

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12
Romans 1:1-15

Eighth Sunday After Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
July 18, 2021

Paul Backtracks

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

Our Old Testament Lesson today is taken from the book of Ecclesiastes. Traditionally, authorship has been ascribed to Solomon, who lived in the 10th century B.C. Like other Wisdom Literature, such as Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes is intent on imparting wisdom and knowledge to the people of God, teaching them to revere the Lord. Some kind of gathered assembly is addressed. The audience is made up of royal counselors, as well as common farmers. Listen to these words from Ecclesiastes 4:9-12...

Introduction to the Epistle Lesson

Our Epistle Lesson today is taken from the opening words of the apostle Paul's letter to the Christian believers in Rome, a letter that is perhaps the most significant letter in the history of Christianity. It was probably written from Corinth, on his Third Missionary Journey, in A. D. 57. The theme of Romans is the revelation of God's judging and saving righteousness in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Like his other letters, this one begins with Paul's name. But the very next thing, he identifies himself as a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle. Listen to these words from Romans 1:1-15...

Sermon

In writing to the Romans, Paul was writing to a church (or churches) which he had never visited, but was located in the greatest city in the greatest empire in the world. And at the onset he offers them a compliment. He says he thanks God for them because their faith is proclaimed

throughout the world. Wherever he went on his far-reaching missionary journeys, he heard about the faith of the Christians in Rome. Not that their faith was unusually strong, but the fact that the Christian faith was established in the capital of Rome.

First, we see here that Paul was more prone to *commend* than to *criticize*. There are some who focus on faults, and others who focus on virtues. It was said of Thomas Hardy, that if he went into a country field, he would see, not the beautiful wild flowers, but the dung-heap in the corner of the field. I believe that we can gain far more by affirming people than by criticizing them, whether it be spouse, child, church member, business associate, student, or athlete.

Aidan of Lindisfarne was an Irish monk and missionary credited with converting the Anglo Saxons in Northumbria to Christianity. Back in A.D. 630 the Saxon king had sent a request to Iona that a missionary be sent to his kingdom to preach the gospel. And a missionary was sent. But he came back speaking of the “stubborn and barbarous disposition of the English.” “The English have no manners. They behave like savages.” He reported that the assignment was hopeless, to which Aidan declared, “I think, brother, that you may have been too severe for such ignorant hearers, and that you should have led them on gently, giving them first the milk of religion before the meat.” So Aidan himself went to North Umbria, and gentleness won for Christ that very people whom the critical severity of his brother monk had repelled.

Beyond that, I think it wise to note the good and noble in average people. One of the great personalities of World War I was Donald Hankey, who wrote *A Student in Arms*. He had seen men at their best and at their worst. Once he wrote home, “If I survive this war, I want to write a book called *The Living Goodness*, analyzing all the goodness and nobility inherent in plain people, and trying to show how it ought to find fulfilment and expression in the Church.”

Hankey did write the essay entitled *The Beloved Captain* in which he describes the captain who picked out the awkward ones and taught them himself. “He looked at them and they looked at him, and the men pulled themselves together and determined to do their best.”

Jesus chose average men as his disciples for the greatest assignment on earth. At least seven of them were fishermen. One of those fishermen was Peter, who played a leadership role and was with Jesus at the Transfiguration. But as we know, Peter failed Jesus, when in the shadow of the cross, he denied he even knew him. But following his death and resurrection, Jesus restored Peter, and the fallen fisherman became the rock upon which Jesus would build his church.

Secondly, Paul *prayed* for these people in the church in Rome. Later we will look at spiritual gifts. Some people may feel they have very little in the way of spiritual gifts. Perhaps they’re confined to home and can’t come to church. They may have very little to give financially. They can’t teach a class, serve as an officer. But they *can* pray for the church and its members. And perhaps they can make a phone call or send a note.

