

July 28, 2019

Faith Enough

Romans 1:1-17

Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore.

Rev. Dr. Tom Blair

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, asking that by God's will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you. For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.

I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles. I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish—hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

For 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; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith."

Last week I was at Lake Tahoe for a continuing education workshop- a very nice place to be. (It's good that there were generous and forward-thinking Presbyterians back in the 1920's who purchased the lake shore property when the area was wilderness, and not prime resort real estate.)

And as I do when I go out there, I take my bike along so that I can ride around the lake on our afternoon off. It's an amazing ride; 74 miles of incredible beauty with a few good climbs tossed in for adventure. In other workshops I've gone to out there, we have Wednesday afternoons off and then have an evening session, which makes for a hurried ride, but this time we had the rest of the day off and I had a chance to do some exploring.

So instead of just circumnavigating the lake (which is fun enough), I ventured along some other 'feeder' roads which run down to the road around the lake. One proved more interesting than I expected. It wasn't a scenic vista that caught my eye, or wildlife that distracted me, but a simple church sign.



It was on the road to Truckee that I saw it. It was just a simple white sign at the end of a long driveway leading to a small white chapel.

On the top in simple black letters were the words “Community Church” and on the bottom the Pastor’s name, along with “Worship at 11 AM.”

The words in the middle were the ones that stood out most, just three words in bigger lettering than the others, all caps. “NO SIN HERE.”

There were no cars parked back at the church for me to ask what that meant, and I don’t think I would have gone in to ask anyway, but these three words gave me cause to think about their meaning as I completed my cycling journey.

“NO SIN HERE.” Did that sign mean that all who went to that little chapel were forgiven, once and for all? Did they believe that they were immune from the ills of humanity, the trials and temptations of doing anything improper, ‘living above the law’, as it were, unaffected by societal unwellness of any sort? Who knows?

I left wondering if any chapel signs at Ocean City or Deep Creek Lake, summer resort places wherever they may be, might have the same three words with a similar meaning. Is church to be a place where we find ourselves exempt from sin, in a ‘safe space’ away and apart from the rest of the world - a sanctuary of refuge and security set aside from other things?

As I continued my bike ride, I thought about these things in the context of our Summer Sermon Series (this is what I do.) And I thought how fortunate it is that we are reading through some of the letters of the Apostle Paul, because he begins to provide us a framework for thinking about just these issues as he writes to new Christian believers in various churches in the world of the Roman Empire.

Today we begin Paul’s letter to the Romans, which will be our last letter to look at for the summer of 2019. We will take the remaining six Sundays to do this, and we have plenty of good material to cover.

This wasn’t Paul’s last letter, but it may well be his most important. He wrote this letter from Corinth, to people he hadn’t met yet, in the year 56 or so. We don’t know who took the Jesus movement to Rome; there is no historical evidence for the traditional story that the church there was established by Peter, but there clearly was an ‘ecclesia’ there, numbering in the hundreds (not the thousands).



It was a small, very devoted group of people that Paul addressed, which is important in and of itself. Paul clearly has multiple purposes in mind with this letter. He wants to introduce himself, (and his beliefs) to people he will be visiting before too long on his way to Spain (or so he hopes!) He wants to

share with them the news of his collection for the church in Jerusalem that he will be taking before he makes his trip to Rome.

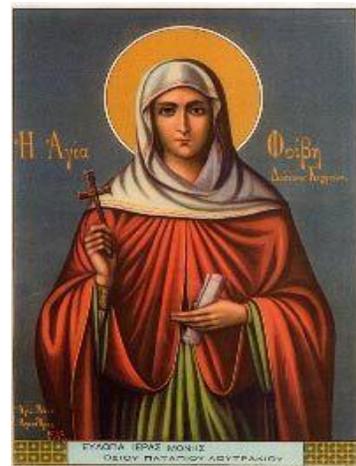
He also wants to use this occasion to set forth his thought in a systematic way, not to address the particular internal problems they are facing (because he's not aware of them yet), but rather to outline the overarching message shared by God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, an event which changed history forever.

Interesting in all of this is that in many ways the individual people to whom he addressed this letter are as important as the message he shared. We know to whom Paul wrote because he tells us so, in the final chapter, 16. The body of the letter doesn't mention names, but the final salutation does. Names can reveal a great deal. It would make a significant difference if Paul was addressing a Roman consul, an average citizen or a slave. Of the 27 people named in the concluding portion of his letter, nine are women, and it is Phoebe, a generous and very capable woman, that Paul entrusts with the delivery of this letter. This is not unimportant. Since the 'postal service' of the Roman Empire was reserved for official state business and Paul's correspondence did not fit in that category, a trusted associate was customarily charged with delivering letters. Phoebe was that person, who likely did not just make the delivery, but as was often practiced - also read the letter to those to whom it was sent. And as numerous scholars have speculated, as it was the custom for the deliverer to present the letter aloud to the recipients, it was also common for the deliverer to take part in the writing of the letter as well to better understand the content and nuances of the document. So it was that Phoebe was a significant leader in the Corinthian church as well as the Roman church.

So, Paul's letter is addressed to 'all of you'- and he does mean all, inclusive of anyone 'who has ears to hear.'

