

SERMON: “NOT ASHAMED OF THE GOSPEL” PART 1

Feb. 14, 2010

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: Holy God, you sent your Son Jesus to proclaim and embody the gospel of your triumphant grace. By the power of your Spirit open now our hearts and minds, that we may receive in faith what you would make known to us through your word of grace and truth, that it may bring about in us the “obedience of faith: through Christ the Lord, son of David, Son of God. Amen.

O.T. LESSON: Psalm 31: Psalm 31:1-5, 14-16

N.T. LESSON: Romans 1:1-16

I have a confession to make. I have been ordained for almost 42 years. Yet this is the first time I have ever attempted to preach an extended series of sermons on Paul’s Letter to the Romans. I know I should have. I should have in every church I’ve ever served. But I just never seemed to get up the courage to do so.

Preaching on Romans is a daunting task, to say the least. Romans is the Mt. Everest of the New Testament. It is not for the faint of heart to climb. It towers over all the rest of Paul’s writing. Over the years of my ministry, I’ve preached often enough on various passages in Romans, especially the magnificent 8th chapter, to which I continually turn. But I’ve never done a series of sermons on Romans...until now. Doing so seemed an appropriate way to bring to a close my active ministry in the Presbyterian Church and in this wonderful congregation.

No other book in the Bible has played a more important role in shaping the Church’s understanding of the gospel of God’s grace in Jesus Christ than Paul’s Letter to the Church at Rome. It is interesting how often a deeper reading of the Letter to the Romans stands at the center of nearly all the great theological movements in the history of church. Augustine’s profound reading of Romans led him to become the great “Doctor of Grace.” Martin Luther’s struggle with the Letter led him to his understand of the “justification by grace through faith” that stands at the heart of Protestantism, and gave him the sense of peace with a holy and righteous God he had sought in vain elsewhere. John Calvin’s careful exposition of Romans marked a turning point in his career as a pastor and theologian, and the Letter served as the source of John Wesley’s conversion at Aldersgate when his “heart was strangely warmed,” and Karl Barth’s explosive commentary on Romans in 1922 “fell like a bombshell on the playground of the theologians.” No other book in scripture has played such a pivotal role in deepening the Church’s understanding of the gospel of God’s grace in Jesus Christ as Paul’s Letter to the Romans.

Originally I had planned to start this series next week, on the first Sunday in Lent--an appropriate time to do so. But the more I thought about it, the more I eager I was to plunge into Romans right away. And so with more than a little “fear and trembling,” yet also with a great deal of excitement, we set out into the truly “deep waters” of Romans over the next three months. Not every sermon will be on Romans—there will be a few much needed breaks along the way--but it is my intention to end my years as your pastor by focusing primarily on the Letter to the Romans under the title, which I have borrowed from Fleming Rutledge (with her permission), “Not Ashamed of the Gospel.” So, here goes...

Like many a symphony or Broadway musical, Paul begins by sounding the themes that he will return to throughout the letter. He introduces himself to his readers in these words:

“Paul, a servant/slave of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart by the gospel of God which he promised before hand through his

prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh, and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead...”

That’s a mouthful, and a mind-full. We could easily enough spend the next three months unpacking those words alone. Paul makes it clear from the very beginning that he did not volunteer to be an apostle. He was drafted! More specifically, he was literally knocked off his horse and turned completely around by an encounter with the living Christ that he did not in any way seek or desire.

At the time Paul was doing all he could to destroy the Christian movement and to terrorize the followers of a “dangerous blasphemer” named Jesus. All that came to an end for this “Pharisee of the Pharisees” on the road to Damascus. Totally apart from his own will, Paul was made a servant, a slave, of Jesus Christ by his transforming grace alone. In an instant, as Paul would later say, **“the old had passed away, behold, the new had come,”** and even he, the sworn enemy of the church, became a **“new creation in Christ.”** In a blinding encounter with the risen Christ, Saul, the Persecutor, “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord,” became Paul, the Apostle to the gentiles.

But it is important to remember that in his ministry to the gentiles, Paul did not cease to be a loyal son of Abraham, a child of the Covenant. Paul remained a faithful Jew to the end of his life. He continually longed and prayed that his own people would come to faith in Israel’s true Messiah, Jesus the Christ, **“descended from David according to the flesh, and designated Son of God in power...by his resurrection from the dead...”** He is Lord, Paul insists over and over. He is Lord, not just of Israel, and not just of the Church, but Lord of all. He is God’s promised redeemer of the whole lost human race. And even beyond that, he is the redeemer of the whole creation, which, as Paul says, has been groaning as if in childbirth as it awaits its final redemption from the powers of Sin and Death. Paul sketches his gospel of redemption on a canvas as vast as creation itself.

This is the gospel that Paul is so eager to preach in Rome. Rome was the very center of the intellectual and cultural and political life of the world of his day. What better place to proclaim the gospel of God’s all-encompassing grace—to the “civilized and the savage, to the educated and the ignorant”¹--than right at the heart of the Roman Empire! There is nothing small or parochial about Paul’s gospel. There is nothing tame or timid about it. Paul declares, **“I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to *everyone* who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith.”** To Paul has been entrusted, by the risen Christ himself, the extraordinary news of God’s plan to set all things right.

The gospel of which Paul is not ashamed is a message of stunning hope-- a message of hope, not just for some, but for all—for all who trust in what God has done in the death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ to overcome all the Powers of Sin and Death, all the forces that would turn us into our own worst enemies and set us against our sisters and brothers in Christ.

