



# Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers  
From the clergy and members  
of Holy Trinity Church  
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"Trusting God"**  
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## Readings for this Sunday:

Old Testament Exodus 19:2-8a  
Epistle Romans 5:6-11  
Gospel Matthew 9:35-10:8

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Today is the fourth Sunday after Pentecost. Pentecost was a liberation day if ever there was one! Today is also the Philippines' Independence Day. While our local news is filled with heightened security measures and economic fears, our Scripture readings are filled with the assurance that God has set us free from all that might cause us to be afraid. Political independence, whether in this country, or any other, has always been a mixture of blessings and curses. God's Word tells us that the reason for this lies deep within human hearts; for no matter how we form our political rhetoric, "independence" soon degenerates into a lifestyle that benefits self. We are all, by nature after the Fall, self-centered. Occasionally we do look to the interests of our family and other groups to which we belong, but apart from God's Spirit acting powerfully within us, we would never sacrifice our own interests to promote those of another. This is especially true when the other seems unworthy to us, or inferior, or has acted with hostility towards us. I find no natural inclination in myself to do what is best for another person under such circumstances. I suspect you have found the same.

So what are we to make of our longing for independence? Is it from God? Are there biblical limits to a godly independence? As I have prayed over the readings for the next three weeks, I have been led to focus on Paul's letter to Rome. The chapters before us have a lot to say about independence and true freedom. What is true for the individual in relation to God the Father, becomes the pattern for families and the ever larger social groups that define our interactions day by day. The Christian vision is not one of colonial subjugation and slavish dependence; but neither is it a vision of radical independence. The relationships we are called to enter, first with the Father through Jesus, and then in an expanding network of social connectedness, might best be described as interdependence, or partnership. Raw "independence" can be a cruel task master. As a wise Filipino Catholic priest once said to me, "The problem with setting free those who sees themselves as slaves, is that they inevitably rule as tyrants." Our Lord's model for leadership was that of servant. When he sent out his

disciples, as in today's gospel reading, he told them to take nothing, so that interdependence was assured.

It is hard for us to see people we love torn apart by selfish interests and partisan rivalries, whether this happens in our family, our barcada, our church, our neighborhood, or our nation. Wherever we find independence pulling people apart rather than setting them free to serve in love, we would do well to come back to these chapters in Romans to remind ourselves what true freedom is. This I hope to do over the next three weeks.

In the first half of Romans chapter five, Paul establishes the basis for the believer's freedom. God has acted to restore our sin-damaged relationship with himself. Freedom results from what God has done. This is pure gift. He did it entirely through Jesus and offers it freely, without cost to us.

Next week we look at the second half of chapter five. Paul returns to Genesis and the beginning of our human dilemma. What the Father has done in Jesus meets the deepest need of those who are trapped in the effects of Adam's rebellion. In Jesus we come to know the only kind of love that will bring true freedom to our families, social groups and nation.

Then in chapter six, Paul describes what Jesus' resurrected life looks like in us. He leads us through the tough implications of our baptism being, in reality, the death of our sin-controlled old life. Then he shows us how to live in these still mortal bodies as though our resurrection had already happened. Indeed, the promise of Pentecost is resurrected life now because the Holy Spirit lives in us.

This has been a tough week for Suzanne and I. A week ago Saturday I arrived the small island off the coast of Northern Samar where we lived and did Bible translation for 18 years. I brought with me Pura and her husband, Waling, who had a large swelling on his right cheek and eye. They had been told it was an infection from an ill-treated tooth abscess. It was not an infection; rather it was a stage IV malignant tumor, which if untreated, would likely cause death in a few months. He was immediately admitted to a hospital and scheduled for surgery last Tuesday. Our hopes rose as we learned that the cancer appeared to be contained with no lymph involvement. Hope came and went as the surgery was rescheduled four times due to his weak condition and further tests. The last postponement was due to finding metathesis throughout his lungs. Waling is 46. They have five children.