Paul was clearly aware of some of the inner dynamics going on in the 'house church' of Rome. This has to do with the 'Jew, Greek and barbarian' that he explicitly addresses. Some historical background will help here.

Under the reign of Emperor Claudius, in the mid '40's, Jews were deported from Rome and sent to Greece, among other places. Apparently, the Emperor had been hearing about Jewish murmurings of a new leader in Palestine, "Chrestus" who had died and then somehow came back to life. (Rumors do have a way of traveling, don't they?) Claudius saw this as a threat and wanted these people gone. The

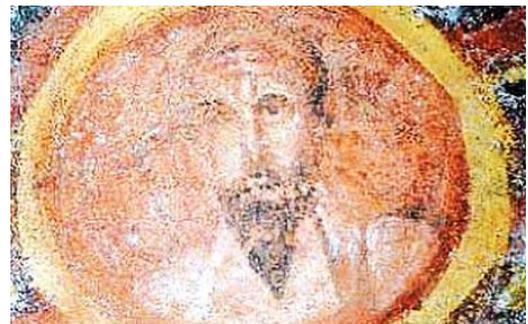


‘murmuring’ group seems to just have been a small Jewish contingent, but Claudius wanted them all gone. [**The Roman historian **Suetonius** is the source for this.*]

They were later able to return after Claudius died (by poisoning) under Nero, Claudius’ 17-year-old adopted son (who allegedly was the one who poisoned him.)

The displacement of Jewish members of the early Roman congregation affected how it was run and who was in charge. So, much of what Paul writes about really concerns how it is that returning Jews will be accepted by the Gentile leaders and included in the life of the congregation. The ‘conflict’ as it were, between Jewish and Gentile believers, wasn’t just about issues of doctrine; it also concerned the issues of inclusion and belonging, who was invited to the table, how decision-making was shared and how it is that resources were distributed.

In contrast to the Emperor’s ways, the apostle Paul had a distinctively generous way about him, so much so that it was said that while it was that you would name your son after Paul, you would name your dog after the Emperor (how many dogs do you know that are named Nero?)



Paul was all about sharing the good news in Christ. In the official imperial Roman theology, the titles “Son of God” and “Lord” specifically applied to the emperor, and the word “gospel” referred to his accomplishments. By speaking of Jesus using these terms, Paul tacitly invited the Roman community to declare its loyalty to the true ruler of the universe.

Members of this fellowship, ‘the Way,’ were to become allies with Paul in acknowledging that unbeknownst to the powers that be, a universal transformation had taken place when God vindicated and raised the crucified Messiah.

Finally, reading Romans invites us to more ‘original thinking’ than we might expect, of Christian ways before doctrine and tradition were codified. Perhaps the most important area where we find this is in Paul’s understanding of ‘faith.’ Remember, we’re going back to year 56 now, so you have to forget everything you ever knew from Calvin, Luther, Aquinas, Augustine and even the Apostle’s Creed!

When Paul says that he is ‘not ashamed’ of the gospel, he is surely aware of why people think he should be. After all, Jesus was crucified and died as dishonorable a death as any person could imagine. Death by crucifixion was as bad as it could get for both Greeks and Jews. It was intentionally cruel and unusual punishment explicitly inflicted for the purpose of dishonoring the victim.

So it is that Paul goes about speaking about 'faith' in a way that we might not expect. He uses this carefully written phrase to parse it out..."the righteousness of God is revealed for faith through faith.'(1:17) Specifically here, Paul is **not** talking about 'my personal faith in Jesus', but the faith that Jesus himself possessed and placed in God throughout his life.

It is Jesus' faithfulness to do what he needs to do, to follow God's lead, step by step, praying and discerning all the way, and then to faithfully go to the cross; to be faithful to his understanding of his fate far beyond the understanding and expectations of any of his disciples.

It is with this faithfulness of Jesus that we are called to align ourselves... trusting him to be Lord and Savior of all, not just ourselves individually alone.

It is not so much my 'faith' in Jesus, as belief, but rather as loyalty in Jesus that Paul is talking about. 'Believing in Jesus' wouldn't have made much sense to Paul... it's like saying that you believe the Earth is round, the sky is blue and that water is wet. Belief is not the question. What is important is where your loyalty lies. In the Roman Empire, to ask people to be more loyal to Jesus than to Caesar was expressing criminal intent. To place faith in anyone other than the Emperor was a capital offense. Nonetheless, this group that Paul addressed, maybe a tenth of whose names we know, literally put their lives in his hands, trusting themselves over to God in Jesus Christ.

Being loyal to Jesus was the most important thing in the world.

Now, I have my doubts if there was a sign that read "NO SIN HERE" at their house church in Rome. Sin comes with the territory; falling short is what happens when you are striving for a goal as great as following Jesus all the way. Sin is not the point.

One of the first things we discover in Paul's letter to the Romans is that the gospel he shares is part of a much larger story. It is an act of God that had been previously promised in scripture. Before the gospel is about our faith toward God, it is about God keeping faith with us. The content, the subject, the active agent of this message is Jesus Christ. And Jesus changes everything, reaffirming God's promise in creation that we are made for good, beloved by our Creator always.

This is just the beginning of the message of Paul in Romans, but the theme remains constant. God arrives among us in Christ Jesus in more ways than we know- and we are bidden to respond with our lives. The good news is that Christ reigns. Thanks be to God. Amen.



