

May 7th: Mutual

Good morning again, friends! This morning we continue our year-long sermon series—we've been reading through the whole Bible from the beginning to the end and seeing how these ancient texts can be relevant to our modern lives. Along the way, we've read about nomadic people, people under empire, and now we turn to a new stage of our text which is focused on the birth of a new group of people: the very first Christians.

We've finished our study of the Gospel of Matthew, and so the next step in our journey is to examine what happens to Jesus' movement and disciples after his resurrection. For these next few weeks, we'll be taking a closer look at the early church—including the writings of the Book of Acts, and the letter to the Romans. These texts require us to carefully consider the context of these writings, so our meditations will have a little bit of everything: history, theology, and application to our own lives. Hopefully, this will bring us some insights into how we can be a part of God's big and beautiful story.

Before we dig in, would you pray with me?

Collaborative God,

You have invited us into the divine work of creation and transformation as your disciples, and so we come together today to remember this partnership and recommit ourselves to your service. We offer our full selves to you, all of our strengths and weaknesses, passions and pitfalls, knowing that you have brought us into community to encourage and support each other as we strive to be agents of wholeness in our world. Fill us with courage, empower us with wisdom, we pray. Amen.

Today we return to the world of the early Church and its contentious beginnings. Like our modern church, these years and decades following Jesus' resurrection were not always easy—there were disagreements and council meetings and personality conflicts between leaders. Last week we read about a first century disciple named Paul, who was called to bring the gospel to

Gentle communities around the Mediterranean, and his four missionary journeys resulted in many thousands of conversions and new congregations being planted.

The Epistle to the Romans, as this text is sometimes formally called, is Paul's attempt to mediate some of the early tensions and theological issues that were found in one of the largest of these first Christian congregations. Some biblical scholars call this text his "magnum opus," because it manages to be both deeply spiritual and deeply personal, addressing complex situations and belief systems with sensitivity and wisdom. The church in Rome was one the fastest growing at this time, and also one of the most diverse. Paul commends them for their deep faith and good works which is being reported all over the world, but he also addresses some internal tension: this congregation contained both Jews and Gentile converts, and Paul has heard that these two distinct groups are having a hard time coming together to function as one body.

Rome is one of the few places that Paul has not traveled to at this point, so he's coming into this conversation at a small disadvantage. Other letters that he penned, like the Epistle to the Galatians, and 1 and 2 Corinthians, were directed towards congregations that Paul had previously visited during his missionary journeys, so they had some rapport and relationship already. Paul was writing to these friends knowing that they would understand his intention was to help them—but the church in Rome had only heard about Paul, they hadn't interacted with him prior to this letter. So Paul has to rely on other means to build a connection with this congregation—he draws upon both Jewish history and Greek culture to try and communicate his points to them.

Our passage today is from Paul's initial greeting to the church in Rome, so we see all the hallmarks of a typical letter that you might write to relative strangers—Paul takes quite a few verses to properly introduce himself, and tells these brothers and sisters that they while they may not know each other yet, he sees them as part of the same family because they share a sense of belonging in Christ. And even though Paul is writing from the Greek city of Corinth, he says that this distance is not a barrier to building their

relationship, because through Jesus, they have both, “received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name’s sake.”

And then in verse 7, Paul gives a fairly standard closing to his opening message: “To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.”

As far as letters go, it sounds like a strong start, especially this last phrase. “Grace and peace” becomes almost a tagline of Paul’s that he repeats in many of his writings—a way to say hello and goodbye to fellow Christians that is quickly adopted by others.

With these greetings out of the way, Paul seems primarily concerned with defining his purpose for writing. In verse 8, we hear that Paul has a longing to be with them in person, and in verses 11-13, Paul says, “I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles.”

Paul seems to be saying that he is writing with the primary purpose of encouraging this young church, and he is trying to offer them some spiritual guidance so that they can continue to work together in their common mission. He specifically says that he wishes for them to be strong, so that they can “mutually encourage each other’s faith.” And by “mutually encourage” Paul means that these Roman church members are to not just encourage the fellow members of their congregation, but to encourage Paul as he serves all of the Mediterranean churches.

That seems like a difficult task for a church that is having problems with its diversity, doesn’t it? How are they supposed to support each other when their cultures and spiritual practices are so different from each other? How are they

supposed to be an encouragement to Paul and his work as an apostle when there is strain within their congregation?

Despite these tensions, Paul seems to think that there is one thing that can bring them together: the gospel of Jesus. So he says: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’”

If these particular verses sound difficult to understand, that’s totally normal. We often see that Paul uses his letters to explain and clarify the message of Jesus—and scholars are quick to point out that Paul’s instructions to these early churches is some of the most significant theology that was developed and disseminated during the first century CE. But even Paul’s explanations can be complex.

