

June 9, 2019

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Romans 3:1-12

What good is it to be a Jew? What good is it to be circumcised? ² It is good in a lot of ways! First of all, God's messages were spoken to the Jews. ³ It is true that some of them did not believe the message. But does this mean that God cannot be trusted, just because they did not have faith? ⁴ No, indeed! God tells the truth, even if everyone else is a liar. The Scriptures say about God, "Your words will be proven true, and in court you will win your case." ⁵ If our evil deeds show how right God is, then what can we say? Is it wrong for God to become angry and punish us? What a foolish thing to ask. ⁶ But the answer is, "No." Otherwise, how could God judge the world? ⁷ Since your lies bring great honor to God by showing how truthful he is, you may ask why God still says you are a sinner. ⁸ You might as well say, "Let's do something evil, so that something good will come of it!" Some people even claim that we are saying this. But God is fair and will judge them as well.

⁹ What does all this mean? Does it mean that we Jews are better off than the Gentiles? No, it doesn't! Jews, as well as Gentiles, are ruled by sin, just as I have said. ¹⁰ The Scriptures tell us, "No one is acceptable to God! ¹¹ Not one of them understands or even searches for God. ¹² They have all turned away and are worthless. There isn't one person who does right." (Contemporary English Version)

One problem with Easter being late is how it bumps Pentecost into Bible School, leaving preachers like me in a bind about how to plan the service. The last two weeks of my online clergy groups have been all about how to incorporate the tongues of fire into our worship spaces. Now I get to post a picture that says, *all you need are three sheets of styrofoam, ten cans of free paint and Susanne Parker.*

Most of you will spend something like fifteen more hours here this week, so I want to be brief this morning. Brief, yet focused enough on Romans again to hear Paul echo the message of Pentecost, our oneness in Christ, our sameness. Not only that we are each just like the other, but that we are of the same one Spirit, a distinction that means more to me the more I contemplate it – and truthfully, the more I read the Eastern mystics, who have language for it that we don't. More on that another time.

Let's talk a minute about the church at Rome in the time of Paul. I doubt emperors are much different than kings and presidents, as it has to do with their own popularity. The further they fall out of favor with their people, the more prone they are to find a

scapegoat to blame and deflect attention. According to some accounts, in the late 00's - 40's CE, Jewish riots in Rome were causing such disorder and turmoil, Emperor Claudius felt he had no choice but to expel the lot of them from the city.

They'd been expelled from Rome before, in 139 BCE and again in 19 CE. *Why this time, you ask – food shortages? Pogroms?* Supposedly they were in the streets about whether Jewish followers of the *Christos* should be allowed to worship in synagogues. Now does that sound right to you? Because that doesn't sound right to me. Not that some might not have been upset about that? Arguing even. But rioting? Really? What do Christians get excited enough to protest about today? Abortion is the only one I can think of, that Christians don't share with non-believers, that Christians are willing to go to jail for.

However many Jews there were in Rome – a few thousand maybe? – realistically, how many were believers in Jesus? One hundred? Two hundred? Claudius needed someone to blame, and Jews have been the doormat of history forever – so he chose them, and they were gone. Gone for five years, until Claudius died and the new emperor took the throne. His name was Nero. What do you know of him?

If those Jewish Christians had had any idea what Emperor Nero had planned for them, they'd have certainly stayed away. But they didn't, so they didn't. The Jews returned in 54 CE, and the Christian ones found a church that had moved out of the synagogue, was worshipping on Sundays and being led by Gentiles – Gentiles who didn't agree that just because their Jewish brothers were back, church life had to rewind by five years. They struggled to figure out how to worship and work together. Gentiles believed they could lead as well as Jews. Jews felt pushed out by their church brothers/sisters, the same way they were pushed out by the Romans.

You've no doubt read about the adjustment it was between men and women after WWII, the assumptions people made about men going back to work and women going back to homemaking and mothering. Men came home from the military and took over the jobs women had been doing for four years. (I read a similar article about the Civil War. For all the horror of it, women got a reprieve from childbirth, four whole years of not being pregnant.) Three years of the struggle goes by when the church in Rome receives a letter from Paul. It is hand-delivered by a woman named Phoebe, Paul's partner in ministry, his agent, the one who speaks for him in his absence.

