

Worship

August 27, 2023

10:00 a.m.

Knox, Moore



Call to worship: Psalm 124:8; 95:6, 7

*Hymn: #435 “All things bright and beautiful”

Prayer of praise and supplication:

Eternal God,
you are the same yesterday, today and tomorrow,
and yet you come to us afresh each new day.
You breathe new life into what has grown tired and discouraged.
You offer healing for what is worn or broken.
You restore hope when things seem impossible.
You are the source of life and love for all your creatures,
and you renew us to put our love for you
into action for the wellbeing of your creation.
And so, we worship you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
offering our prayers and praise to you,
eternal and ever-present God, now and always. Amen.

Prayer of confession (*unison*):

Merciful God,
we confess that we have
sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed.
Thinking ourselves wise,
we have not honoured you as God,
we have resisted believing in you,
we have refused to obey your Word,
we have failed to trust your gospel.
Forgive what we have been,
amend what we are,
and direct what we shall be,
so that we may delight in your will
and walk in your ways.
to the glory of your holy name.
Amen.

We hear the gospel of God's grace: Romans 8:1
Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good
His love endures forever.

*Hymn: #508 "Your word, O God, awoke the uncreated"

Sermon:

Humble evangelism

In some sense the letter to the Romans functioned as the apostle Paul's letter of introduction to the church in Rome.

As we've seen over the past few weeks, in the first parts of the letter Paul addressed the big topics in the story of God's relationship with us: creation, sin, atonement, justification, grace, faith, sanctification, resurrection, living in the paradox of the new life, and the hope for all of creation that is given to us through Jesus Christ. In other words, Salvation.

In the last few chapters, Paul turned his attention to how these topics relate to our individual lives; how the gospel becomes the power of God for salvation in personal living. We'll begin these final chapters next week.

However, in addition to being his general introduction and treatise on salvation, there was a specific concern which Paul wanted to address.

The church in Rome began within the Jewish community. Under Emperor Claudius, the Jews were evicted around 49 CE. During their absence, Christianity began to find some traction amongst the Gentiles. When Nero succeeded Claudius, he reversed the edict and allowed the Jewish community to return. By the time Paul wrote, the church was a mixed community of Christians who came from either Jewish or Gentile backgrounds. This created friction.

So, Paul addressed this issue in light of the gospel which is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.

That is what we'll consider today. We can't deal with all of the intricacies, but we'll read parts of this section spanning chapters 9 – 11.

READ ROMANS 9:1-5; 10:1-4, 9-17; 11:1, 13a, 17-36.
This is the word of the Lord
Thanks be to God.

The Jewish Christians considered themselves to be closer to God than their Gentile neighbours. After all, it was with their ancestors – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – that God first made the covenants. It was to one of them – Moses – that God gave the Law. It is from their community that the promised Messiah would come who would usher in God's unchallenged rule.

They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah...

However, by the time Paul wrote to the Roman church the number of Gentile Christians exceeded the number of Jewish Christians. And they considered *themselves* to be more favoured of God. Apart from being a numerical majority, this sense of superiority came, ironically enough, because they lacked all the things that made the Jewish community special. They lacked the history, the names, and the traditions. All they had to stand on was faith. Believing that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God, crucified for the forgiveness of sin, resurrected from the dead, ascended to be Lord of all. Given the Jewish community had been exiled and was then the minority among the Christians, the Gentiles began to assume that God must have rejected Israel!

The Gentiles have taken the place of the Jews in God's favour and His plan of salvation!

Tragically, this mistaken thinking has infected the church from Paul's day to our own with sometimes horrific consequences.

Paraphrasing the prophet Isaiah, Paul reminded his readers that what we can see with our temporal, mortal eyes does not always describe the full glory of God's ways:

For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor? (Romans 11:34)

The answer, of course, is no one but God Himself.

Early in the letter, Paul observed that this assumption of knowledge and wisdom that leads to pride is an indicator of sin's infection:

Claiming to be wise, they became fools...(Romans 1:22)

Both the Jewish and the Gentile contingent in Rome understood themselves as more in God's favour than the other party. However, Paul wrote this is not true. Jesus is the Messiah.

For the Jews *and* for the Gentiles.

In addressing the Gentiles specifically, Paul urged them to embrace humility. Using the metaphor of an olive tree, the descendants of Abraham are God's precious, cultivated olive tree. We who are Gentiles are the outsiders, the wild olive trees. In God's adoptive grace through Jesus Christ, the Father has opened for us a way to be adopted into his holy family – grafted into the cultivated stem. But we don't support the root. The root supports us.

Therefore, Paul argued, although the Jewish community can learn stripped-down faith from the Gentile community, the Gentiles learn to accept the spiritual heritage into which we've been adopted from our Jewish sisters and brothers.

This, if nothing else, is an argument for the importance and relevance of the Old Testament for the Christian church!

Just as the Jewish community tried to make the Gentiles become circumcised before they could be considered members of the Holy Family in Christ (which was dealt with in the Acts of the Apostles), the Gentiles argued that circumcision, dietary laws, and even sabbath keeping were no longer relevant. Paul argued that's not the case. What matters is one's faith. The rest are good or bad only in the degree to which they help the faithful live their Christian faith

In a bit of a parallel, in 1994 the Presbyterian Church in Canada adopted a confession recognizing the church's role in operating residential schools and the harm those schools caused to Indigenous children, their families and communities. The fourth point of the confession reads:

*We confess that the Presbyterian Church in Canada presumed to know better than Aboriginal [sic] peoples what was needed for life. The Church said of our Aboriginal [sic] brothers and sisters, 'If they could be like us, if they could think like us, talk like us, worship like us, sing like us, and work like us, they would know God and therefore would have life abundant.' In our cultural arrogance we have been blind to the ways in which our own understanding of the Gospel has been culturally conditioned, and because of our insensitivity to Aboriginal [sic] cultures, **we have demanded***

more of the Aboriginal people than the Gospel requires, and have thus misrepresented Jesus Christ who loves all people with compassionate, suffering love that all may come to God through him.

Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, the sacrifice of atonement and the risen and ascended Lord through whom alone people can come to the God who created them. Although many parts of our living change when we accept that truth, it is arrogant to assume that all parts of other people's living change when they accept that truth!

The Gentiles wrongly assumed that in order to be a faithful follower of Jesus the Jews had to abandon their dietary laws. The Presbyterian Church in Canada wrongly assumed that in order to be faithful followers of Jesus the Indigenous populations had to abandon their language, music, art, food, and dress.

We must be careful that we do not demand more of others than what the gospel requires. We may just be surprised at how God's plan is working all things together for His good!

In his kindness and patience, God is delaying the return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the judgment, and the final wedding of heaven and earth until all Gentiles who will believe have turned to Him in Christ and then all Jews who will accept that Jesus is the Messiah have returned to Him in Christ as well.

In other words, God is delaying the end of this age and the beginning of the eternal, resurrection age when God's home is forever and unchallenged among us mortals until everyone who will accept that Jesus is the Messiah; everyone who will believe in their hearts that God raised him from the dead and who will confess with their lips that he is Lord has done so, so that everyone who will believe can share eternal fellowship with the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Spirit.

So do not become proud, but stand in awe ... O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For from him and through him and to him are all things. (Romans 11:20, 33, 36)

What then? Does this mean that we shouldn't evangelize? That we shouldn't tell others about Jesus? That we shouldn't care whether others accept the gospel or not?

This is the tack we often take. It's definitely the safe tack. We're not likely to run aground or meet contrary winds on this tack. And, when the ship was in favourable seas, this may well have been passable; when most people had at least some knowledge of God and the story of Jesus and when the church was understood to be beneficial for society. But, as was true in Paul's day, we're no longer in that situation. It's not enough to just live good lives and assume people will learn about Jesus, and assume God will be glorified by our kindness alone.

After all,

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. ... How are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? How are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?

Although not everyone is called to proclaim him week in and week out from a pulpit, "as God sent Christ to us, so Christ sends us into the world. We are here to proclaim Christ in word *as well as in deed.*" (*Living Faith*, 9.1.1)

If you're like me, you've gotten so used to not proclaiming Christ in your daily affairs and not giving vocal honour to God for your regular blessings, that it feels very uncomfortable. And you're not even sure how to do so. Especially when we begin to realize that we can't see the whole picture of how God is working out salvation in the lives of others.

Christ calls us to humility; he also calls us to be evangelists. He calls us to *humble evangelism*.

I wonder if it's not unlike learning a new craft. The first time you shape a bowl out of a lump of clay won't be perfect. You'll have made many mistakes along the way. And although the finished product might make a suitable gift, maybe even sell, it's far from perfection. And yet, so enthused are you of your new hobby, that you're eager to talk to anyone who'll listen about what you know, what you're learning, mistakes you've made, and what you have yet to learn. If they want to join you in learning the craft, you're more than happy to create a co-op; but your main work is sharing what you know.

Evangelism is simply sharing the good news of Jesus Christ – of the reality and goodness of God, of the forgiveness of sin, of the hope of the resurrection, and of the here-and-now comfort of the Holy Spirit.

Humble evangelism involves sharing what we know, what we're learning, the mistakes we've made, and what we've yet to learn.

To God be the glory forever and ever.

Amen.

*The Apostles' Creed

*Offering

*Prayer of dedication

Prayers of thanksgiving, intercession, the Lord's Prayer:

Life-giving God,
you equip your people with gifts to work for your kingdom,
bringing justice and peace to every land and community.
We thank you that you will work through us,
even when we don't feel equal to the task.
Help us recognize your Spirit at work among us.

Through your Spirit, O God, you give the gift of prophecy.
With this gift, empower the church to speak words of justice and truth
into situations where people are exploited or treated unfairly.
Guide us to bring change for good in the world, and bring hope to the
hopeless.

In the example of your Son Jesus, O God, you give the gift of serving.
With this gift, encourage your servant Church to work with those made
vulnerable
by structures of power and privilege.
Show us how to share the abundance in our country with lives and
communities
that often lack even basic resources.

With the inspiration of your Spirit, O God, you give the gift of teaching.
As a church that values teaching, engage us to support access to education for
every child.
We pray for teachers and students as they prepare for another year of working
together.
Help us encourage each person who shares in a learning community this year.

Through the love and compassion of Christ, O God, you give the gift of
encouragement.
As a congregation, show us where and how to reach out to hearten any who
are struggling.
Give us the words and actions to comfort those who mourn,
to be companions to those coping with mental or physical illness,

and support any who feel isolated or left behind.

Through the examples of prophets and apostles, O God, you give the gift of leadership.

Call up leaders within the Church to build up our ministries and model respectful ways of living and loving together.

Call up leaders in our nation and neighbourhood who model respect and attend to the common good and the needs of the earth itself.

Gift-giving God, we are grateful for all the people in whom we meet your gifts at work.

Inspire us to add our energy and experience to the care of creation as the loyal followers of Jesus who embodied all your gifts and taught us to pray together:

The Lord's Prayer

*Hymn: #471 "We are one in the Spirit"

Benediction

Congregational Amen.