

Paul's Pride

**Ps 24 and Romans 1:16-16 – Sermon Text = Rom 1:16-17
677, 672, 675, 680**

*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.
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."
(Romans 1:16-17)*

Paul has never met the people who make up the church in Rome.
They are strangers to him, in many ways.
But he's not a complete stranger to them.
His reputation will have preceded him.
And it probably isn't the most flattering reputation.
Some would remember him as a zealot in his anti-Christian days
and are still wondering if his Christian faith is all that authentic.
Some will remember his arguments and debates with Peter
and other prominent leaders in the Christian movement
and wonder if Paul is just coming to sow more seeds of discord.
Some will wonder why he is just passing through
and not planning to stay with them and fortify the church in Rome,
the church at the centre of the empire.



I find an intriguing hint at how Paul might be dealing with this reputation
in our painting this morning.

It is by Pier Francesco Sacchi,
an Italian painter working in Genoa in the 1520s.
What gives Paul a sense of humble pride in his mission
is the crucified Jesus in the background, seen through the window,
a constant image in the consciousness of Paul.
This is Paul's focus in his understanding of the Gospel –
the God who chooses to rule the cosmos through a crucified rabbi.

It's outrageous, a scandal, foolishness, just plain nuts.
No wonder people are staying away from church in droves.

What Paul had come to know,
beyond all the reasoning of the Greek and Roman philosophers,
beyond all the decrees of the Roman emperors,
beyond all the intricate interpretations of the Hebrew scholars,
was that Jesus was the Christ
in whom and through whom God had chosen to save the world.

God's righteousness was his desire that his whole creation
be reconciled to the source of its life and well-being – its *Shalom*,
to use its proper Hebrew name.

Through Jesus bearing the worst kinds
of isolation, condemnation, and extermination
that the humans of his generation could devise,
this God of mercy and of grace
proved more powerful than any of those forces
and showed those with eyes to see and ears to hear
that nothing could separate them from his love.
In that truth, they could live as blessings in the midst of the damnations of the world.

Righteousness is God's *Shalom*.
Faith is the grateful acceptance of and determination to live in that grace.
God has faith in his original plan for our place in creation.
We have faith because of God's faith.
To live in God's righteous faith is to be nourished to flourish
for the sake of God's commonwealth.

Now, if you've been following the flow of my words and phrases here
(granted, not always the easiest thing to do on a Sunday morning),
I hope you can see the source of Paul's pride
as he prepares to meet the Christians in Rome.
It's what God is doing through and in him.
It's the ways God is using Paul to nourish the Christian faith.
It's the resilience God is giving Paul to pursue their mission.
Paul pride focuses on and arises from the crucified Jesus
who is the power of God for the salvation of the world.

I think the church needs to recover this kind of pride.
It's a humble confidence in the God of the Gospel,
in the God who confounds popular worldly wisdom
to provoke a response in human beings
that brings them home to the purpose for which they were created.

There's a line in the lively and inspiring song
that Sarah and Daniel are going to do after the sermon
that struck me as I was listening to Abbey Lincoln sing it on YouTube.
It's a song from a live album that jazz drummer Max Roach put out in 1960.
It's called 'Long as You're Living,'
and was written by Tommy Turrentine (trumpet) and Julian Priester (trombone).
Here's the phrase:

*Love's for enjoying – hate's for destroying
Never forget it – or you'll regret it
long as you're living.*

There is far too much pride in this world
of a kind that that leads to hate and destroying.
We're seeing it in Africa, in the Middle East, the the USA, and in our own country.
Too often, it fills our political rhetoric.
Too often, it fills our movie screens.
Too often, it fills our video games.
And far too often,
if we are going to be brutally honest with ourselves,
it fills our pulpits and pews and church halls.

There is no room for a pride that divides in the church.
There is no room for a pride that diminishes and dismisses the other in the church.
There is no room for a pride that ignores love and cultivates hate in the church.

There is always room for a pride
that finds its dignity and worth in God's saving love for the whole creation.
That is the source of Paul's humble confidence
in the importance of the mission of the church.
The Gospel was crucial for Paul
because it revealed to all people the work and word of God
in ways that freed them to bless the world
with their own particular gifts and talents.

As he begins this letter of introduction to the Roman churches,
he reminds himself and them of their common vision.
It is not the vision of Paul, or of Peter, or of Aquila and Priscilla.
It is the vision of the God of the Gospel
who saved the world in and through Jesus, his Christ.

It is a pride that is fed and formed
solely by God's faith in the enduring righteousness of love.

So, what does all of this mean for our lives this coming week?
How is God provoking us to love and good deeds for his creation this week?

Let me suggest a couple of things to pay attention to
as we leave this service of worship
renewed in the freedom of God's faith in us
to serve God's righteousness in the world he has saved.

Pray every morning and every evening
for the kind of pride that will build your humble confidence
in the ways God uses your unique interests and skills
for the *Shalom* of his creation.

Each and every one of you,
and all of us together,
have opportunities every day to speak a word of love
into the "atomized, unforgiving, and inhospitable"
society that surrounds us.

(Thanks to *New York Times* columnist David Brooks for that perceptive phrase.)

We can create connection, forgiveness, and hospitality
just by the ways we talk with others.
Pray for both the opportunity and the courage to do that.

Then, having shaped that intention
in conversation with the God who enables and empowers that activity,
go out and do it.

Be channels of connection, forgiveness, and hospitality
in the world.

Think of Nike's little check mark and it's tag line –
Just do it!

The passion to spread this message, to be this kind of change,
to encourage others to do the same,
led Paul to a pride in what God was enabling him to do
for the spread of the commonwealth of the God of the Gospel.

That's a pride worth emulating –
a humble confidence in being an agent of God's love.

Let's go out and just do it this week.