

May 26, 2019
The Trouble with Conversion
Annette Hill Briggs
Romans 1:1-17

1 Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, ² which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, ³ the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh ⁴ and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, ⁵ through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, ⁶ including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

⁷ To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

⁸ First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. ⁹ 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, ¹⁰ asking that by God's will I may somehow, at last, succeed in coming to you. ¹¹ For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—¹² or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish ¹⁵—hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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."

It is wonderful to be back. Many thanks to Deborah for filling the pulpit while I was away, listening to lots of preachers preach about *preaching as moral imagination*. Which "sap to syrup" boils down to telling the truth in a culture that no longer even pretends to value the truth. The gospel truth is what we tell: Jesus lived and died and rose, once and

for all people – God's act in Jesus Christ, making plain what had always been true. Not politically true, but cosmically, divinely true: all persons are equal before God.

We know it and believe we believe it. However, we eat and sleep and breathe and read and think and work and walk around in a culture hell-bent to convince us otherwise. And by “us” I mean white Christian people. We aren't much in touch with our own prejudices, keeping them fairly neatly tucked away, mostly from ourselves. Every time Paul writes in Romans *first to the Jews and then the Gentiles*, remember we're the Jews – the ones convinced that we are more right than whoever we think isn't right; and very often, it is our faith or our theology telling us we are right.

Just to open ourselves up a little more to the book of Romans, I want us to do a little meditation exercise. Ask yourselves – just to yourselves in your own hearts and minds – “who are the people I find most difficult to approach joyfully? gladly? From whom would I least like to hear opinions? With whom would I find it really challenging to plan a worship service? lead a Bible study? *Who would I very much not like to go to church with? to sit next to in this worship service? to share table with on Wednesday night?*” It might be someone specific – a personality that annoys you. It might be a people group – their moral choices are hard for you. Maybe it's their politics – but you do best when you can be apart from them. These are prejudices, friends – regard for other human beings on the basis of something other than their humanity.

One of the privileges of the dominant group in any culture is that our prejudices don't sound like prejudices. They sound like shared values. We may not believe some Nazis are good people or that black people aren't mistreated. But we do abide some degree of white supremacy, don't we? We abide the safety and the freedom and the opportunity white supremacy affords us. We abide the privilege that white supremacy affords our children. Privilege that will muzzle the gospel of Jesus Christ sometimes. Or distort it to our advantage, even.

Interestingly, however, no one I heard at the Festival of Homiletics preached from Paul. Interesting in that it was moral imagination that drove his preaching. A devout Jew who met the Risen Christ and realized the “truth” about God he'd always known – *wasn't*. And you know what that is called? That's called conversion. Trading of what we in good faith believed to be true for what we learn is true, when new information and experience shows our hearts and minds so. And then changing our lives accordingly.

But – there is much trouble with conversion. It doesn't stay put. Jesus is alive. And we are ignorant. And fearful. And we learn slowly.

This is as good a place as any to stop and pray: *That we might find our heart and lives' true home in you, O God, so that the truth spills from us without hesitation; that we might*

pray to know the truth and live like people who have prayed that prayer, with nothing to fear, nothing to protect, we pray now. Amen.

So, Romans. The book is called Romans because it a letter written to the church at Rome. The next book is 1 and 2 Corinthians, called that because it is a letter written to the church at Corinth. Why is Romans before Corinthians? It's longer. Why is Corinthians before Galatians? It's longer. Paul wrote Romans from the city of Corinth, around 58 C.E. He had never visited the church in Rome. Church history has no record of how a church came to be there.

The first seventeen verses of chapter one are the abstract of Paul's letter. He introduces himself as he wants to be known. He outlines his topics. He makes every effort to connect with them personally. Verse 1: *Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.* Most English translations say “servant.” “Slave” is better. “Bondsman” or “bondservant” is best. Except “bondsman” means something different in English. A *bondsman* was an indentured slave who had paid their debt and was free, but instead of setting off on their own, asked to remain with the master – to trade obedience and labor for the master's care and protection, thus binding themselves to the master for a lifetime. Today we call this student debt.

As a sign of the bond, they went to a priest, who stood the bondsman against a doorway and drilled an awl through the earlobe of the freed person, marking them as a bondsman. *I am a bondsman of Jesus Christ*, Paul says. *I was free; now I belong entirely to him, called to be an apostle* – his apostleship is a sore spot between Paul and the other apostles, to which we will get in later weeks – *set apart for the gospel of God.* The rest of verses 2, 3 and 4 are a brief summary of the gospel. But this word for the “set apart” phrase is what interests me most here. The Greek word is *aphorizo*, most literally “off horizon.”