For many of us our physical, emotional, and spiritual experience with sin, and our sense of separation from the holy God, is much like Waling's last week. We tell ourselves things are really not so bad, until God allows something to happen to convince our minds and be confirmed in our experience that there is no option available to us other than placing our complete trust in him. This is where Paul left us last week at the end of Romans chapter four. He pointed us again to Abraham's life-long choice to trust God "against all hope." Paul assures us that trust in God, and not our obedience to God's Law is the only means for restoring our broken relationship with the holy God. The critical element of this trust is our belief that God raised Jesus from the dead. Indeed we find life only when we are convinced that a living Jesus is now able, and committed, to live in our sin-scared, death-ridden bodies, minds and spirits. He was raised to life so that we might now, and for ever after, be fully reconciled and live in right relationship with God, as the Canticle of Zachariah puts it,

Free to worship him without fear,

holy and righteous in his sight all the days of our life.

And this brings me back to Pura and Waling. What gives stability to the pingponging thoughts and emotions that fill their lives in hospital? What alone will keep any of us walking with Jesus in the coming week in the midst of far less severe assaults on our trust in God? As Paul begins chapter five he asserts that it is the reality of now being at peace with God. This is a reality which we can know cognitively, with our minds, for it is based on what another has done in historical fact. And it is a peace which we can experience by God's Spirit with our emotions. Peace with God gives us access to grace, that is, access to everything we need to live resurrected lives. Peace with God gives us deep, unshakeable joy and fills us with hope, that is, the certain assurance of sharing in God's glory for all eternity. Peace with God even gives us joy in the midst of severe suffering, as Suzanne and I have been privileged to witness day after day this past week while praying with Pura and Waling. Peace with God produces perseverance when things get tough, building character in us and refining hope. All this Paul asserts in the verses immediately before today's reading begins.

We now come to verse six of chapter five. I invite you to take the bulletin insert and read along with me, for if we grasp, not only with our minds, but also through our emotions, what it means for God to love us, we will never see our lives the same. Please read with me verses 6 through 8:

<sup>6</sup> You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup> Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. <sup>8</sup> But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

The modern world, and especially our media, carries out an unrelenting assault on our conception of what love is. It has been so severe that, when I have asked people, "What is love?", apart from those who have thought deeply about their Christian faith, I almost never hear that love is doing what is best for the loved one. People speak of how they feel and of the joy they experience being together. They speak of passion and, more and more openly, of sexual satisfaction. Even an older person's definition of mutuality and companionship, we must admit, is focused on what both parties get from being "in love". So Paul's words here bring us up short. How can we re-train our minds so brain-washed by modern conceptions of love?

One answer is to let this word from Paul penetrate deep into your being. By meditating on, perhaps even memorizing these words, you will recall them and know the truth when other ideas push in upon you. I asked that these verses be printed in your insert so that you could take them home and read them each day this week. It is a five-minute task. Yet if you will do so, next Sunday will mean far more to you. This is one way by which we come to have the mind of Christ.

The process of re-training our minds with these verses begins by affirming that in or unreconciled state we were, and we still are, powerless to do any good for ourselves. We were, and are, powerless to do good for those we love. Our attempts to love in our own strength have inevitably turned self-centered, just as has our fight for independence. The only remedy is Christ's death for the ungodly. That's us. That's you and that's me: powerless and ungodly.

In verse seven Paul quips that "very rarely will someone die for a righteous person." How true! Religious, self-righteous, Jesus-people have never won my

sympathy. They don't seem to need anything, certainly not my self-giving love focused on that which will benefit them. Then Paul concedes that a truly good person might call forth love from another, even the love that gives up life so the other might live. But this is rare among humanity apart from the closest of family ties. But what is this that God has done in Jesus? What kind of love is this which is so uniquely "his own love"? It is this: While we were sinners, Jesus chose to die that we might live. Or as Paul further expands this inconceivable truth in verse 10: If, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through Jesus' life!

Next Sunday we will explore with Paul what this salvation through Jesus' life looks like day by day. For clearly Paul is not only concerned with what it means to spend eternity in the Father's loving presence after we die. His purpose is to answer our questions about experiencing God's presence now, about living Jesus' kind of life now. For today it is enough that we find joy in God's reconciling love, a love which is wholly focused on what is good for us, on what will bring us peace and grace, hope of God's glory seen in us, perseverance in sufferings, and a proven character that does not disappoint us. All this "because God has poured out his (unique kind of) love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us."

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.