

The Value Of Knowing To Whom We Belong  
Romans Summer Sermon Series – July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2007

**Series: Extreme Make Over**  
**Text: Romans 8:1-17**

A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Stacey D. Jones at Collegiate Presbyterian Church on Sunday  
July 15, 2007.

When I was in seminary in Richmond, Virginia, oh so many years ago, one of the ways we students took a break was to make the hour trip up to Washington, D.C. I had never been then before going to seminary and I loved Washington. Every trip was an opportunity for me to have a stimulating experience and the opportunity to soak up the history and the culture of the city.

For me, a trip to Washington is not complete without a visit to the Viet Nam Veterans Memorial. The Viet Nam war was to that generation what Iraq is to my generation with over 50,000 men and women dying for what we had hoped would bring freedom and democracy to the people of Viet Nam. Even though that effort failed, the impact of those 50,000 deaths continues in the lives of parents, spouses, and children of those who lost their lives in the cause.

Every time I visit there I am impressed with the monument itself and the private, individual dramas which take place in the lives of those who visit. Flowers, stuffed animals, family portraits, and other memorabilia litter the base of the polished granite wall where over 50,000 names have been carved. Each piece of memorabilia is a silent testimony to a poignant moment which has been spent there by someone who is still grieving the loss of a loved one.

Usually when I go, I simply walk the length of the wall and move on, but my last trip there before I graduated I did two things differently. I had just finished an internship at a church in Cedar Rapids and knew that the son of one of the members had died in Viet Nam. She had not been able to get to Washington, as her finances were limited. During that visit I took the time to look up her son and took a picture of the wall and his name for her. It meant so much to her to just have those pictures. I also spent some time with the things that had been left at the wall and the notes which were attached. One in particular remains in my mind. It was attached to a wedding picture of a couple who had been married in 1970. The note read: ***"Raymond, still remembering you. Hope you are still remembering me."***

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I have no idea who Raymond was. What I do know is this: It had been 20 years since the Viet Nam war ended, but the woman who wrote that note still defined herself as a widow and by the memory of the one she loved who has been dead for decades.

I am not skilled enough to tell you whether or not such loyalty is healthy. There is a part of me which admires her loyalty. Surely there is nothing wrong in living out the commitments we make to those whom we love, and there is a great deal of value in remembering to whom we belong. However, there is another part of me which is concerned. The phrase, "**...still remembering you. Hope you are still remembering me,**" is a message from a woman who may be emotionally paralyzed. When our definition of who we are is rooted in the past alone, when we define ourselves by the relationships which can no longer be life-giving or life-sustaining, it raises serious questions about our emotional and spiritual well-being.

If you will allow me, I would like to use this experience as the focus of our text for this morning. What Paul is addressing is a new identity which is rooted in a new relationship with God. The old relationship was based on the Law which defined boundaries but did not necessarily bring life. The new relationship is based on the grace of God.

Back in Chapter 7 of Romans, Paul has defined the human dilemma as he understood it. He confessed in his letter to the Romans, "I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, 'Do not covet.' But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire" (Romans 7:7-8).

Some of you may remember a scene from James Michener's Hawaii which illustrates a weakness the apostle Paul noted in any law-based religion. Abner Hale, a nineteenth-century missionary, is trying to help Hawaii's nobility institute some much-needed rules. One rule he insists on is no adultery.

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But which adultery, they ask. "In Hawaii we have 23 different kinds of adultery."

"You what?" Abner gasps.

"And this would be our problem," they explain. "If we said simply, 'There shall be no adultery,' without indicating which kind, everyone who heard would reason, 'They don't mean our kind of adultery. They mean the other 22 kinds.' But on the other hand, if we list all the 23 kinds, one after another, somebody will surely say, 'We never heard of that kind before. Let's try it!' and things would be worse than before."

In the old relationship God gave the Law to control the passions of the human condition: Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not covet, and Thou shalt not steal. In the Old Testament, God knows the human condition and gives His people laws in order to keep their passions in check. In the New Testament God offers us intimacy instead of Law as a way of negotiating our relationship to one another and our relationship to the One who created us. We do not define our response to temptations of human flesh by what the Law says. We define our response to those temptations by the impact of what we might do on our relationship with God. If we are tempted, we do not ask what the law has to say. Instead, we ask if what we are about to do will damage that relationship, or will it bring us closer to the heart of the One who created us?

