

Divided by Opinions
A Sermon on Romans 15:1-13
Second Sunday of Advent
December 4, 2016

Introduction

The original lectionary by the Roman Catholic church was dominated by the Gospel of Matthew and by Paul's Letter to the Romans. The early church believed that Matthew was the most important gospel and that Romans was Paul's most important letter. Their importance is reflected in their placement in the New Testament. Matthew is the first gospel and Romans is the first letter.

Romans has more theology in it than any other book in the New Testament. This theology was critical to St. Augustine and to the Protestant Reformation. Much of traditional Protestant theology comes right out of Romans.

Romans is also critical to the mystical tradition in Christian history. Christian spirituality draws largely on Romans.

This is my tenth year as your pastor, and I have never preached a series on Romans. We are going to fix that. Romans is the lectionary epistle this year, and Mary and I will preach on Romans all 20 times that it is on the lectionary.

Today's text sums up much of Paul's argument in the entire letter. I am not going to even try to summarize the entire letter. Instead I will focus on what this text has to say about Advent.

First Move: Divisions in the Church in Rome

Today's text is about how to be church together. Paul is addressing two different groups in the Roman churches. The traditional translation calls those two groups the strong and the weak. I believe that a more accurate translation is the powerful ones and the powerless ones, or the able ones and the unable ones.

Mary gave you part of the matrix for Romans last week. Claudius, the Roman emperor, expelled the Jews from Rome around 49 CE, perhaps for leading a tax revolt. That would have included Jewish Christians. They were not allowed to return until 54 CE. Gentile Christians were not forced to leave, so they took over the leadership of the churches in Rome. Paul writes his Letter to the Romans about five years after the Jewish Christians returned.

Apparently a dispute developed between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians. Paul talks about this dispute in Romans 14. The Jewish Christians still believed that they needed to observe the Jewish dietary laws and the Jewish festivals. The Gentile Christians thought that the Christ event made observing food laws and festival days unnecessary. Paul refers to the Jewish Christians as the weak or powerless or unable ones. This could be a reference to a weakness in faith, or it could refer to their economic condition when they returned to Rome from exile.

Paul tells the powerful ones that they are obligated to bear the weaknesses of the powerless. [I will be using my own translation as I go through the text.] The powerful ones as Gentiles were enemies of God and they have received a new life in Christ. The ethic of reciprocity obligates them to show their gratitude by bearing the weaknesses of the powerless ones.

Paul tells the powerful ones not to please themselves but to please the neighbor, and neighbor here would mean your neighbor in the Christian community. The purpose of pleasing the neighbor is to build up the community.

Paul refers to the example of Christ, who did not please himself but instead pleased God. Paul quotes from Psalm 68: “The insults of the ones insulting you have fallen upon me.” In the Psalm, God is being mocked for not defending the people of Israel against its enemies. God is the powerless one in the Psalm.

Paul has an exalted view of Scripture. “For whatever was written before was written for our instruction in order that through the endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures, we might have the hope.”

The hope is God’s hope that Jews and Gentiles would be united as one people and would join together in praising God at the end of the age. The Scriptures, which for Paul would be the Old Testament, helped the Jews endure whatever sufferings they faced and encouraged them to bear these burdens in the sure hope that all peoples of the earth would be united on the Day of the Lord.

Paul closes the first section of today’s text with a prayer. “Now may the God of [this] endurance and encouragement grant you to hold the same opinion among one another according to Christ Jesus, that with one mind, with one mouth, you might praise the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Instead of being divided by opinions about food laws and festival days, the powerful ones should take the same attitude that Jesus took with the outcasts, who were the powerless ones during his ministry.

Paul begins the second half of today’s text with another exhortation to the powerful: “Therefore welcome one another just as the Christ also welcomed you to [the] glory of God.”

The Greek word for welcome also carries the meaning of bringing into friendship. Jesus again is the example. He welcomed tax collectors and sinners to eat with him. If you have been invited to eat with Jesus, you should extend the same welcome to your neighbor in the Christian community who has a different opinion about traditions.

Paul ties it all up by summarizing the purpose of the first coming of Christ, in his earthly ministry: “For I say [that] Christ has become a deacon of the circumcised.” A deacon is a table servant. Paul uses the perfect tense—it denotes action in the past that continues into the present. Christ served the Jewish people and continues to serve them after his resurrection. Christ became a deacon “for the sake of [the] truth of God to confirm the promises of the fathers.” Christ was fulfilling the promise that God made to the patriarchs. In Genesis 12:1-3, God promised that Abraham that if you will go to a land that I will show you, your seed will become a great nation and all families of the earth will be blessed through you. Christ brings this blessing to the Gentiles, bringing them into the people of God. God shows mercy to the Gentiles, who were formerly enemies of God. “For the sake of mercy the nations, [may] glorify God.” The Greek word for Gentiles also can be translated as nations, which I believe is a better translation. Sometimes the nations includes all the nations besides Israel and sometimes it includes Israel. The Romans referred to all the peoples that they conquered as the nations.

Paul supports his conclusion with four citations from Scripture, one from each of the three major parts of the Old Testament: the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. Paul apparently intends to show that all of the Old Testament bears witness to God’s plan to bring Gentiles and Jews together as one people of God. The citation from Isaiah brings in a familiar image of Advent: “The shoot of Jesse will rise up to rule the nations, in him the nations will place hope.” Rising up is a reference to the Resurrection. The resurrected Christ will rule the nations on his return.

