

Lent 4
3 April 2011

“God’s Dynamite”
Romans 8.1

Grace, mercy and peace to you, from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Our text is from today’s second lesson, Romans 8.1: “There is now, therefore, no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

There is a terrible, terrible tragedy unfolding in Japan. In the wake of an earthquake and tsunami, thousands have been killed, tens of thousands are still missing, and hundreds of thousands have had their homes, their businesses, and their towns destroyed.

What makes it even orders of magnitude worse is the fact that it involves five reactors at a nuclear power plant. Not only has significant, dangerous radiation been released, the end is not yet in sight. Things could get much, much worse. Despite official pronouncements that this poses no risk to America, the outcome remains to be seen. The whole world could be blanketed with radiation.

Nuclear radiation is extremely potent, more power than our bodies can stand. There is awesome power locked up in the atom. Power that when it is harnessed for peaceful purposes is a blessing. It can generate electricity for our homes. When aimed at cancer cells in our bodies, it can promote healing. But it’s potential to do harm is also quite frightening.

In Romans 1 St. Paul talks about another source of power. He writes: “I am not ashamed of the **Gospel** of Jesus Christ – it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who has faith.” The Gospel is God’s powerhouse. The word that St. Paul uses for “power” is “dunamis” from which we get the word “dynamite”. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is **God’s dynamite**.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is God’s dynamite. It can blast thru the stoniest of hearts and plant faith. Where there is sin, it can bring forgiveness. Where there is despair, it can instill hope. Where there is death, it can create life. The Gospel is the powerhouse of God. It is God’s dynamite.

The Gospel is so powerful that it can be more power than we can comprehend. There is in our lessons this morning one of those powerful articulations of the Gospel. Romans 8.1 is one of those statements of Gospel that is so clear, so pure, so powerful, that many find it incomprehensible. And I’m talking about **Christians**. There are Christians who find Romans 8.1 to be more Gospel than they can absorb: **There is now, therefore, no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!**

If you will accept the gift of grace that God offers you in Christ, you are **beyond** condemnation. From the time that you receive that gift of grace for the rest of eternity there is **nothing** you can say or do or think that will condemn you before God. **Nothing!** By “nothing” St. Paul means ... “nothing.” If you will receive the gift of grace that God offers you in Christ you are forgiven. Completely, totally. The sins I committed last week, last year, last decade – **forgiven**. The sins of which I am aware and for which I am contrite – **forgiven**. The sins of which I am unaware and remain hidden in my blind spots – **forgiven**. The sins which I will commit tomorrow and next week and next year – already **forgiven**. Jesus has already died on the cross for those sins. They are

already paid for. **There is, now, no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!**

That is more Gospel than even a lot of Christians can stand. For some, it just sounds too good to be true. *“Surely when St. Paul says ‘no condemnation’ that is holy hyperbole. There must be some exceptions.”*

There are whole theologies devoted to finding exceptions. I have had “Holiness” friends who say “Well, yes, St. Paul says there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus ... but if you take a drink, you’re going to hell...if you dance or go to the movies, you’re going to hell.” (Children are, at heart, “holiness” folks: *“Oh, you said a bad word, you’re going to hell!”*)

Our Roman Catholic friends have developed it into a system called “penance”. The Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church says “Raised up from sin, the sinner must still recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin.” “Something more” than what Jesus has already done. I must admit that notion is appealing, it makes sense. Why *shouldn’t* I have to make some payment to make amends for what I have done? It makes sense because Romans 8.1 is just more Gospel than we can absorb.

Even for Lutherans. I can’t tell you how many Bible studies I’ve been in where someone has heard that the Bible talks about the *“unforgivable sin”*, and speculates that the unforgivable sin must be *“suicide”*. Why’s that? The logic is that in order to be forgiven you have to express repentance, you have to ask for forgiveness. By definition, if you commit suicide you have committed murder and are dead before you can ask for forgiveness. So wouldn’t that be a sin that would condemn you? The problem – the very *big* problem – is that if that line of thinking is true, then all of us are in trouble. Not one of us could be certain of our salvation. Because you don’t know *when* death is going to take you. And you don’t know *what* you are going to be doing when death takes you.

You might be going 90 miles an hour on the Beltway – committing the sins of disregarding Caesar’s laws, of putting you neighbor at risk, of putting yourself in jeopardy – hit the bridge abutment and die instantly. No time to repent. No time to ask for forgiveness. Dying with “unrepented” sin. Which puts you in exactly the same boat as the suicide. There’s no telling what kind of mischief we might be involved in when the heart gives out or the brain explodes. For any of us the circumstance of our dying may be such that there is no time to repent.

But I don’t think St. Paul is exaggerating or over-stating the case when he says **there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!** If you have received the gift of grace that God offers you in Christ, you are beyond condemnation. There is nothing you can say or do or think that is not already forgiven. Even if you say or think or do it at the moment of death.

(The Bible does talk about an *“unforgivable sin”*. It is not suicide. The unforgivable sin is rejecting the offer of God’s forgiving grace. In other words, the only thing God can’t forgive is rejecting his offer of forgiveness. For those who receive the gift of God’s grace offered to us in Christ, there is no condemnation. None.)

I talked to our school children in Chapel about this last Wednesday. **There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!** I illustrated it by having one child play the role of the “perfect” student – the one who always obeys the rules and gets assignments done on time. I had another student play the role of the student who is “always” in trouble. I had a big stack of demerit slips and

the “naughty” student confessed to a whole list of infractions. Yes, he was running in the hallway. Yes, he cheated on a test. Yes, he took something from another students locker without permission. On and on. For every infraction that the “naughty” student I handed a demerit clip to the “perfect” student, to the hoots and hollers of the student body. It wasn’t fair! But, I pointed out, it is exactly what Jesus has done for us. Isaiah 53 says that the punishment for our sin was laid on Jesus. And because Jesus has taken all our punishment on Himself, **there is, now, no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!**

I told the children in Chapel that there are two things that we can do with that information. One is to run amuck. “If there is nothing I can do that can condemn me – I can go out and do anything.” Sadly, we look around and see even Christians testing those waters all the time.

The second thing we can do with Romans 8.1 is “grown up” response, the mature response. It is to say “Thank you Jesus. Thank you for taking all of my sin and all of the punishment of my sin on Yourself. Thank you for covering me with your righteousness and making me holy and acceptable to God, now and in the hour of my death. And help me to live a life that serving God and helping my neighbor gives You thanksgiving and praise.”

There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!
God’s dynamite!