

“THEREFORE, ...”
James S. Currie

I'm not sure what the origin was, but I recall seeing, in my father's handwriting, five sentences. The first sentence had five words, the second sentence had four words, the third sentence had three words, the fourth sentence had two words, and, finally, there was only one word. The sentences, I think, went something like this: "I am proud of you, I believe in you. I love you. Thank you. You." It was, I suppose, a way of instilling in him and anyone who happened to come across that little card the importance taking the attention off of oneself and focusing on the other person, whether that person is spouse, child, friend, or acquaintance.

That memory led me to think about the importance and the power of words, and perhaps even how some words are more important than others. If you were to google "the most important word in the English language", you would find that one person has argued that that word is "no". Learning that word enables a person to differentiate one's self from others -- from parents, from siblings, from anyone else. Someone else maintains that the two most important words are your name. They identify you. They claim you, and you claim that as at least part of who you are. You might have your own choice as to what the most important word in the English language is.

What would you say the most important word in the Christian vocabulary is? Would it be "God"? Love? Joy? Forgiveness? Hope? Faith? Grace? Justice? Service? Redemption? Gratitude? It would be a fascinating to take each one of those, find the

context in which they are used in Scripture, and then try to define them for ourselves. We use those words and hear them used all the time, but it seems they beg for definitions. I remember hearing a long time ago a sermon on the word “nevertheless” and what an important word that was in the Christian vocabulary.

I would maintain that in today’s reading from Paul’s letter to the Romans the word “therefore” carries equally important weight. Paul has been writing about Abraham and the faith he had in trusting God’s promise that he would, even in his old age, become a father and through Isaac be the father of many nations. Throughout this letter Paul is struggling with the relationship between the importance of the law, on the one hand, and the gospel, on the other. He argues that, while the law is important in terms of pointing to human sinfulness, it is in God’s grace that the gospel of freedom is lodged. Abraham’s faith was, to use the language in Genesis, “reckoned to him as righteousness.”

And then we come to that word that opens chapter 5: “Therefore”. All this talk about Abraham’s faith and righteousness has a point. “**Therefore**, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand” (Romans 5:1-2a). What a powerful word that is! “**Therefore**, ...”. Therefore, not only are we justified by faith, and not only do we have peace with God, and not only have we obtained access to this grace in which we stand, but now we know there is meaning to life and to whatever suffering we may undergo -- because “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 that has

been give to us” (Romans 5:3b-5).

If you were to read further in Romans, you would find this word again and again. **Therefore**, Paul writes later in this chapter, “just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all” (Romans 5:18). And in chapter 7 where Paul wrestles with his own human frailties, talking about how he does not do what he wants, but he does the very thing he hates, and how the law awakens within him his own sinfulness, the word that opens chapter 8 is “Therefore”. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

It is a magnificent word, “therefore”. Another place it appears that it plays a powerful role is in the letter to the Hebrews. In chapter 11 we find that great roll call of the saints: “By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain’s” (Hebrews 11:4). And then the list continues, mentioning the faith of Abraham, the faith of Moses, the faith of the Israelites as they passed through the waters of the Red Sea, the faith of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets, and all those who died refusing to surrender their faith. And then chapter 12 opens with these words, “**Therefore**, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1-2).

Sometimes that word “therefore” is not spoken, but is understood. For example,

just before the Ten Commandments, both in Exodus 20 and in Deuteronomy 5, we find these words from God: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” The unspoken, yet understood, word that follows those words is “therefore”. Because I am who I am, because I am the Lord your God who brought you out of slavery in Egypt, **therefore** “you shall have no other gods before me.” Because I have been, and always will be, faithful to my covenant to you, **therefore** you shall not take my name in vain. Because of who I am, **therefore** you shall remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. And on and on and on.

Therefore. That word now comes to us. Because of the faithfulness of God that is demonstrated throughout Scripture, because of what God has done in and through Jesus Christ, because of God’s presence among us through the Holy Spirit, **therefore** know that you are a child of God and, collectively, you are the people of God, **therefore** know that in Jesus Christ you are forgiven, **therefore** know that God has claimed you as God’s own and has called you to be representatives of the kingdom in the world.

Because of who Jesus Christ is, **therefore** it makes a difference how we live our lives. Because of the work of the Spirit in giving birth to the church, **therefore** the church is called to be the vehicle through which the good news of God’s grace is shared and proclaimed, and **therefore** you are the body of Christ and called to exhibit the joy of the gospel.

Today is Trinity Sunday. We affirm the mystery of the tri-unity of the Godhead -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. Three in one, and one in three. It is a mystery, and yet, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism states, “these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory.” Because of the

faithfulness of this mysterious God, because of the grace, hope, love, forgiveness, and living presence of this God, **therefore**, we dare to give ourselves to God and declare with Paul: “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ...”.

There are lots of words one might choose to summarize or reflect who we are as followers of Jesus Christ, and they all are good ones and deserve their own study. For today, because of what comes before and because of what comes afterward, “therefore” is a good one.

Thanks be to God!