

## ***Summer Sermon Series***

### **Sunday, June 22**

Holy Scriptures: Romans 1: 1-17  
*Story*

Sermon Title: *“Called Into God’s*

### **Sunday, June 29**

Holy Scriptures: Romans 6: 12-23  
*Have to Serve Somebody*”

Sermon Title: *“You’re Gonna*

### **Sunday July 5**

Holy Scriptures: Romans 7: 15-25a  
*Addictions Consume*”

Sermon Title: *“When Habits and*

### **Sunday, July 12**

Holy Scriptures: Romans 8: 1-11  
*Demands, And Love’s Response*”

Sermon Title: *“The Law’s Just*

### **Sunday, July 19**

Holy Scriptures: Romans 8: 12-25

Sermon Title: *“Hope Prevails”*

## ***“Called Into God’s Story”***

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, June 22, 2014

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

**Holy Scriptures: Romans 1:1-17** (The Message)

I, Paul, am a devoted slave of Jesus Christ on assignment, authorized as an apostle to proclaim God’s words and acts. I

write this letter to all the believers in Rome, God's friends.

2-7 The sacred writings contain preliminary reports by the prophets on God's Son. His descent from David roots him in history; his unique identity as Son of God was shown by the Spirit when Jesus was raised from the dead, setting him apart as the Messiah, our Master. Through him we received both the generous gift of his life and the urgent task of passing it on to others who receive it by entering into obedient trust in Jesus. You are who you are through this gift and call of Jesus Christ! And I greet you now with all the generosity of God our Father and our Master Jesus, the Messiah.

8-12 I thank God through Jesus for every one of you. That's first. People everywhere keep telling me about your lives of faith, and every time I hear them, I thank him. And God, whom I so love to worship and serve by spreading the good news of his Son—the Message!—knows that every time I think of you in my prayers, which is practically all the time, I ask him to clear the way for me to come and see you. The longer this waiting goes on, the deeper the ache. I so want to be there to deliver God's gift in person and watch you grow stronger right before my eyes! But don't think I'm not expecting to get something out of this, too! You have as much to give me as I do to you.

13-15 Please don't misinterpret my failure to visit you, friends. You have no idea how many times I've made plans for Rome. I've been determined to get some personal enjoyment out of God's work among you, as I have in so many other non-Jewish towns and communities. But something has always come up and prevented it. Everyone I meet—it matters little whether they're mannered or rude, smart or simple—deepens my sense of interdependence and obligation. And that's why I can't wait to get to you in Rome, preaching this wonderful good news of God.

16-17 It's news I'm most proud to proclaim, this extraordinary Message of God's powerful plan to rescue everyone who trusts him, starting with Jews and then right on to everyone else! God's way of putting people right shows up in the acts of

faith, confirming what Scripture has said all along: “The person in right standing before God by trusting him really lives.”

Sermon

**Called into God’s Story**

A young pastor went to visit with a wise soul in the church,

and in the midst of their conversation broke down and confessed,

*“I am at a loss of what to do.*

*I don’t understand why people don’t come to church anymore.”*

The elder paused and looked upon the young preacher with compassion,

and said, *“When you preach, let God set you on fire for the Gospel.*

*People will come out to watch you burn.”*

The Apostle Paul was on fire for the Gospel,

and people came out to see him burn with love for Jesus.

To this day we study his story of redemption read his words and teachings,

and they turn up the heat and set us ablaze for the one they point to, Jesus Christ.

He introduces himself to the Christians in Rome, saying,

*“Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ called to be an apostle,*

*set apart for the Gospel of God.”*

Almost 50 years ago Clarence Jordan converted the Greek New Testament

into a colloquial modern translation with a Southern accent

setting down Paul’s introduction this way:

*“From Paul, a “captive” of Christ Jesus,  
an appointed agent assigned to God’s great story.”*

Paul was called into “God’s great story,”  
into being and sharing the Good News,  
and the world has not been the same since.

Paul’s story begins when he was named Saul.

Saul was very bright, learned man who spoke several languages  
and was well versed in philosophy and history.

He was very fierce against his opponents;  
to be his opponent all one had to do was to believe differently than Saul.

Saul set about persecuting and murdering Christians;  
he was present at the stoning of Stephen.

Saul used his authority and power to murder and harm and hurt people of faith,  
and would have continued doing so until his last breath  
had not the love of God transformed his life.

First God stopped Saul in his tracks on the Road to Damascus  
and let him know that the people being persecuted  
belonged to God, as did Saul.

The light of God’s love blinded Saul.

### **Called into God’s Story**

Enter Ananias.

God sent a Christian named Ananias  
to invite Saul into his life and take care of him.

You better believe that Ananias was fearful and unsure of this command from God,

yet he did as the Lord instructed.

Trust and obey, my friends, trust and obey.

We who are called into God's story to serve and love must do so, for we can do no other.

As much criticism gets heaped on the church for past and current wrongs,

sometimes we get it right.

Sometimes we are on the right side of history and leaders in the cause of mercy.

