

For eight weeks now, we have been plugging along and reading from Paul’s Letter to the Church in Rome. This is now the third week in a row that we are unpacking the second major section of that letter—chapters nine to eleven—in which Paul is exploring a question that was crucial in the life of a developing early Church and deeply personal for him: what is the relationship between Jews and Christians? Does God have but one promise? *By no means!*

More than giving us a simple formula for all times and places, I think that what Paul does for us here is to model a *process* for asking big theological questions. Two thousand years later, these words are more descriptive than prescriptive because they are so enmeshed with *particular* issues that the Church was dealing with in that *particular* place and time. Our context is different. But we can see how Paul goes about this and that is enormously helpful if we mean to “hear a Word of the Lord” across the many centuries that separate us.

In fact, I think, this is true about Paul much of the time and about reading the Bible in general. Sometimes people have been taught to think of the Bible as a kind of rule book, or even like a cookbook that gives us recipes for how to live our lives. But the Bible is more about revealing to us *a way* to think and pray through the challenges we face in our own day than it is about giving us pat answers that can be applied again and again in very different circumstances. So in chapters 9-11 of Romans, we see Paul wrestling with a question that was extremely important to the first-century Church in Rome. From these chapters we don’t find ten rules to live by or three doctrines we must profess to believe in. Rather, Paul engages his fellow believers—all of them on a journey to see Christ more clearly, to love Christ more dearly, to follow Christ more nearly.

I might be wrong about this, but I don’t think that most of us here at St. Francis Church lie awake at night worried about the salvation of Jews, however. In a post-Holocaust world, in a diverse and pluralistic society, as part of a theologically-inclusive denomination, we generally assume that Christians and Jews will work together to serve the God of Abraham and Sarah, the Creator of heaven and earth, the One whom we Christians also have been taught to call “Abba” by Jesus of Nazareth. So what insights can we take from this part of Paul’s Letter to the Church of Rome? What good news does it speak to us who are gathered here on this August day?

Today we heard these words as Paul reaches a conclusion to this section: *God has imprisoned all in disobedience, so that [God] may be merciful to all.* The lectionary and the way we organize for reading the Bible doesn’t always make it particularly easy for us. That’s why we need to try, at least, to read the Bible outside of worship—in Bible Study groups and on our own. We’ve had three weeks in a row dealing with an extended argument, but it’s hard for us to hold all of that together. It’s challenging for a preacher who knows that even if everyone was in church for those three weeks in a row, that many of us have difficulty remembering what we had for breakfast, let alone what Paul said two weeks ago in chapter nine. And even when we are able to do that, did you notice that today’s reading cut a whole bunch of stuff in the middle of chapter eleven—like twenty-seven verses or so! Don’t you ever wonder what parts of “the Word of the Lord” get cut and left on the editor’s floor by the lectionary committee?!

Well, in the midst of all of his rhetoric, Paul finds a metaphor. (Personally, if I were put in charge of the lectionary and it was up to me to decide what to keep of Paul and what to lose, I have to tell you I'd keep more of his metaphors and lose some of the rhetoric.) In any event, here in part is what we *didn't* hear read today:

If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy. And if the root is holy, then the branches also are holy. But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not vaunt yourselves over the branches. If you do vaunt yourselves, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. You will say, 'Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.' That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe.

Paul is telling those Gentile Christians in Rome not to be too proud, but rather to stand in awe because they have become "honorary Jews" through Christ. "You have been grafted into the life of Israel," he says, "but you are still supported and sustained and fed by those Jewish roots. And you need to draw on those roots in order to bear good fruit." Jesus talked a lot in his ministry (as did the prophets before him) about how the goal of faith is to bear good fruit. But disconnected branches, without roots, cannot do that.