Who is *off horizon*? Someone on a different planet – right? – who sees the world from an entirely different perspective. People who look and see what everyone cannot. Having met the Risen Christ, Paul sees what he could not see before. Which links directly to verse three. Listen to me – this is so important in Romans. The things Paul could suddenly see that he couldn't see were two things, the two themes of this letter noted here in verses 3-5: the equality of Jews and Gentiles before God in Christ Jesus. Technically “every Jew and Gentile” counts as every human being, right?

He could see *the equality of all people before God in Christ Jesus.* But he could also see – this is verse 3 – listen – listen – listen, that *this equality before God was NOT NEW in Christ Jesus.* Not for those who had been reading the prophets. Not for those who called Abraham their father. Not for Jews like himself. For them, *the equality of all people before God* had always been true. Verse 3 goes like this: *the gospel which God promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures.* I do wonder which truth blew

Paul's socks off more? They are really one and the same. But it was only for one he was beaten and stoned and thrown into jail most times. Telling them they were wrong is what drove his Jewish brothers to violence.

Can you imagine the audacity of suggesting that a 2,000-year-old faith system might have missed something? Something critical? That such a religion, even in good faith, might actually have maintained theology and practice that were racist? Or sexist? Or nationalistic? Exclusionary? And then used the holy scriptures as defense of such practice and theology? (This is supposed to make you laugh, in that grimacing kind of way.) In verses 5-6, Paul describes his ministry intention for coming to visit them: *to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, ⁶ including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.* To preach the gospel to the Gentiles and to you. They can't say he didn't warn them. It will be a protracted argument throughout the letter, no doubt written not only for the believers in Rome but for those across all the churches he has preached.

Romans – the scripture Paul didn't have, setting forth the gospel of God revealed to him by the Holy Spirit; received and sifted through his imagination and his years of obedience to it; heard and received in some places more warmly than others; heavily doctored in some places more than others. If only he'd had some scripture to point to and say, *see, it says right here.* What he did have was a Holy-Spirit-driven hunch that made him brave and made other people think he was nuts – the Holy-Spirit-driven hunch that drove him back and forth across the Mediterranean, leaving Asia Minor and Greece speckled with churches. The same Holy-Spirit-driven hunch drove him to compose most of the New Testament.

Yet another 2000 years has gone by now, and I suspect most folks outside the church would scoff if we told them basic human equality is the very subtext of the New Testament. What do you suppose folks who consider themselves “churched” might say? Out loud I suspect they'd say, *“Of course. Anyone can be a Christian.”* Not untrue. Nor what Paul hoped we'd learn, it seems to me. Jew and Gentile are ethnicities, friends. Consider your list of prejudices. I suspect they are NOT fixed, in that those people could be more like you wish they were if they tried.

All these traits are traits, fixed or fluid, mixed, chosen or assigned: sexuality; the amount of melanin in one's pigment; being a dork, as we've talked about before. These things are accessories. They carry no weight in our relationship with God. Only humanness itself has matter. If we could only imagine such a way of faith, such a way of life. Yet, we are blind. We are blind to our blindness.

In his book *Falling Upward*, Richard Rohr writes, *“Nothing can be called sacred that does not include everyone.”* I had to put the book down and breathe for a minute when I read that. And try to remember anything I'd ever attended in a church that, by his definition,

could be called sacred. I got a little sad and decided Richard Rohr had to be wrong. Then I remembered Richard Rohr is never wrong, and I got a little more sad because I couldn't remember anything.

So – what is sacred, then? Nature is the most sacred experience, I decided. Nature doesn't care if a person is rich or kind or pretty or cheerful. The sun will shine and birds will sing for anyone. And golden retrievers – they don't care who pets them. They'll go home with anyone who even looks their way and has a couch. The fact is, friends, church has missed some really important truth. It's hard to know. And absolutely necessary, if we hope to be found faithful. And we do, don't we? Don't we?

We aren't just playing here, are we? More than ever, friends, I believe the only hope this world has is the righteousness of God woven into the fiber of creation. The other translation for righteousness is – what? Justice. The rightness of God and the justice of God are the same thing. Nature knows. Left to herself, nature functions rightly. Humans? We could. We can, if we ever choose to function as we were meant to, as Paul describes in verses 16-17, the end of the beginning of his letter to the church at Rome – and to us, of course. ¹⁶*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.* ¹⁷*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."*

Would you pray with me?