

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 4, Year A

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Yesterday was the feast of the Visitation of the Virgin Mary to her relative Elizabeth. The two women spent months together talking about the miracle God was working in their lives. But you have to feel a little sorry for Mary and her life as a mother. It seems from experience that one of the most satisfying complaints a mother gets to use is when a child leaves the door open, every mother on earth but Mary gets to say, "What, were you born in a barn?"

Today we begin a sequence of readings from Paul's letter to the Romans, one of the most influential writings in all of Christianity. The gospels give an account of the actions and teachings of Jesus. Paul plays a key role in shaping the "wow" response of the disciples to the resurrection into an ethical system that could include the gentiles as well as the Jews. Most of us gather here at St. James this morning because of St. Paul's argument that Jesus Christ died for all humanity, not just for Jews.

Oh, Romans is such a luscious letter. It soars with a vision of Christ as the gateway into a relationship with God. It reminds of God's faithfulness to us that has no dependency at all on our faithfulness in return. It sets out an imagination of humanity at peace made possible because of God's action to make peace with the Creation and humanity. Because God acts first, humans are liberated and empowered to act in God's ways and in God's name.

Every third year we read the Gospel according to Matthew, and we get to read Paul's letter to the Romans. Matthew I don't always get, but I revel in Romans. Permit me some revelry, will you?

When Paul wrote to the Romans he had never been to Rome. His other letters were to churches he had helped found, but he wrote to the Romans to introduce himself. He probably also wanted to explain himself a bit, since it seems like rumors about him were swirling around. He had been a persecutor of the Christians. He had been an ardent advocate for the Gentiles to the point that some speculated he was anti-Jewish. And he was a fund raiser — he was asking the Roman church to help support his next missionary journey into Spain.

Part of what makes the letter to the Romans so powerful is that it is an introduction, and therefore a more detailed explanation of the theology which Paul had nurtured. In the Corinthian letters or the letters to the Galatians and Philippians, Paul is writing follow up letters to the work he had already done there. To the Romans, though, Paul was writing essentially his first sermon, the outline of the gospel he had been preaching to others and which he hope they would receive sympathetically.

So what is this gospel? What makes Paul's words here so delicious?

Our glimpse into the letter comes from the opening words we hear this morning. Paul was a student of classical Roman and Greek rhetorical speaking, and so he telegraphs his argument at the beginning of each letter. He sets up what he's going to use the rest of the letter to address. So, let's look: What is the Letter to the Romans going to be about?

"For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom

God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.”¹

All have sinned, Paul says. Paul will spend many words describing how the various populations of the day have failed to live up to righteousness. He will remind the Jews that God has given them a law to follow, and they haven't followed it. He will remind the Gentiles that God has given them a blueprint in nature which every society deduces into its own just laws, and they haven't followed those laws. He will remind the disciples of Jesus that he gave them an example in righteousness, and yet they have not even kept a lifestyle they saw lived out in another person.

Part of what makes Paul distasteful at first blush is that he does lean pretty hard on the sinful stick. He can seem to be preoccupied with sin until we see that what he's really pre-occupied with is how the church can become a community of peace. What's the number one, two and three impediments to peace in a church? First — judgmentalism. That person is a sinner (and so not like me). Second — classism. Call it classism, racism, chauvinism, but when one part of the community looks down on the other as being disagreeable or of less value, it's hard to have true peace between the brothers and sisters. And third — vindictiveness. Injuries, misunderstandings, insults and affronts are not forgiven, but held onto. They're nursed into recurring feelings of hurt and anger, even as people pray with their lips, “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”

Rome was an imperial city. If you want to see the tendencies of people in an imperial city just keep watching the news during this election year. Washington DC hardly looks like a city of peace, does it? Translate that impression to the Rome Paul was speaking to. Part of what makes Paul's preaching about Jesus effective is that his students would have to come to see that no one among them is better, more deserving, or less sinful in the eyes of God than their neighbor. “There is no distinction — add among you — since all [of you] have sinned and fallen short.”

Once that's clear, Paul's theology soars. Once we've gotten it that we are sinners, that there is no way we're going to make a good impression on God by our own upstanding perfection, that there's no way into the heart of God but the way of humility, then Paul invites us into the delightful recognition that everything having to do with righteousness is a gift. Everything having to do with righteousness is a gift.

Where in your life does that burden of falling short weigh you down? What, in you, flinches at the mention that Jesus hears everyone of your thoughts, sees every one of your actions, perceives the depths of every motivation in your life? Where in your life is there a relationship broken by injury and distrust that you have been powerless to heal? Where in your life does fear and doubt and jealousy leave you imprisoned or captive?

Putting things back to right, dear friends, no longer depends on you. Yes, we do our best to do our best. Yes, we strive to be morally upright and compassionate and generous. But in the end, God's own right ways are given to us as a pure gift. Without earning, deserving or being able to pay anything back, God gives us righteousness, God gives us forgiveness, God gives us total recovery, as a completely free gift.

¹ The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version, Ro 3:22-25 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989).

God's love for you, God's faith in *you*, is so great that you can't possibly take it for granted if you believe it. That's where the faith part comes in. If you believe God has done this remarkably generous thing for you, it will change your life. If you don't believe, it won't make too much difference to you. If you'd rather believe in your own power and goodness to become perfect on your own, keep at it. God can wait until you're worn down and frustrated and ready to give up. Then God simply says, "Here, I've been trying to give you this gift all your life. Please just take it." If you'd rather believe that God still has to prove something to you, like some kind of used-car salesman, fine. God can wait you out until at that angry and resentful end you're finally willing to let God hand you your redeemed and glorified life. "Here, you'll be happier with my gift."

That's Paul. He was so touched by the grace of God that it made everything else in his life of less importance. But the question he's going to be asking us over these next few weeks are these:

- Is your life happier, lovelier, more joyful and more free by thinking that you are better than your neighbor?
- Would you rather live a life of spirit governed freedom or a life of failing to measure up to an external standard?
- Would you be willing to stop trying to make everything work by your own effort and accept that God is trying to give you the very best things as a totally free, no strings attached gift?

"Out of sheer generosity God put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we're in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ." ²

² Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message : The Bible in Contemporary Language*, Ro 3:24 (Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress, 2002).