

Refreshment of the Saints
Romans 15:22-33

This past week, the world mourned the passing of Billy Graham, after 99 years of life and very fruitful ministry. It is estimated that he preached in person to more than 210 million people, and reached countless more through newspaper columns, books, radio, television and over the internet. He ministered to Presidents from Harry Truman to Donald Trump. And his ministry changed lives, even of some of our neighbors. Just this week on the morning news, I heard a lady recalling how she gave her life to Christ at one of Billy Graham's crusades in Jackson, Mississippi in the early 1950's. And I myself remember vividly being convicted of my own sin when watching one of his televised sermons when I was 8 or 10.

The Apostle Paul had a similar globetrotting ministry, didn't he? Back in verse 19, he pointed to the missionary journeys he had already made, and in verses 24 and 28 he mentions his plans to go all the way to Spain, the Western edge of the known world. Everywhere he went he started churches, saw thousands of people come to faith in Christ, did miracles of healing and even raised a young man named Eutychus from the dead – even if Eutychus did die because he went to sleep and then fell out of a window during one of Paul's long sermons!

Looking at giants of the faith like Billy Graham and like Paul can be more than a little daunting for any preacher, or really for any Christian. What can any of us possibly do that they haven't done? What could we possibly say that they haven't already said a whole lot better? If Billy Graham couldn't bring America out of its moral crisis, what can any of us hope to do about it?

Well, in today's passage, Paul points to several things all of us can in fact do to further the work of the Kingdom of God, no matter who we are. And it can start as easily as just opening your front door.

Take a look, for example at verse 32. Yes, Paul is making big plans for yet another epic missionary journey, another bold plan to carry the gospel into uncharted territory. But at the same time, he also looks forward to visiting the already-existing church in Rome so he might find some refreshment during his travels. In fact, in verse 24, he admits that this visit, this being filled up with their company, will actually help him along his way. In other words, one way we can participate in the work of the kingdom is to extend hospitality to other Christians who are involved in kingdom work.

Now, I know we already do this as a whole congregation. We leave our Sanctuary doors open so that tourists from all over the world can marvel at the beautiful architecture we get to enjoy every week. We also welcome groups from Michigan who are working with Christian Volunter Services in town. And I suppose it is just as encouraging for us to us to see energetic young people working busily on home repairs and wheelchair ramps in town as it is for them to have a warm climate in which to spend Spring Break. And I've enjoyed their Michigan hospitality just as much on my visits up there.

But we don't just have to provide hospitality as a group. After all, every one of us happens to have a home in a resort area, a place people love to visit because of its historical beauty and natural wonder – a place called Claiborne County. So, could we use our own homes as a refuge for those in Christian ministry? Could we invite folks to come stay with us for hunting or fishing vacations? One pastor I know loves to ride a bike, so I have invited him to come stay with me while he rides the Natchez

Trace – what other opportunities might we find to provide refreshment for the Billy Grahams and Pauls of our own time?

But along with our hospitality, Paul points to another way that all of us can participate in the work of the gospel – providing help to Christian brothers and sisters who are in need. And again, as a congregation, we know how to do this. When other preachers ask me how we handle pledging and budgets, I just tell them that whenever my congregation sees a need, y'all try to meet it. And over the years, we've done just that. We've contributed to the Gratitude Gift for retired pastors with financial needs. We've partnered with other congregations to support local missions like Christian Volunteer Services and to dig cisterns and wells in Northeast Brazil. We've helped folks recover from Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Harvey. We Mississippi Presbyterians know how to work together and to share our financial resources with others.

But did you notice that Paul insisted on adding a personal touch to this gift? After all, he could have sent some deacons to carry the offering to Jerusalem. But even though Paul's evangelistic plans were so urgent that he hadn't yet been able to make time to visit Rome, he insisted on carrying these gifts all the way to Jerusalem. You see, he wasn't satisfied to help the needy at arm's length – he was determined to get personally involved with them.

And this desire was probably fueled by the reason they were in such great need. After all, the Christians in Jerusalem weren't just financially poor – they had been suffering waves of persecution at the hands of the unbelieving Jewish leaders in the area. Paul knew this firsthand because he himself had participated in these acts of cruelty, hauling Christians off into prison and consenting to their execution – that is, until he met Jesus and became a follower of Christ.

So Paul probably saw in this gift from Greek believers to the Christians in Jerusalem an opportunity to do more than just fill a few stomachs. No, personally delivering this gift would be a way he could provide them some personal encouragement. It would allow him to bear witness to the way Christ had changed his own life. And by presenting a gift to Jewish Christians from Greek Gentiles, he could participate in breaking down some long-standing cultural barriers that had prevented the spread of the gospel for years.

Well, how about us? We not only have the blessing of living in a resort for those interested in cycling, hunting and history. We also happen to live among some of the poorest people in the country. How can we partner with other congregations to demonstrate the love of Christ? How can we help the poor in ways that will not enable bad choices but really make a positive difference in their lives? And how can we build bridges across the cultural differences that divide us?

The answer to this will largely depend on our individual resources and relationships. For example, I know a fellow who has no car, and gets around by bike to make his living doing odd jobs. Well, I know a little about bikes, so I got him a set of tires and tubes. But here's the catch – that project cost not just money, but also the time to get to know someone and find out what his needs really are. The best sort of help is given to those we get close to and allow to get close to us.

But there's yet another way we can participate in the work of Christ, not just with hospitality and finances, but with prayer. Now, remember that Paul had never been to Rome, so he would never have met most of the people who first heard the words of this letter. But did you notice that in verse 30

Paul does not hesitate to ask these perfect strangers to pray for him? How much more then should we pray for our friends and neighbors – and be willing to ask them to pray for us?

But notice also the nature of Paul's requests. He isn't asking for comfort or peace or healing, although there's nothing wrong in praying for any of those things. No, in verse 31 he first asks for deliverance from the unbelievers in Jerusalem. Then he asks that his service to the saints in Jerusalem, the gift and the encouragement he was planning to carry to them, would be acceptable to those who would receive his help. In other words, Paul's main prayer concern wasn't so much for himself, but for the success of his ministry.

And this should serve as a sobering reminder to all of us who are involved in ministry on a regular basis – our success isn't due nearly so much to our competence or our diligence as it is to prayer. At the end of his life, Billy Graham understood this. Seven years ago, when he was 92, he was asked if he could go back and do something differently in his ministry, what would he change. He quickly responded that he would travel less and take fewer speaking engagements, but pray and study more. And even when he was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, he saw that sickness as simply another opportunity for him to rely more on God. In short, he knew that God alone deserved the credit for everything he had been able to accomplish in his long life and ministry.

But if that's true, that means each and every one of you have the opportunity to participate in your pastor's ministry, or really the ministry of any of the pastors or evangelists that you know. For when you pray for the success of our ministry, you are an essential part of everything that God chooses to accomplish through us. So it's really not too much to say that the prayers we all offer up for God's Spirit to move in this place on Sunday morning are just as important as anything I do in my study throughout the week.

And what will be the result of all this hospitality, all this giving, and all these prayers? What is the result of a life focused not on the wants of the self, but on the needs of others? In verse 24, Paul said he was looking forward to enjoying the company of his fellow believers in Rome. And after their prayers for his successful travels and his gifts to the saints in Jerusalem, he expected to come to Rome in joy by the will of God. In short, a life devoted to welcoming others, a life devoted to giving to others, a life devoted to praying for others will be a life filled with joy.

Is that the kind of life you want – a life filled with joy and purpose, a life that will make a difference for the Kingdom of God? It's possible, when we open our homes, open our hands, and get down on our knees.