

“A plea for unity, a cry for peace”
Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:1-13; Psalm 72: 1-7, 18-19
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The letter to the Romans has long been repeatedly analysed word for word, sentence for sentence. It has been regarded as a source of deep and often difficult-to-understand theology. And that it is.

Mining the letters of Paul for precious theological nuggets sometimes makes us forget that his letters are primarily pastoral. His letters do much like what your pastors do when you approach them for counsel. They listen to you, pray for you, encourage you, give you counsel, and if called for, correct you. This is also exactly what Paul's letters do.

We ask ourselves therefore: What makes the letter to the Romans pastoral, and if so, how may this pastoral counsel be relevant to us today?

What was happening to the Christian communities in Rome that Paul wrote this pastoral letter to them before he even met them?

Christianity was brought to Rome by Jews who had previously travelled to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost, heard and believed Peter's speech, and then brought the faith with them back to Rome. There they announced the Good News of Christ to all including those outside the Jewish community – the Gentiles.

The arrival of the Christian faith divided the Jewish community – you can say that it became a “wedge issue” like what they say today. There was so much trouble and mayhem caused by this wedge issue between the believers and non-believers within the Jewish community that the Roman Emperor Claudius expelled them from Rome sometime around AD 50. You know about Priscilla and Aquila who met Paul and Apollos. Their story is recorded in Acts 18. They were among

the Roman Jews deported by the Claudius. The Christian community in Rome were now left to the Gentile Christians who then made it their own.

Eventually, the expelled Jewish Christians returned to Rome to find that they don't recognize their church anymore – it had been taken over by the Gentiles. It led to conflict.

I'll pause here and reflect that sadly; we may still see this type of conflict in our churches today. You know what I mean. Let's think about that for a moment.

The Gentiles developed a feeling of superiority over the Jewish believers who returned. The Jewish believers who returned found their faith traditions violated – dietary laws, the Sabbath, etc. In this atmosphere of conflict, discord, suspicion, mutual disdain among fellow believers, specifically between Gentile and Jewish believers – to this people Paul wrote his pastoral letter sometime between 56 and 57 AD.

Again we pause and I ask us to think of some of the non-theological conflicts that have troubled our churches, sometimes split our churches. The hymnals, the music, chairs versus pews, even the colour scheme sometimes. To this I say we're not in heaven yet and still have much to learn from God. Paul's letter is how he pastorally counseled the Gentile and Jewish Christians in order to help them sort out their conflicts.

The entire letter to the Romans beginning in chapter 1 builds up to chapter 15 – the way to unity and peace within the body of Christ in their time and situation. The whole letter was Paul's plea for unity, a cry for peace. We have simply loved to chop the letter into little bites for its golden theological nuggets, and rightly so, but forgot about the people in conflict with one another, to whom this was sent.

Here is the whirlwind tour:

Paul began by systematically explaining the relationship between God and man: the meaning of righteousness, the impossibility of attaining righteousness through one's own efforts or through obedience to a set of rules alone, and the reality that righteousness is given to us through Christ through faith. These and other foundational truths Paul presented in what we now have as chapters 1 to 11 of Romans. These foundational truths, the position of the Jews and Gentiles before God, all build up to Paul's cry for unity in the end, chapter 15, before ending the letter with final greetings in chapter 16.

After the establishing the foundational truths of righteousness by faith, Paul turns to the practice of righteousness in chapters 12 to 14 with these famous and beloved words: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship."

And then we now see better what the pastoral counsel was in chapter 15. The strong must bear with the weak, not because of pride in being the stronger, but because of a Christ-like servant attitude. The strong must serve and take care of the weak.

But this is a sensitive issue: who are the strong and who are the weak?

We may find this silly now, but the hot button issues then were dietary restrictions and Sabbath observance. Jewish Christians were still observant practicing Jews. If you find this difficult to understand – why after all Christ liberated them from the Law they still bind themselves to the Law – consider this: those of us raised in the traditions of our ancestors, even if we find ourselves outside of our countries of birth, we find that those traditions stick with us longer than we imagined they could.

We are free to let them go, but neither does it really matter if we hang on to them by force of habit. For example, I could never ever call my mother by her first name, neither could I call my father by his first name when he was still alive.

I just couldn't – I wasn't raised that way. If I forced myself to call them by their first names, I would violate my own conscience, and that's not good.

What then was the problem?

The Gentile Christians who never grew up observing the Law, felt they were superior in their practice of freedom from the Law. They looked down on the Jewish believers who still practiced Jewish tradition. The Jewish believers on the other hand considered Gentile Christians as the barbarians who remained incomplete in their faith because they didn't buy into the Jewish lifestyle. Today, some might dismiss others as old-fashioned, and the old-fashioned think of others as semi-heathen and worldly. This type of conflict that afflicted the Christians in Rome seems to afflict us even today. Lord have mercy, let there be more peacemakers among us!

Paul in our reading today constructs his pastoral counsel beautifully. Let me mention a few highlights

- To the Gentile Christians, Paul had strong words: Don't be so self-righteous and self-serving!
- To the Jewish Christians he had this advice: Receive and accept these foreigners and strange people.
- To the Gentile Christians he said that if they receive insults and abuse from the other group, they must remember that Christ himself received all manner of abuse and insults.
- To the Jewish Christians, he said that since Christ received them, they must also receive others no matter their origins.

And finally, Paul ends both in both texts with a prayer of hope for harmony, unity and peace among the groups, to the glory of God.

In what manner is Paul's text still relevant to us today?

Well, like those early Christians in Rome, we are different from each other. Paul's letter tells us that rather than permit these differences to turn into areas of misunderstanding, let us instead see these as areas of challenge and growth – that we become part of the fulfillment of Paul's prayer of hope.

Centuries ago, Shakespeare explored many of these tensions, stereotypes and conflicts in the person of Shylock the Jewish moneylender and Antonio the Merchant of Venice.

I would like to read to you Shylock's powerful speech from Act 3, Scene 1. While I read this, I want you to pretend that I am someone you find hard to love – the person you can't get along with – the person who you would rather not see.

Listen carefully:

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?

To this speech I will add: Did God not create us equal, male and female? Did God not also create us in community: Adam and Eve, not just Adam alone? Did God not choose Abraham to be a great nation – a community? Did Jesus not call to himself his 12 disciples, his community? And did Jesus not go to the cross for each one of us and all of us who belong to him?

Therefore, in obedience to God's intentions and to his glory, we will aim to live in community, using our differences not in disunity but in Christ-like service to one another. In a true sense we must begin to live like as if we are already in that which Isaiah foresaw in chapter 11, our OT reading for today, when indeed the old nature will pass, and the new creation will be ushered in where ancient barriers will be no more, old hostilities will be a thing of the past: when truly, the

wolf will live peacefully with the lamb, the leopard with a young goat, and the ox, the lion, the cow and the bear will graze together.

Let us end with that which the Apostle wrote to the Romans, an ascription of praise to our God:

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.