There is a moving story told by Johan Boger (in the novel The Great Hunger). The story is about an engineer whose little daughter was killed by a neighbor's dog. Her death turned the community against the dog's owner and drove the father almost insane.

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Shortly after the girl's death the region was stricken by famine conditions. The engineer took some of his meager supply of corn seed and planted it in the field of the neighbor whose dog had killed his little girl. Why would he do such a thing? This is how he replied: *"Now it was that I began to realize how every great sorrow leads us to the outermost port—there was no more. I understood how blind fate can strip and plunder us of all, and yet something will remain in us at the last that nothing in heaven and earth can vanquish. Our bodies are doomed to die and our spirits to be extinguished, yet still we bear within us the spark, the germ of an eternity of harmony and light for both the world and for God. Therefore, I went out and sowed corn in my enemy's field THAT GOD MIGHT EXIST!!"*

In the act of sowing the seed, the father in this story made a statement. The Law gave him a right for revenge. He could have demanded an "eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," but grace called him to a relationship—with God and with his neighbor. He recognized that he was not the only one suffering, and in that moment he sought solidarity with his enemy through an act of faith where he found community with his neighbor and a restored relationship with his God.

*"THAT GOD MIGHT EXIST!!"* What would it take you to make such a statement? What would it take for you to believe so much in the grace of God that you are called to do more than tolerate those who have done you wrong? What would it take for you to remember to whom you belong?

Some one I admire greatly told me about a conversation he had with his mother. His mother had thanked him for his willingness to take care of her affairs now that she is no longer able to do so. He said to her, *"Mom, it is an honor for me to be able to help you after all you have done for me."*

Mom responded, *"Some honor!"*

He said, *"No, Mom, it is really an honor and a privilege for me to be able to give something back at the end of your life for all you did for me at the beginning of mine. By my count, you took care of me for 18 years. I have only been doing this for five years now, so you have at least another 13 years to go before we are anywhere close to even."*

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For the Christian, remembering to whom we belong is extremely important. It is our affirmation of faith in a living God who has promised to sustain those who trust. It is claiming, with Paul that we have been adopted as one of God's own children. We can dare to be intimate with God. We can even call God "daddy," and it is this relationship which changes the way we deal with the world in which we live. God is more than a distant creator who gets the process going and then steps back and is no longer interested. God wants to be intimately involved in our daily lives, just like a daddy, and God wants us to want what is best for our lives.

Do you sense the difference? Living a principled, moral life is not about following a list of rules and regulations. It is about entering into a relationship where all that we say and all that we do is influenced by the kind of relationship we want to have with the One who created us. We can choose to be distant, or we can choose to accept God's invitation to intimacy and live lives of faithful service.

I began this message with the silent testimony of a woman who left a message at the Viet Nam War Memorial. Let me close with the testimony of another woman who still lives in my memory as a giant in the faith.

Virginia was a schoolteacher by profession, but I'll let you in on a secret. She never taught school. She taught children. Young people, old people, rich people, poor people, ALL PEOPLE were important to her.

Her avocation was music. She had a magnificent contralto voice which she used on a regular basis to give her testimony of faith. When Virginia sang, there was rarely a dry eye in the house because you knew that she wasn't just singing words and music. She was telling you what she believed by her selection and performance of the songs which she sang.

Virginia fought a valiant battle with cancer for nearly seven years. I will never forget the time she returned to the congregation to sing a solo after undergoing yet another round of surgery and more chemotherapy. She chose a piece from Handel's oratorio, "Israel in Egypt:" *"Thanks, thanks be to thee. Thanks, thanks be to thee. Thy people hast, thou led with thee, Israel safe through the sea!"*

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Those who were there that day knew that Virginia wasn't just singing about Israel. She was singing about herself. She was grateful to God for the strength she had found to go through her ordeal, and though her rich contralto voice was a bit more throaty than usual, it did not matter. We were listening to a testimony of faith, not just a song.

Several years later I had moved, and I was on the phone with Virginia. She was in a Hospice facility now; a place where terminally ill people spend their final days in comfort. Virginia was dying. She could no longer sing, but that did not keep her from testifying to God's faithfulness. She did it in the words of another of her favorite songs. This is what she said: *"Grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home."*

My friends, if I could wish you might receive just one message from this series, it would be this: It is God who created you, Christ who redeemed you, and the Holy Spirit which sustains you. There is value in knowing to whom we belong.