Ananias found Saul as God promised, vulnerable, alone and blind;

before him sat a mean-spirited person who killed Christians

and was suddenly placed by God into the hands of his victims.

Rather than take revenge or rain down hatred,

Ananias and his fellow disciples ministered to Saul.

The courage and grace of Ananias and his friends

give hope to all who are called into God's story. .

We welcome all of you who are blinded by the Light,

who are deaf to the cries of the world,

who are addicted and powerless of what has taken over your life,

who are lost and afraid, isolated and lonely,

wondering and wandering and questioning,

angry and sad, hurt and hurting,

who are looking for direction or a destination or a vocation,

who are seeking and searching, happy and joyful,

and we will take you in.

I have been called into God's story.

So have you.

You belong to God.

We are God's people.

Therefore you belong here, with us and we belong to you and yours.

### **Called into God's Story**

First things first:

Saul was accepted and welcomed in by Ananias.

Then Saul accepted Christ as his Lord and Savior.

He changed his belief system

and started the long, slow, arduous journey

toward changing his life, his behavior, his habits and relationships.

Saul changed his name to Paul and began to change his ways.

Paul went about the Mediterranean,

areas we know as the Holy Land and Northern Africa and Southern Europe,

travelling by land and sea, by foot and Corvette

*(just seeing if you're paying attention)*

sharing the God's story and who is invited into the God's good graces...everyone.

Now he used his fierceness for good and not for evil.

He initiated conversations, conversions, and communities of faith.

He wrote sermons, recorded the words of songs, and sent missives to churches.

Trivia Time:

What percentage of the New Testament consists of Paul's writings? (25%)

Let's be honest here: Paul was not perfect.

His own values and prejudices and opinions crept into his theology and counsel.

He was at times a marvelous theologian and a not-so-great sociologist,

and at other times vice versa.

He preached with passion,

    protested abuses by the principalities and powers,

        and taught with reason and faith.

He helped to shape and influence God's fledgling church.

We see now that the one called into God's story became a perpetuator of the narrative.

### **Called into God's Story**

We are blessed to have Paul's letter to the Christians in first century Rome.

He poured into it his intelligence, reason, faith and experience.

In his Epistle to the Romans,

*"Paul deals with problems as contemporary as tomorrow's newspaper."*

    (Achtemeier, "Romans" page 1)

He stood up to the principalities and the powers.

He addressed the political, economic, and military capital of his known world.

His epistle considers the fate and future of the Jewish people;

    the responsibilities of citizens to their government,

        whether one agrees or disagrees with governmental decisions;

    morality with regards to relationships, including human sexuality;

        as well as the place of legalism and God's loving response.

Future church leaders from Martin Luther to Martin Luther King,

    from Augustine to Karl Barth would find in his letter to the Romans

        a source of spiritual wisdom and strength.

### **Called into God's Story**

We who are living out the Good News might wish we knew more of the story.

Today we would love to know when Romans was written

and exactly where Paul was when he set ink to paper.  
We'd love to have a better grasp of what he knew about the churches in Rome,  
what they were dealing with, who founded them,  
what the house churches smelled and sounded like,  
and exactly what the issues were with which they wrestled.

We do know from verse 1:10 that he had not yet been to Rome.

He said: *"I ask [God] to clear the way for me to come and see you.*

*The longer this waiting goes on, the deeper the ache.*

*I so want to be there to deliver God's gift in person*

*and watch you grow stronger right before my eyes!"*

Thanks be to God, we can surmise from Acts 19 that the Epistle to the Romans  
was most likely written during the later stages of Paul's life,  
sometime between 55-64 AD,  
which would mean he crafted it while travelling  
through northern and southern Greece on his way to Jerusalem.

### **Called into God's Particular Story**

Each of Paul's epistles was occasional, meaning that

they were occasioned by particular circumstances in Christian churches.

As Leander Keck points out:

*"None of Paul's letters was written simply as a means of self-expression*

*and then shared with friends,*

*the way some persons write poetry as a hobby.*

*Nor were they written for the general public...*

*Rather they were written for particular congregations*

*(small house churches)*

*who had particular problems."*



One could argue that the lone exception of occasional letters is Romans,

because Paul had not been there yet.

However, he addressed challenges and concerns and joys

particular to their city and circumstances.

Portions of the letter are stiff and formal,

like any letter one writes to someone you have not yet met.

Even so his passion for God and God's people bleeds through.

Paul connects, through God, with the Roman Christians own story.

We wonder aloud what was in the collective story of the Roman churches

that touched Paul's own experience so much so that he would say to them:

*Therefore, since we are justified by faith,*

*we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

*Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand,*

*and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God.*

*More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings,*

*knowing that suffering produces endurance,*

*and endurance produces character,*

*and character produces hope,*

*and hope does not disappoint us,*

*because God's love has been poured into our hearts*

*through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.*

*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?*

*Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution,*

*or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?*

*No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*

*For I am sure that neither death, nor life,*

*nor angels, nor principalities,  
nor things present, nor things to come,  
nor powers, nor height, nor depth,  
nor anything else in all creation,  
will be able to separate us  
from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

(Romans 5:1-5; 8:35, 37-39)

He who had been forgiven

taught us much about forgiving ourselves and one another.

