

Romans 1:1-17

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I spent the week at the Festival of Homiletics in Minneapolis. Homiletics is the art and study of preaching. This week, 1500 ministers from 49 states and every continent except Antarctica, gathered to listen to really skilled preachers speak about the conference's theme: Preaching as Moral Imagination. The heart of the week's message was that the message of the gospel is a message the world desperately needs and, now more than ever, ministers are called to speak truth boldly, even when "truth" is the last thing people want to hear. The conference encouraged preachers to continue to imagine a world that is whole, where everyone has what they need and all of creation belongs to each other. Thank you for allowing me the time away to learn and be reminded that we are not alone in our call to repair the brokenness in the world and that call is more urgent than ever.

I am very grateful to several of you who kept me in the loop while I was away because truly there is never a dull moment around here.

Certainly, technology makes staying in touch so much easier than it used to be. I remember, as a little girl, calling my grandparents on Sunday nights because long distance calls were cheaper then. And I loved going to the mailbox because there were more letters than bills and advertisements. A hand-written letter is quite the novelty these days. I think that's one of the reasons the ministry of the prayer group is so important. Part of that ministry includes writing notes to the ones for whom we pray. I would guess that for many of us, a letter from the prayer group might have been the last time we received a hand-written letter. I'm curious, though, how long has it been since you wrote a letter with an actual pen and paper?

Texts and emails are so much faster, right?

Well, Paul didn't have any other options, if he had things to say to people far away, a letter was the only way to say them. Besides Jesus, Paul is the most well-known, well-researched person in first century Christianity. In some respects, we know more about Paul than we do Jesus because Paul left behind written letters, unlike Jesus who left us stories and sayings which were passed along orally.

*In the New Testament, there are seven letters which are correctly attributed to Paul: 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philemon, Philippians, and Romans. These letters were written in the middle of the first century, earlier even than the gospel books, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. There are six other letters that historically have been attributed to Paul that most scholars believe were written by disciples of Paul who were attempting to bring Paul's theology and insights forward. Those letters are 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians and Colossians. These pseudo Paul letters were written sometime after 80 CE

Paul saw himself primarily as a Jewish prophet to the Gentiles, bringing and spreading the news of a crucified Messiah. His method of doing this was pretty savvy. You see, Paul understood the importance of cities. What's important about them? In the ancient world, like our 21st century world, cities were homes to major seaports and main roads. From cities, goods could be exported to and imported from other places. Paul understood that the same was true of news, including the good news of the gospel. In chapter 15 of Romans, Paul writes that he had "fully proclaimed the gospel." This doesn't mean he had personally spoken to everyone. What he meant was that there were small groups of people in the cities who had heard the gospel and embraced its world-changing news. Those early Christians, in turn, were exporting it from those important centers of migration and commerce. Because of this, Paul was planning to turn his attention to new places, to an

expanded vision, and that's where his head was when he wrote the letter to the church in Rome.

The Letter to the Romans was written somewhere between 55-57 CE, to the fledgling communities of Jesus followers in Rome. These were not churches Paul started, however Paul planned to visit them on his way to share the gospel with "the ends of the Earth," which in this case, was Spain. Paul wrote the Letter to the Romans while in Corinth. At this point, his plan was to go to Jerusalem to deliver the offering for the poor he had collected from primarily Gentile churches in Greece and all over Asia Minor and then go on to Rome. The collection was very important to Paul. He thought if the collection was well received, it would confirm equality between the Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus before God.

Some scholars have suggested that Paul wrote Romans as sort of a "last will and testament," fearing the worst about his encounter with religious leaders in Jerusalem. Other scholars have argued that the letter provides the foundation for Paul's authority to preach in Rome or that he was simply seeking Roman support for his Jerusalem visit. While these ideas probably play into the letter, I don't think either of these theories is the real reason he wrote to the Romans. In their book, *The Authentic Letters of Paul: A New Reading of Paul's Rhetoric and Meaning*, Jesus Seminar scholars agree, saying these other guesses completely miss what was really on in Paul's mind. He was forward-thinking. This letter was laying the groundwork for his future plans, his mission to Spain. The Jesus Seminar scholars write, "Paul's argument [in the letter] builds upon establishing a common understanding of mission so that the Roman communities can assist him in moving to the 'ends of the earth'" (Dewey, Hoover, McGaughy, and Schmidt, *The Authentic Letters of Paul: A New Reading of Paul's Rhetoric and Meaning*).