Paul closes with another prayer: “Now [may] the God of hope fill [you] with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in the hope through [the] power of [the] Holy Spirit.” Our hope comes from God, and it is God’s hope of all people uniting as one people. This will bring us joy and peace. If we trust in God’s promises, the power of the Holy Spirit will cause this hope to abound or overflow in us.

Second Move: Divisions in the Church Today

At the close of our study this fall on Violence in the Bible, John Dominic Crossan said that during the Protestant Reformation and for the next 400 years, Christianity divided vertically into denominations: Methodists, Episcopalians,

Presbyterians, Lutherans, Disciples of Christ, UCC. Now those vertical differences are not so important. Members of the mainline denominations go to seminary together and take all the same courses except for a course on the history and polity of their denominations.

The split now is horizontal between progressive Christians and conservative or evangelical Christians. It mirrors the political division in American society. There are progressive and conservative members in every congregation. The proportions are different. You will more progressive Christians in a Disciples congregation and more evangelicals in a Church of Christ. But there will be some conservatives in a Disciples congregation and some progressives in a Church of Christ.

The theological issue that divides progressive and evangelicals is eschatology. What are we hoping for? Progressives hope for the kingdom of God, a new age here on Earth where all people have enough to meet their basic needs and all people live in peace together. Evangelicals are hoping for an afterlife in heaven.

This is similar to the division that had arisen in Rome between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians. Progressive Christians believe that their hope is closer to what Paul and the historical Jesus were hoping for. The evangelical hope is closer to what orthodox Christian tradition was hoping for.

This is Peace Sunday. The Christian conviction is that peace can come only through God. Paul says it is the fruit of God's hope for the coming together of Gentiles and Jews.

This was a challenge to Roman imperial theology, which credited the emperor Augustus Caesar for bringing peace to the empire through military victory. Empires ever since have embraced this ideology. The American empire embraces it today. The slogan of our political establishment is peace through strength.

If we take the Sermon on the Mount seriously, then we cannot believe that violence will lead to anything other than more violence. Violence or strength brings not peace but an escalating cycle of violence. Can a Christian believe that more violence will bring peace to the Middle East? Many Christians, especially evangelical Christians, apparently do believe this, but that belief comes from political ideology not from the Scriptures.

Christians have different political opinions. Today's text suggests that if we are to be church, we should put those opinions aside and serve our neighbor. We rarely change people's opinions by argument. That causes people to dig in and defend their positions. The historical Jesus did not make rational arguments. He challenged conventional wisdom by using parables and aphorisms. He used jarring images to

force people to ask themselves, can the kingdom of God possibly be like a peasant woman searching for a lost coin?

Jesus modeled the new age by inviting outcasts to eat with him. He welcomed them into community. The church today can model the kingdom of God by welcoming people who are divided by their opinions and bringing them together as one people.

Third Move: Balancing Tolerance and Justice

An area that today's text does not address is, how far should Christians go in tolerating each other's opinions?

Paul did not tolerate all opinions in the church. In the closing verses of Romans (Romans 16:17-20), Paul urges the Romans to keep an eye on those who cause dissension and who serve their own appetites instead of serving the Lord.

The theologian John Cobb in his commentary on today's text suggests that there are limits to what opinions can be tolerated. Cobb says that opinions based on racism, sexism and heterosexism contradict the gospel. People who act on these opinions exclude and diminish people from participation in the full life of the church instead of welcoming and accepting them.

As the church has divided horizontally into progressive and evangelical forms of Christianity, it becomes harder to separate their theology from their politics. Crossan says that the church must be concerned about justice. It is one of the major themes in the Bible. There are two different types of justice that run through nearly every page of the Bible—distributive justice and retributive justice. Christians cannot sit by idly in the face of injustice.

On the other hand, most of the political discussion today addresses partisanship and political ideologies. These conflict with the gospel more than they overlap with it. The political arena does not have open and honest discussion about issues such as racism, sexism and heterosexism. The political arena does not even address bringing an end to violence or making American society less violent.

John Dear, the Catholic priest who spoke here two years ago, says that our churches should be laboratories for non-violence. We should be instructing our parishioners how to practice non-violence in their daily lives. That means, in part, not judging people by their opinions, no matter how offensive their opinions are to us. We can actually interact with someone in church that we disagree with instead of blasting them on social media. We can listen to them and try to understand their beliefs instead of forcing our own opinions on them. We can love them.

Practicing non-violence in our daily lives also means taking part in the political arena to resist injustice, participating in grass-roots movements for peace and justice. Our congregation joined VOICE this year. VOICE is a group of congregations and non-profit organizations that organizes on poverty, education and criminal justice. Get involved in one of these areas in VOICE.

Conclusion

Our hope comes from God, that all people can live in peace. Our endurance and our encouragement also comes from God through the Scriptures. God promised Abraham that all families of the earth would be blessed through him.

Advent is about anticipation of this promise and preparing the way for the coming of a new age. Churches can help prepare the way by welcoming each other and pleasing each other as Christ welcomed and pleased us. Then we will no longer be divided by opinions.

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