Paul never forgot his past or the errors of his ways;

he stayed close to the love of Christ

and the love of his people in churches across the land.

He anticipated the glory of God,

dealt with a thorn in his side,

and kept his eyes on the prize.

### **Called into God's Story**

Enter Robert Grimes.

Robert Grimes served his country in the Army Corps of Engineers.

He was sent to Viet Nam in the 1960s,

and while there was assigned a Vietnamese interpreter named Minh Nguyen.

They overcame their cultural differences to become fast friends,

yoked by a love of engineering and a common Creator.

Robert Grimes completed his tour of duty and returned home to Dallas, Texas.

25 or so years later Minh Nguyen and his wife and children

fled terrible oppression in Viet Nam, escaping on an overcrowded boat,

and eventually made it to a refugee camp in the Philippines.

A Church World Service employee asked them if they knew of anyone

who could help them get out, and Minh said, “Bob Grimes, Texas.”

Church World Service tracked him down.

When Grimes learned of the Nguyen family’s plight,

he turned to his Disciples congregation for help.

East Dallas Christian Church was asked to help support the family,

to provide shelter and hospitality for several months.

The church said yes, we will help the friends of our friend.

Sometimes we get it right.

Sometimes we are on the right side of history and leaders in the cause of mercy.

Betty and I were in the midst of the conversations, serving there as Associate Pastors.

So there we were one evening,

waiting in the Dallas airport for the Nguyen family to arrive,

Robert Grimes, Betty and I, our senior pastor Michael Mooty,

and outreach chairpersons Byron and Yvonne Clark

Robert was the first to welcome home with Minh and his 6 year old son, Vy.

They were the only two allowed to leave the refugee camp.

It would be 3 or 4 years later before the whole family was reunited.

Meanwhile Vy quickly became adopted by the whole church,

and before you knew it he was talking English

and had the full run of the building and grounds.

He was quite a little rascal, impish and smart and quick with a great smile.

He did well in school, learned to master the flute,

and attended Texas Christian University with a music scholarship.

After TCU he went to the University of Chicago Divinity School

because he knew he was called into God’s story.

Betty and I and our children were blessed to be a small part

of his magnificent ordination to the Christian ministry,

held at East Dallas Christian Church in 2009.

One summer he served as a Disciples Peace Intern

and keynoted at Camp Christian in Georgia.

He went on to work for Church World Service in Berkeley, California

as an associate field director.

Today we celebrate the Good News that Vy Nguyen

has been called by the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

to serve as the next Executive Director of Week of Compassion.

Week of Compassion is the national and international

relief and emergency resource arm of the Christian Church.

A child who had been shown mercy and hospitality

now has much to teach us about having compassion.

Vy never forgets his past or the challenges of his days;

he stays close to the love of Christ

and the love of God's people in churches across the land.

May we join with the passionate and compassionate Apostle Paul and Ananias,

with Robert Grimes, Minh Nguyen, Vy Nguyen and their families,

affirming each and every day

that all of God's children

are called to live into God's great story,

set afire and burning with love for Jesus  
Christ.

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*

# Week of Compassion Calls a New Executive Director

*Week of Compassion welcomes Rev. Vy Nguyen as the New Executive Director beginning September 1, 2014.*

Vy Nguyen holds a Master of Divinity from the Divinity School at the University of Chicago, and earned his B.A. in religious studies with a minor in environmental sciences from Texas Christian University. He joins Week of Compassion after serving for more than 5 years with Church World Service for the Southwest Regional Office where he worked with congregations and donors to increase their fundraising portfolio. Prior to his work with Church World Service, Vy worked with the Lutheran Volunteer Corps office in Berkeley, CA where he brought stability to the program and increased support for the organization among volunteers, congregations, and non-profit agencies. LVC doubled the number of volunteers and non-profit agencies during his tenure.

Vy brings with him a strong passion for working with diverse communities and building bridges between them. As a former refugee who came to the United States through the efforts of Refugee and Immigration Ministries and Church World Service, he has witnessed first-hand the vital role that Week of Compassion provides throughout the world. Through his work with Church World Service and local congregations, he has sought to foster among communities a deeper understanding and awareness of both the challenges that individuals and families face in the world as they struggle for refuge, as well as the importance of building local capacities and movements towards sustainable development in international relief and long-term development work. His commitment to enhancing diverse community engagement with the mission and vital work of outreach organizations has led him to work closely with senior staff at Church World Service on researching why communities choose to become involved in and engaged with new causes and non-profit organizations. Their efforts have led to new and creative ways of engaging with communities and donors to

increase fundraising as well as strengthening relationships with individuals and communities.

Vy and his wife, Linh Bui, live in Oakland, CA.