And then he concludes: "God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all." *All of us rely on the mercy of God.* That is the "kicker" to this whole long second section of Romans. That is where this theological reflection has led Paul. Try making that your own prayer for a day or two, or maybe a week or a month. Like a mantra. *All of us rely on the mercy of God.* That one sentence takes us to the very heart of Paul's theology. It's important to notice how he gets there but because he is, well, Paul...he is easy to lose along the way. But this is the point: Jew and Gentile—everybody gets imprisoned in disobedience. And all rely on the mercy of God. It isn't our own righteousness that saves us, but God's mercy!

If we start to think that we are saved, or loved, because of what we have done—because of how great we are; if we start to compare ourselves to other Christians or to non-Christians and find ourselves somehow "the winners"—the *real* Christians, the *truly* faithful, then we are in big trouble. *Do not become too proud. Stand in awe of God's mercy, because all of us rely on the mercy of God.* That wise counsel tells us who we are, but it also tells us who God is.

Recognizing our own failings and shortcomings is not about beating ourselves up. There is a way of confessing our sins that can leave us feeling like we are bad to the bone. As I understand the gospel, that doesn't do God, or us, any good. It leads to guilt, rather than to repentance, and it's hard to dig out from underneath guilt. The story of our faith is that we are created in the image of God. We are a holy people, claimed and marked and sealed as God's beloved in Holy Baptism. *But we are human.* We are made of dust, and all of us fall short of the glory that God intends for us. Paul understood that at a very deep level. He knows that when he was so sure he was right, when he was so proud as a Pharisee and so eager to please God by squelching heretic followers of Jesus, that he was acting against the mercy of God; even if he didn't know it at the time. *He thought he was being*

faithful, but he was being unfaithful. I suspect if we are honest with ourselves we might acknowledge that we have some experience with that. It's not the same kind of sin as being willfully disobedient. It's not the same as knowing that speaking ill of our neighbor is wrong and then going ahead and speaking ill of that neighbor. *I'm talking about when we do what we are certain is right, with the best of motivations, with certitude and piety—and then later on discover that we had it all wrong and have made a mess of things.*

God is merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. That is not a New Testament idea—something Jesus said in order to start a new religion. That notion is rooted in the theology of Moses and the prophets and scattered throughout the psalms. *God is merciful and steadfast and kind:* not because we deserve it, but simply because it is who God is. In fact, it's not an idea limited to the Bible. These are the opening words of the Holy Qur'an, the first and most important words of the very first Surah that are prayed every single day by faithful Muslims:

*In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful
Praise be to God the Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds;
Most Gracious, Most Merciful...*

In Arabic, as in Hebrew, the root word for mercy is closely related to the word for womb. The God who has birthed us, loves us: how could that God reject the offspring of Her own womb?

What would happen to us if we started to truly live out of that reality? How would it change us? Perhaps when we see someone else who is carrying a heavy burden, we might show them mercy rather than judgment. Perhaps we'd worry less about how other people are acting and more about how we can become more merciful, as God is merciful. The word "Christian" has a bad rap these days and I don't think it has a bad rap primarily because of a secular media or because people hate Christians. I think it has a bad rap because too many people, in the name of Christ, speak judgmental and bigoted words. And people think that because some very vocal people are out there saying things that are judgmental and bigoted that that is what it means to be a Christian. What would it take for the world, when hearing the word "Christian" to think: *God is merciful to everybody?* What would it take for the world, when hearing the word Christian, to think: "see how those Christians love one another?" What would it take for us to realize that we are all utterly dependent on God's mercy, every one of us, one day at a time—and then to live on that grace moment-by-moment, trusting that God's mercy makes full and abundant life possible. I submit to you that we'd be on our way to living our mission to participate in transforming a world that often feels cynical and caustic and unbearable into a new creation that is more meaningful, more hopeful, and more loving?

God has imprisoned all in disobedience, so that [God] may be merciful to all. At the end of the second section of Romans, Paul concludes that to be human is to be imprisoned in disobedience. We are a stiff-necked people: we Christians, Jews, Muslims, secular-atheists. All of us.

And still, God is merciful to all: *most gracious, most merciful.*