Here at Midway, are we trying to grow, to be a city set on a hill, without praying? Are we lifting up those on our prayer list? Our members and our visitors? At the moment Paul was not where he could actually be with these people. He was not even in Rome. But he exercised the gift of prayer. If we are separated from people, and even if there is no other gift we can give them, we can lift them up in our prayers.

Thirdly, Paul says he prays that he will be able to find a way to come to them. “I am longing to see you.” Paul knows that there is something special, something unique about person-to-person contact. Being separated from one another was one of the hardest parts of the early Covid response.

We are thus invited to consider the significance of any occasion upon which we come together. Sunday School, Worship, committee meetings, work days, choir practice, day trips—they provide the opportunity for fellowship, for listening to each other, for learning from each other, for encouraging each other. I think personal contact is important in the life of the church, including with those who are not able to come to church.

Our fourth and final point is what Paul says regarding his desire to come to the Romans. He has commended them. He has prayed for them. He has plans to be with them, to make a personal visit. Now in verse 11 he says:

For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you...

But then in verse 12 he backtracks with these words:

or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.

Paul didn't want to go to Rome as a tourist to see the famous Appian Way, or the Forum, or the Coliseum, or the chariot races. He wanted to go to Rome to see the Christians there, and to impart to them some spiritual gift, to lovingly minister to them in the name of Christ.

Many think of Paul as the greatest thinker of the Early Church. Many think of Paul as the greatest missionary of the Early Church. Many think of Paul as the greatest servant of Christ in the Early Church. But Paul was wise enough to know that he could learn something from these people of God in Rome. That they could strengthen his faith.

To be sure Paul believes that he has some spiritual gift that will encourage and strengthen the believers in Rome. It could be preaching of the gospel, teaching, exhorting, comforting, praying, counseling. Whatever specific gift Paul had in mind, its purpose was to strengthen the Roman believers in the faith.

In his commentary on Romans, John McArthur tells the story of a young woman who

...had been teaching a Sunday school class of young girls for some while and thought that she loved them dearly. But one Saturday afternoon at her college football game the Lord convicted her about the superficiality of her love for them. Because of her busy Saturdays, she seldom spent more than a few minutes preparing her lesson for the next day. From that day on she determined to make whatever sacrifice and give whatever time necessary to give those girls something of eternal significance. That was the kind of committed, self-sacrificing love Paul had for the church in Rome.

But Paul also believes that these members of the church have gifts which can bless and strengthen him. The New English bible translates it this way:

I want to be among you to receive encouragement myself through the influence of your faith on me as well as mine on you.

Lest the Roman Christians think Paul has in mind a one-way blessing, he assures them that a visit will be to his benefit, as well as theirs. Although highly-gifted, the great apostle, never thought he was above being spiritually nurtured by other believers. To be like Jesus, we seek a humble spirit, a thankful spirit, which doesn't "lord it over" others, but learns from and is blessed by the faith of others. That's the kind of Elders we want our Officer Nominating Committee to search for.

In our Old Testament Lesson today, we find that in place of lonely work, working with another person is commended, even if only for pragmatic reasons. They can help each other, keep each other safe. Not rugged individualism, but working together in relationship with others. In community, work and reward are integrally connected. Work that is without community is like work that is without Sabbath rest—futile and depleting. But those who come together have a good return for their hard work. They are blessed with the ties that bind.

Listen again to Ecclesiastes:

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help.

So Paul knows that we all have gifts by which we can encourage and strengthen the faith of each other. John Calvin said, “There is no one so void of gifts in the Church of Christ who is not able to contribute something to our benefit.”

And the gifts—they are given to build up, to confirm, to comfort, to heal. They are not given as ornaments to wear for display on special occasions. They are given as plants to bear fruit.

In order for us to be a significant church, we need to encourage each other. Pastor encouraging people, people encouraging pastor, people encouraging each other. So that we are in fact, a Priesthood of Believers. A people who bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. A people who build bridges and not barriers. A people who put the gifts they have to good use.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.