtiness. And his Jewish readers who were in such vigorous agreement with everything he said about homosexuality suddenly discover a

boomerang about to hit them right between the eyes. We come to Romans chapter 2. And I want you to listen for the key word.

"*Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that <u>you</u> will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed."*

What is the key word for this text? Judgment! Seven times! And did you hear how the boomerang hit? Paul's Jewish readers would have been cheering as he declared God's wrath against certain kinds of sins, the obvious sins of the *unrighteous***.** But suddenly, they find themselves included in that list—not the unrighteous but the self-righteous. The judgmental. The hypocritical. Listen to verse 1 again: "*Therefore*… [we always have to ask what the therefore is there for…in this case, "…because you outwardly moral people are guilty of this long list of HIDDEN sins…"] *Therefore, you have no excuse, O man, <u>every one of you who judges</u>."*

We have already heard how God's wrath—his hatred for sin which corrupts his creation and destroys his relationship with us—we've heard how God's wrath is revealed against blatant immoral behavior. But suddenly we discover that the moralists who are tsk-tsking those more *obvious* sinners are *just* as guilty and *just* as deserving of God's wrath because of their more *hidden* sins.

Last week, Hugh Hefner died at the age of 91. I don't think many here would argue that Hugh Hefner was a great champion for traditional moral values. In fact, even those of us who *might* have peaked at a Playboy magazine at some time in our lives would admit that the sexual revolution he helped launch has degraded our society. It would be easy for us to tsk-tsk Hugh Hefner and even, perhaps, to speculate a little about what happened when he came face to face with his creator last Wednesday.

But Paul would say, "Be careful! You who are quick to judge this unrighteous man…be careful because you who judge will *also* be judged." One of the most misused Jesus quotes is this: *"Judge not lest ye be judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged..."* Jesus is *not* saying we ought not exercise judgment. He *is* saying that the way we judge others will become the rule by which we ourselves are judged.

So let me paraphrase what Paul goes on to say in Romans 2: "Do you suppose, O man—you who judge Hugh Hefner's obvious sins and yet practice these other hidden sins yourself…do you suppose that *you* will escape the judgment of God?" Given that 57% of American pastors admit to the use of pornography, the potential for hypocrisy is breathtaking.

Last week we learned that the consequences of our sins are themselves an expression of God's wrath. If I eat gluttonously, my heart suffers. If I sin sexually, my conscience and perhaps my body suffers. If I treat others maliciously, my relationships suffer. If I gossip, my reputation suffers. This is God parenting with love and logic. The logical consequences of our behaviors are *one* of the ways we experience God's wrath against sin.

But it's not the only way. One day—which Paul calls "the Day of Wrath" —God will have had enough. He will pronounce judgment on everyone…on the unrighteous…and on the self-righteous…on the obvious sinners… and on the less obvious sinners…on those who have fingers pointed at them…and on those who do the pointing. We all deserve God's wrath and judgment, he says. And there's only *one* reason God delays that awful day. What is it? So that we might repent! God is kind and forbearing and patient…all Paul's words…because he *longs* for us to repent. To stop focusing on the sins of others, to look honestly at our own sin and how it destroys our face to face relationship with God…and to say, "I am so sorry, Jesus…" …and throw ourselves upon his grace.

This message of repentance is hard for traditionalists to receive. People who live unrighteous, out-of-control lives…they *know* what they are and what they are doing. They may keep doing it but not because they think it is good or makes God happy. It's not hard to spot them and it's easy to point them out. But the other group—my group, the traditionalists, the upright and upstanding, the elder brother of the prodigal son—we are the ones at greater risk. It is easy for us to become indignant, easy for us to pass on incensed Facebook posts and web links with moral outrage, easy for us to point at all those other nasty sinners and walk obliviously into the web of our own weaving that traps us in our self-righteous judgmentalism.

I *want* us to be a church that stands for holiness, that stands courageously for God's way of living life. But I *don't* want us to be the kind that does so with finger pointing and tsk-tsking. I want us to be *so* aware of our own brokenness, of our more hidden but equally toxic sins like arrogance and unkindness and hypocrisy and selfishness that we cry out as the tax collector did, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

You heard last week that good news starts with bad news. This has been pretty bad news. Paul is tearing down every moral and religious pretense and bringing us all face to face with our desperate need for salvation from the inside out. The unrighteous…and the self-righteous. We all need saving. But today, as we come to the Lord's Table, we get a tasty reminder of the good news. The good news that God saw us in our broken state and saved us. His wrath…his judgment…delivered, not against us, but against his own sinless son who took that judgment upon himself on that cross. That is incredibly good news. Jesus died for the unrighteous…and for the self-righteous… for the Hugh Hefners…and for the tsk-tskers. And if we receive that gift by faith…we will be saved.