So let’s break this down a little bit.

A lot of Christians get tripped up in these verses about the so-called “order of salvation,” that is, that Paul says that Jews received the gospel first, and then it was shared with the Gentiles. Some interpretations of this text have resulted in certain Christians believing that this kind of language creates some inherent hierarchy in the early church or provides a divine explanation for the division between Jew and Gentile believers. However, that is the exact opposite of what Paul is trying to communicate—he is attempting to make clear that no matter how people have received the gospel, or in what order, or as a member of a particular group, the salvation that they have experienced results in the same righteousness. No matter if they were first or last, the redemption through Christ is the same. No matter what cultural community they originally belonged to, all of God’s family lives by the same faith.

But more than just being equal in the sight of God, I think Paul is trying to make the point that the good news of Jesus is inherently a message of

mutuality. It is a mutual gift, freely given to all. A mutual undertaking to be shared. A mutual endeavor to be entered into. A mutual gospel to be proclaimed.

As we look at other sections of the Bible, especially the four gospel accounts, we can see that the message that Jesus preached is rooted in relationship—both to God and with each other. Relationship is at the core of Jesus' plans for humanity, and he is deeply concerned with the collective redemption of God's people, not just our individual souls. Jesus speaks to both crowds of people and in personal conversations, but the ultimate plan is the restoration of all of creation, of bringing the entire world back into harmony with its Creator.

And Paul is telling these new churches that they have a crucial role to play in carrying out this message. They have the specific task of reaching out to new people and spreading the good news of Jesus, they are being equipped to join God in what God is already doing in these cities and towns where congregations are being planted. As they continue to grow and serve in their chosen communities, their success will then inspire other believers in other places, and the message of relationship and redemption will multiply and spread until all of creation is redeemed and made whole.

And this gets back to Paul's initial purpose for this letter: the hope that his words will empower these new Christians to be mutually encouraging to each other. Paul desires that even in moments of dissent or difficulty, their common faith and common purpose will continue to be a support system that they can rely on as they minister together. This mutual understanding is the foundation of mutual mission.

I don't know about you, but this passage brings up a lot of questions for me—not just as a disciple of Jesus myself, but also as the leader of a spiritual community.

Our congregation in Bremerton might not be divided between Jew and Gentile, but there are plenty of ways that we divide ourselves, so many labels that we

apply to separate from each other or categorize each other. We have different cultural backgrounds, familial circumstances, socioeconomic statuses, jobs, values, priorities, weekly schedules—the list goes on. There seems to be a never-ending pressure to give in to these distinctions between us, and so I think we need to be occasionally reminded of the things that hold us together.

Honestly, I don't think Paul would be surprised to hear that our modern congregations still struggle with some of the same issues that plagued the early church. When you understand human beings, and are aware of our tendency towards brokenness and breaking apart from each other, it makes sense that each new era of Christians has faced similar problems with diversity and fractured relationships. To be sure, it is sometimes disappointing to see that our contemporary denominations and churches are still riddled with petty arguments and simmering tensions, but I don't think things are hopeless for us. Quite the contrary actually, because now more than ever I think there's an opportunity for us to show that being a part of God's family is a glue that is strong enough to hold us together, even in the face of increasing conflict and schism.

I think the mutual gospel that Paul is talking about is still good advice, even two thousand years later. But as we'll see in the later chapter of Paul's letter, mutuality is not just an idea to ponder or an ideal to be held cognitively, but an action to be lived out. Mutuality has to be at the core of our practice for our spiritual community to flourish.

Paul's words remind me of an African proverb from the Zulu tribe which says, "I am a person through other people. My humanity is tied to yours." When asked to reflect on this proverb, Archbishop Desmond Tutu explained, "One of the sayings in our country is Ubuntu — the essence of being human. Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can't exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness ... We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole world. When you do well, it spreads out; it is for the whole of humanity."

And so I think mutuality goes beyond just belonging to the same congregation, or worshiping together on a Sunday morning or gathering at the same potlucks or donating towards the same causes.

A mutual gospel is a vision that we all contribute towards, it is a mission that we all work towards, it is a plan that we are all responsible for. That means it is not just my work, or the Council's work, or the Trustee's work, or the work of members—it belongs to all of us. Ministry is not just my role, but something we all must do as a community of faith. And when we are committed to this mutual gospel, when we realize that our spiritual well being is tied up with the spiritual wellbeing of others, we can offer each other the support and encouragement to keep going, even in difficult times.

So my friends, in the spirit of Ubuntu, if we want to go fast, we can go alone. But if we want to go far, we should go together.

Amen.