Probably, the closest thing we have today to this style of letter is a fundraising letter from a non-profit organization. Typically, those letters introduce the organization, the good work they are doing, who is supporting them currently and how, and then they inspire us to join them in that work. We will see in the next few weeks as we look at Paul's letter to the Romans, how Paul uses this letter to do those same things. Our text today is Romans 1:1-17, which is the introduction to the letter. I am reading from the Scholars Version, translated by Jesus Seminar scholars.

¹Paul, slave of God's Anointed, Jesus---summoned as an envoy and appointed to announce God's world-changing news, ²which was anticipated by the prophets in the holy scriptures. ³This news is about the "son of God"---who was physically descended from David, ⁴appointed and empowered as "son of God," in accordance with the spirit of holiness, from the time of his resurrection from the dead--- Jesus, the Anointed, our lord. ⁵Through him I have received the gracious favor of my calling to promote in his name the obedience that comes from a confident reliance upon God among all of the world's nations. ⁶You yourselves are among those who are called, since you belong to Jesus, the Anointed. ⁷I am writing this to all of God's beloved in Rome, called to be God's own people: may gracious favor and peace from God our Great Benefactor and from our lord Jesus the Anointed be with you.

⁸First of all, through Jesus, the Anointed, I thank God for all of you, because your confident trust in God is being broadcast throughout the world. ⁹God is my witness, whom I serve whole-heartedly by spreading the world-changing news of the "son of God," that I always mention you when I pray, ¹⁰imploring that now at last I may succeed in coming to you, God willing. ¹¹I'm longing to see you so that I may share some inspiring benefit that will strengthen you---¹²or to put it more pertinently, that when we come together, we might be mutually encouraged by each other's confident trust in God, both yours and

mine. ¹³I think you ought to know, my friends, how often I plan to visit you---but have been prevented until now---in the hope that I may work as fruitfully among you, as in the rest of the world. ¹⁴By virtue of my calling, I am under obligation both to Greeks and barbarians, both to the wise and the foolish; ¹⁵that's why I'm eager to proclaim God's world-changing news also to you in Rome.

¹⁶I'm not embarrassed by the news, because it has the power to transform those who are persuaded by it, first Jews and then Greeks.

¹⁷God's character is shown by this news to be trustworthy and that leads to having confidence in God, just as scripture says: The one who decides to live on the basis of confidence in God is the one who gets it right.

By first century letter writing standards, this is a very long introduction. It reminds me a little bit of some events I've attended where someone on the planning committee for the event volunteers to introduce the speaker. And that person shares a ridiculous amount of information about the speaker before finally saying, "Now let's welcome..." During those times, my inner monologue is always saying, "The introduction should not be longer than the speech." Clearly, it was important to Paul that the Romans understand he was the real deal. Paul was not some fly by night televangelist, he was called by God. He was called to bring world-changing news.

*There is a lot in this introduction, but I want to focus on the end where he finally gets to what is considered the thesis of the whole letter, verses 16-17, "I'm not embarrassed by the news, because it has the power to transform those who are persuaded by it, first Jews and then Greeks. God's character is shown by this news to be trustworthy and that leads to having confidence in God, just as scripture says: The one who decides to live on the basis of confidence in God is the one who gets it right."

I am sure you are more familiar with the NRSV translation:

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.”^[e]

I like the Scholars Version because it eliminates some of what I call the “churchy” words. It uses “confidence in God” rather than “faith.” And “the one who gets it right” rather than “the one who is righteous.” “God’s character” rather than “God’s righteousness.”