The gospel Paul is so eager to proclaim is a **powerful word of HOPE**—not of **optimism**. Paul never for a moment imagines that everything will turn out alright if we will

¹ Romans 1:14, *Good News Bible, Today’s English Version* translation

just try hard enough to make it so. We are too much captive to the death-grip of Sin to free ourselves from its power by ourselves, no matter how hard we may try. No self-help technique in all the world can save us from our own self-centeredness without getting us all the more tangled up in it. Only a power from outside our conflicted world and outside our self-centered lives can do so. As the Swiss theologian Karl Barth put it, “We can no more save ourselves by ourselves, than a drowning man can lift himself up out of the water by his own hair.” We are too much our own problem to be our own saviors.

What we need is not good advice. We have more than enough of that already, not that it does us any good. We do not need more rules to obey, or more information to assimilate. What we need is a Savior to draw us out of our self-centeredness, and to give us new strength to love and new hope for the triumph of God’s grace, in our own lives and throughout the world God “loves to death” in Jesus Christ.

The gospel of which Paul is not ashamed declares that by the power of God there is **hope for all**...not just for some, not just for the good and the godly, but hope for all, even those who are far off from the purposes of God, even those who, as Paul says, are “**strangers to the covenants of promise...and without God in the world.**” Yes, even hope for the ungodly! That is the most radical word of gospel in Paul’s Letter to the Romans! Soon he will declare, what he already has in mind in his opening words, that “**While we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly... While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**”

The good news of the gospel is that there is hope for all, because in Christ there is **love** for all. Elsewhere Paul will declare, “**God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.**” Or as John puts it in his gospel, in perhaps the most familiar words in all the New Testament, “**For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son that *whoever* believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.**” The gospel of which Paul is not ashamed to preach anywhere and to anyone is that God’s love in Jesus Christ gives hope to all, in this life and in the life to come...even the most unlikely.

Recently I was looking through some old sermons of my father. In one which he preached in June of 1982, he tells of an experience he had in World War II. It was Christmas, 1943. He was a chaplain with an anti-aircraft battalion stationed in Algiers, North Africa. I was three months old at the time. He was in his room working on a Christmas sermon for the men in his battalion, when a young boy, about 14, named Abdul, came into the room. Abdul had attached himself to the battalion. He would do various chores and odd jobs for the men in return for the meals they would let him eat with them. On this particular occasion he had come to shine the shoes of the officer who shared the room with my father.

My father says that after a while he looked at the boy and asked, “Abdul, do you know what Christmas is?” “Sure,” he replied. “Christmas is when everybody gets drunk.” My father had to admit that in Algiers that was almost literally true. “Is that all you know about Christmas?” he asked. “Well, I know that in some homes the people give gifts to each other.” “Isn’t there anything else you know about Christmas?” Abdul shrugged his shoulders and asked, “What else is there to know?”

In my father’s words: “I told him as simply as I could the Christmas story. I told him how God loved everybody on earth and how he sent his Son, Jesus, to tell us and to show us that love. I remember,” he said, “how Abdul looked at me in disbelief and said defiantly, ‘He

doesn't love me! I am an Arab and nobody loves the Arabs.' I tried to tell him that although it seemed that nobody loves the Arabs, God does and that on Christmas we celebrate the birthday of Jesus who came to show us that love." My father went on to say, "I don't know whether Abdul ever understood what I was trying to say to him. I was shipped out of Italy shortly after that and never got a chance to see Abdul again. But what I told him was true. The good news of the gospel is that there is love for us all, a tender, warm, wonderful love. No one is left out, and each of us may have all of that love we are willing to accept."

That is the gospel of which Paul was not ashamed. It is not merely a matter of words that are spoken. It is, as Paul says, the **"power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek"**...and to the Arab, and to you and me. Elsewhere Paul will write, "Christ is our peace, and he has broken down the dividing wall of hostility... For in him we all have access in one Spirit to the Father." (Eph. 2:14,18)

The gospel is the **"power of God for salvation..."** For in it, Paul says, **"the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who through faith is righteous shall live.'"** That's a hard sentence to take in. Righteousness is a hard word to get our minds around. Too often when we hear the word "righteous," we think **"self-righteous."** But that is not at all what Paul has in mind here. When Paul speaks of the **righteousness of God**, he is not just talking about a quality that God possesses. He is talking about **what God does**, as God *makes right* that which is wrong in our lives and in his world. The righteousness of God is **God's setting right** that which has gone wrong.

Yet still we keep turning the gospel into moralistic advice of what **we** should do, as if all that were needed were good intentions. But the human predicament is far deeper than that. The gospel is not about what **we** ought to do. It is about what **God** has done, and what even now God is doing by the power of the Holy Spirit to set things right in our lives and throughout God's creation.

The good news is that God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead will not let Sin and Death have the final word! It is God's faithfulness to that promise that calls forth our own response of faith. By the Holy Spirit he enables us to trust his promise of life in all its fullness for all who are in Christ Jesus. Quoting the words of the prophet Habakkuk, Paul declares, **"The one who through faith is set right with God will live."** **"Will live..."** not just exist from day to day, but live, **really live!** In Jesus Christ we are given a life that is richer and fuller and more exiting than anything we could have achieved on our own. That is the good news of the gospel! If we are not ashamed of it, we, too, will experience the **"power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith,"** even us. **"Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord!"**

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