

St. Andrew Presbyterian  
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## A QUESTION OF CHARACTER Romans 5: 1-8

When I am thinking about ideas for sermons, sometimes I turn to my handy dandy quotation books. And this is what I found in them under the heading of “character”. Forgive the masculine pronouns; you know how quotations are! “A man has three characters: the one he shows, the one he has, and the one he thinks he has.” In a similar vein, “A man’s real character lies somewhere between the partiality of his mother and the scorn of his enemies.”

Or consider this a bit more serious quote: “When wealth is lost, nothing is lost. When health is lost, something is lost. When character is lost, all is lost.” And finally the German poet Goethe wrote this: “Talent is nurtured in solitude; character is formed in the stormy billows of the world.”

It is this last quote by Goethe that comes closest to the thinking of Paul the apostle. Paul knew a great deal about difficulties. His life and ministry brought him much opposition and persecution. He suffered more than we can imagine. And yet Paul saw clearly that that all the stormy billows in his life served to forge his character. Listen again to his progression of thought: “Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.”

The word translated “character” is a fascinating word study. The Greek word is “dokime” and it means tested and found genuine. It refers to metals passed through fire to burn away impurities. It refers to coinage that is authentic. It implies that testing is required to ascertain if something is the real deal or not. The same of course is true for human character. Testing is an essential element in the great work of forming a person’s character. Paul would agree. For the apostle, it is suffering that produces endurance and endurance that produces character.

The good people of the Midwest are being tested rather severely these past days. Tornadoes have killed Boy Scouts and floods have displaced thousands of people and caused extensive property damage. I saw on the news how the students at the University of Iowa are placing sandbags across the streets to save their school. Many townspeople and alumni have rushed there to help. What an enormous test of endurance

and character! A number of you have family and friends across the Midwest and we continue to pray for them. Let's hope that for them the old adage holds true, "Whatever does not kill me makes me stronger."

Paul's vision of character has a distinctive theological character. For Paul, we live between two worlds-two goal posts, if you will. On the one hand, we live with the gift of salvation in Christ Jesus our Lord. This is sheer grace, given freely and generously in Christ's life offered for us. Salvation is never earned, but simply received, grace upon grace. So we run the race with joy knowing that we have indeed tasted the cup of salvation. That is one goal post, if you will.

The other goal post is the end of our journey, where the genuineness of our faith and life are judged. Here our life is examined by the One who gave us our gifts and talents. We are accountable for how we have used this gift of salvation, this gift of grace and mercy. The ultimate destination of all human existence is to face that final exam where nothing is hidden from the eyes of God. Here we yearn to hear these gracious words, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

For Paul, all the struggles we face have meaning. Suffering produces endurance. Endurance produces character. And character produces hope. Hope not just for this life alone, but for the life to come. Paul never divorces our hope in this life from his hope for that life that is life indeed in the presence of Christ. That is why these two goal posts, if you will, recur over and over again in his writings: life as a test of our faithfulness and the finality of judgment. These complement and complete one another. The issue for us is not merely having a good reputation. Ultimately it is a matter of pleasing God and God alone.

And so the process of character formation in the Christian life is a matter of extraordinary importance. Our character matters enormously. I read with some sadness that one of the recipients of a Habitat for Humanity home in our community was indicted this past week for embezzling funds. The family services coordinator for Albuquerque's Habitat said this: "We try to select families with good character and in the over 150 homes we have built, there has only been a small percentage of families who later have problems. You do your best, but it happens." Once again, we remind ourselves that character matters, it matters a lot.

Recently I read the biography of Dorothy Sayers, a remarkable British novelist, scholar, and Christian theologian. Born in 1893 and living until 1957, Dorothy Sayers was an incredibly talented and

complex Christian woman. I have always liked her writings and I found her biography fascinating.

Most fascinating of all was the description of her father, the Rev. Henry Sayers, a scholar and chaplain at Oxford University. Sayers' biographer James Brabazon says of her father, "Henry seems to have lived a life of untarnished perfection, unless you count dullness a flaw and suspect that he may have been virtuous from lack of imagination." Ouch! Now it must be noted that he did love music, even writing hymns for his church. However his church organist found him to be a "severe taskmaster", hardly a merry soul. Working under him for fifteen years, she had no memory of his ever smiling.

Like all of us, he did have his redeeming qualities. He was said to have a "certain mild stateliness" and decorum. Rev. Henry Sayers also loved books, a passion he passed on to his children. It was this intellectual passion that led Dorothy to brilliant academic and professional success, for which she was always thankful.

When her father died, Dorothy wrote this about the impact of his death upon her mother, "My father bored my mother to death for nearly forty years, and she always grumbled that he was no companion for her- and now she misses him dreadfully."

So Rev. Henry Sayers, Oxford don and chaplain was virtuous to a fault, it appears. And I suppose the biographer always gets the last word. Beware your sins will find you out, if not by your biographer, then certainly by God. Funny how the good and the bad and the ugly are hardly ever buried with us. They live on in lore and tales and biographies!

I am reminded of Lord John Reith, another British citizen living about the same time as Dorothy Sayers. Reith was also the son of a minister, in fact, a Presbyterian minister. John Reith served as the head of the BBC but he always fancied himself as the Prime Minister someday. Deeply disappointed that Winston Churchill attained that post, he vented his spleen in his diaries, which were regrettably published upon his death. In these pages Reith revealed himself to be a misanthrope who by his own admission "loathed the common people" and lacked "all ordinary human kindness." The reviewer of his diaries said that their publication was a kind of "posthumous suicide." Again, ouch!

So whether through a biography or an autobiography or just the words of family members gathering for our memorial service, our character will out. It will surface. It will be remembered for good or ill.

Thankfully, this past week we have seen the exact opposite of Lord John Reith, head of the BBC. Tim Russert of NBC News died unexpectedly. I say without shame that I cried a lot on Friday. With our entire nation I grieved the loss of an extraordinary person. The tributes for Tim Russert stressed his intelligence, his competence as a newsman. They also stressed his qualities as a friend, a family member, a devoted Christian. His Catholic faith seemed real and genuine. His friends and colleagues talked of his joy and his authenticity, how he really meant it when he asked about how you and your family were doing. How he remembered the children and the youth around him. How he brought out the best in others.

I tell you it was one of the finest tributes to a human being I have witnessed in a long time. But one of the best parts about Tim Russert was his enormous love and devotion for his father, Big Russ, about whom he wrote a book. In that book he praises a man who was wounded in World War II, returned to Buffalo, raised a family of four children, worked two jobs, and gave his family a life of faith and love. I can only imagine his father's grief on this Father's Day. And the grief of his wife and only son. I have cried a lot this weekend thinking of Tim Russert. Loving son, devoted husband, doting father, beloved friend.

May it be that upon our death, the final goal post on our journey, that our friends and family gather to give thanks for our life, as we have given thanks for the life of Tim Russert. Character matters. It matters a lot. May he rest in peace. Amen.