If you are familiar with these verses, you probably noticed the scholars chose to use the word “embarrassed” rather than “ashamed.” “I am not embarrassed by the news.” Why would he have the need to say that? Had he been asked before if he was embarrassed by the good news he was supposed to be sharing? Had he been told he should be embarrassed? And...Why would Paul, or anyone else, be “embarrassed by the news?” The news in this case, is the story of Jesus, the Anointed One, his life, his death and resurrection. Could it be that it was [and maybe is] embarrassing to believe that God acted through a man who was crucified? I mean, why wouldn’t God have chosen someone who didn’t die on a cross, someone, well, a little more “hero-y.”

Messiahs were not supposed to be dead or if they were, their death was supposed to bring about the coming of a new world, a better world. But the truth is, in the first century Jesus movement, the Messiah was dead and life was still pretty crappy. What we find in Paul’s theology, and indeed among most of the early Christians, is that the death of the Messiah doesn't immediately inaugurate the new kingdom, and yet that doesn't seem to diminish their sense of apocalyptic expectation. Paul, like many others, believed it was coming soon. In the meantime, there was work to do. And it was urgent because the apocalyptic event they were waiting for could happen any day.

I imagine Paul going about his work, talking to people about Jesus, sharing his own experiences of how the news of God's activity through Jesus had changed his own life, how it had called and inspired him to share this good news with others. Knowing human beings, and having had a little experience at talking to people about God and Jesus, I imagine the skeptics, the ones who, instead of just listening politely, ask questions like, "How can you believe in a God that would send a Messiah who gets himself killed?" "How can you believe in a God that says the kingdom is for everyone, yet today there is a small group of very rich people who seem to lack compassion, who rule over the poor majority?" "How can you believe in a God that allows men to make decisions that have devastating effects on women?" "How can you believe in a God that _____?"

What do people ask you?

My reaction to these questions is often embarrassment. I am embarrassed that people think I would have anything to do with *that* God. I'm not embarrassed by the gospel, but at times I am embarrassed by the ways in which the gospel is twisted. And, right now that twisted gospel seems to be the dominant Christian voice in our nation. I was reminded again and again this week, that when we allow the proclamation of a twisted gospel to go unanswered, we are complicit in the damage it does. I'm embarrassed that people use "the gospel" to push a patriarchal agenda that deprives women of healthcare choices and makes it a crime to have an abortion. Punishing people when they are at their most vulnerable is not pro-life and I am not going to politely let that go unchallenged. I'm embarrassed that Christians seem to love the word abomination when they are quoting Leviticus and casting judgement on our brothers and sisters in the LGBTQ+ community, but these same Christians never ever quote Luke 16, when Jesus says to the Pharisees, "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others, but God knows your hearts, for what is prized by human beings is an

abomination in the sight of the Lord.” Jesus says this in the midst of some parables warning of the dangers of loving money more than God.

Paul says that the world-changing news of the gospel has the power to transform us if we will let it. When I hear this twisted gospel, I have to consider that we are giving it power to change people and the world. Then I wonder...have we allowed the world-changing news of the kingdom of God to change us? I feel like that would be the truly embarrassing thing...for Jesus to have lived and died because he imagined a different world...for Easter to have come and gone again...only to realize that we still think the story of the resurrection is only for us. It is still the Easter season, I mean, I feel like it's not too late to ask, “What does the empty tomb do for the people who live in the tomb?” The children still in cages. The residents of Flint, Michigan. Students still doing active shooter drills. People of color still experiencing the effects of racist systems. Women still living with decisions men are making for them. Rev. Dr. Melva Sampson, Assistant Professor of Preaching at Wake Forest University School of Divinity said in a sermon this week, “Resurrection promises a future for the dead. Resurrection calls us to collective realignment of the living with the dead and prematurely dying in our midst.”

The hope of resurrection is good news, but only if the people who really need that hope see it. And that is our call, like Paul, to share that hope to the ends of the earth, which coincidentally might be with people right here in our community. Let us not be embarrassed or too busy or uncertain or afraid to share the world-changing news that hope is alive and God's kingdom is for everyone...Amen.