Do you see how the delivery of the letter conveys the message of the letter? She arrives in his place. She reads the text. She explains the text. No doubt at the end they told her they really liked her dress. She is not simply a FedEx carrier. She is cantor, rabbi, preacher, and pastor. If they told her they liked her dress, it was only because they didn't yet know how to address her as rabbi and preacher. It's not clear if they recognized her as Paul's administrator. And, we will learn, she is an administrator. The

message she preaches in Rome is theologically true. It is also organizationally expedient. Both are Phoebe's job.

Paul believes his work in the east is done. He wants to open a new work in Spain. The only established churches from which to launch such a mission are in Rome. Egypt is getting started, thanks to the Apostle Mark, but is much too far from Spain. Carthage, in Tunisia, is much closer but still 100 years from having established churches. Paul needs the Roman church strong, and while the church since then has not always taken his advice, he chose solid theology as the source of that strength. *Only insofar as you work out the trouble between you, will the gospel of God be evident in you. If you are not one in spirit, you bear no light to the One Spirit who is God, Creator, Savior, Sustainer of all that lives and breathes.*

Again, again, again, and yet again, Paul will speak of the righteousness of God: entrusted to Israel; for the benefit of the whole world. The way some parents take the money they earn and set up a trust for their children – the money belongs to the parents, but is not for their use only; it is for the benefit of those who come after. As Paul says in Romans 3:2-3 (slightly paraphrased): *The Jews were entrusted with the scriptures. Because some were unfaithful with them does not nullify the faithfulness of God!* Paul's point being that the righteousness of God entrusted to Israel extended to the Gentiles from the beginning.

And that righteousness, remember, is reflected everywhere in creation – most of all in relationships. Our relationship with each other, our relationship with creation, is *right*, is *justified*, when that relationship *lines up with* or is *inside the margins of* (justified margins, same idea) the *righteous-ness* or the *right-ness* or the *justice* of God. Our right relationships reflect, reveal, repeat, reproduce the righteousness of God. Thus, Paul's prescription for the church: we are to love each other the way God loved us in Christ Jesus. As it has to do with this text, love them even if they don't deserve it – since none of us deserved to be loved by God, and God loved us anyway.

Hopefully our first two weeks in Romans have you reflecting on your prejudices, maybe discovering some new ones you weren't previously aware of. I've realized how really prejudiced I am toward people I consider prejudiced. When I get going I'm amazed at how judgy my thoughts can be. Also, toward people who carry guns in ordinary places. The smugness in my heart and mind probably makes Jesus want to drink gin from a cat dish. (I'm borrowing this expression from Anne Lamott – from Traveling Mercies, I think.)

Yet, Paul's message can't get through the doors – of our hearts or the church – until we've embraced our own depravity. Critical to these prejudices of ours is our confidence in our sense of difference. We're too polite a people to say out loud that we believe we are better than others. When church folks say, *there but for the grace of God go I*, what are

we saying? *That could be me.* But in my secret heart, I for one am also saying, *thank God that isn't me!* We are grateful to be different! The difference is what matters to us!

When I was in seminary around 1990, my teacher, Molly Marshall, was the first woman theology professor to be granted tenure at a Baptist school. A reporter from a Baptist publication asked her if she believed in the depravity of men. She answered, "*Oh yes. And the depravity of some women.*" She was joking to call out his sexist language – but inside is the reminder, *We are a depraved species through and through.* We act out that depravity every time we rebel against the righteousness of God, the rightness, the justice, of God.

The whole system operates, is driven, by divine love. Love is the energy, the very air and light and water, of all that is. All we have to do to rebel against it is be unloving – in thought or word or deed, anecdotally or systematically. Creation's not undone, of course. We are. We have thrown ourselves on the floor like a screaming toddler, maybe even broken things, or hurt something living, for the hope of being where no one of us can ever be: beyond the love, beyond the righteousness of God. God is always in place. Grace, salvation, gospel, goodness, love – all are always in place.

Depraved means corrupted. Depravity is love corrupted. It's a sorry choice in a situation so filled with possibility. But until we get clear on where we stand, each of us and all of us together, we will never appreciate what God has done for us. Which is what Paul talks about next. I hope to, with you, when we look at it.