

Todd R. Allen
2017
Interim Pastor
of Easter

April 30,
Second Sunday

“Mileposts”
“The Story”: Chapter 29

Scripture: Acts, Chapters 13-20
Pauline Epistles

First Reading: Letter to the Romans (excerpts)

²¹ But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness is given through faith in^[h] Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement,^[i] through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— ²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

²⁷ Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. ²⁸ For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.

Second Reading: First Letter to the Corinthians (excerpts)

¹² Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For we were all baptized by^[c] one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. ¹⁴ Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

¹⁵ Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell

be? ¹⁸ But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.

Third Reading: Letter to the Galatians

²³ Before the coming of this faith, ^[1] we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. ²⁴ So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

²⁶ So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Opening Prayer: Grant, Lord God, that the words of my mouth—and the meditations of our hearts—would be acceptable in Your sight, for You remain our Rock and our Redeemer.

Amen.

What is in a title—of a sermon, that is...?

“Mileposts”

Well, a play on a publication name we know well, here in Alaska. How many of us have one in our vehicles—hands up? Thought so...

Because traveling is also serious business, at least in a part of the world where many miles separate things—among them gas stations; if you are taking a trip along the ALCAN, for instance, it is important to know where you can get fuel....

And the idea of a journey is also the focus of today’s chapter in “The Story”—Chapter 29. How so? Well, for no sooner has the Holy Spirit come down at Pentecost—the

event we recalled last week—than the disciples are sent out to be evangelists—or, quite literally, “bearers of Good News”.

Peter. Paul. The rest of the 12. Each of them is given the language in which to communicate—to share—the news of Christ Jesus, and to do so not just in Judea and Samaria, but also to “the ends of the earth.” And so, off they go and what Chapter 29 combines for us today is one part history—we are told where the disciples went and what happened to them--and also one part theology--what they believed and what they said along the way...

I want to concentrate, today, upon that last part—what they said—and believed—about Jesus as Christ, and I also want to suggest that there are mileposts—important points along the way, as it were—that give us an insight into their beliefs—and to how it is being refined—even stretched. In other words, people like Peter and Paul did not begin their work with every last detail of their thinking about God in place. They had a deep—and remarkable faith in Jesus, to be sure, but—in the days to come—the God who urged them on would also test—and expand—their faith. God acts—as I’ve suggested--much like a wild goose in our midst—leading us on. He surely led the first disciples....

Take Paul. He is really the focus of today’s chapter in the book, and Paul is rightly considered a pillar of the faith—as a person with a singular significance for the growth—and the spread—of Christianity. What would Scripture be without his letters—or epistles--to the Corinthians—the Philippians—the Ephesians—the Romans? Impoverished, for sure! For these letters provide not just a wealth of practical advice on how to live out our faith, friends—they also provide an insight into Paul’s theology—and how God worked to enrich—and to expand—it.

What do I mean?

Well, take Paul’s letter to the Romans.

Its placement—as the first of Paul’s letters in our Bible—is not historically accurate, because other letters pre-date it, but its placement suggests a primacy; in fact, scholars consider it Paul’s magnum opus, his most fully developed statement of faith in Christ Jesus. But let’s note that it comes from a point well down the road for him—that it was penned after many mileposts--along the way....

What had Paul taken in, along the way?

How was his faith enriched—and expanded...?

There is no doubt that Paul gained a richer—and a deeper—understanding of God’s plan of salvation. Earlier in Acts there is great confusion on this matter. We read that there are differing views, for instance, on who should hear the Good News about Christ first. Should they be Jews? Well, this made sense: after all Jesus was a Jew and he largely confined his ministry within the borders of Israel, but--then again--something unexpected was happening: The Gentiles—or those who worshipped other gods—had—by and large—become the most receptive to the Good News while the Jews—again, by and large—had continued to hold it at arm’s length. Did it make the most sense, therefore, for the disciples to concentrate their missionary work in the direction of the Gentiles? Well, it did, but—and here is my point—what did this say to the place of the Jews in God’s plan of salvation.

It was a huge question, then. It still is a question asked into our own time. It plunged Paul into deep thought—and perhaps into the very deepest thought because he was both a Jew and perhaps the foremost student of what we now call the Old Testament. Where did Paul come out? Well, he came to believe what he pens here, in his letter to Rome....

Why were the Jews—by and large—opposing the Good News?
Why were they being so slow to take it to heart?

To Paul, the answer was painfully simple: Their resistance was giving more time for the Gentiles to come to faith—to be evangelized. Now, did this mean that God’ love for the Jews has changed in any way? By no means! The covenant—the agreement—between God and Abraham still stood—but—all the same--as Paul reflected upon Abraham’s faith in God, he came to understand—perhaps more clearly than he had previously—the role of faith when it comes to our salvation, and here—in a nutshell—is what he found: It doesn’t matter whether you are a Jew—or a Gentile: If you—as an individual—have a trust in God like that which Abraham had, friends, this—THIS—is all that matters. To put it plainly: If you and I believe—trust--have faith--that God has acted to save us—in Christ Jesus—this is what matters---THIS makes you kin to Abraham: *“I am not ashamed of the gospel”* Paul writes, *“because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes—first the Jew—and then to the Gentile...”*

His starting point.

But it matters what you trust in—doesn't it? And here's is where Paul must confront—as you and I must confront—the value we place upon works—upon the good deeds that we do....

Are good deeds the means by which we are made to stand in God's favor? Are they the avenue through which we become "righteous"—to use the term Paul uses?

How agonizing—and yet how liberating--it must have been for Paul to come a new understanding of good deeds, and again--in a nutshell—this is what he discovered: *our good deeds matter—they do!—but they do not matter in the way we think they do—or think they should.*

For the Jews of Paul's day—and into our own day, really—works—good deeds—righteous acts—had a central place in the life of a believer. It was the way in which they drew closer to God—even gained God's favor, they believed--but when Paul looked at the life of Abraham, well, he re-thought this equation: *"If in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God."* What is Paul saying? He is telling us that Abraham—and all of us—fall short of being made righteous before God by anything we can do—or can ever do—because we are sinners.

"But now—NOW--apart from the Law, the righteousness of God has been revealed" Paul continues, *"and this righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God—and all are justified freely by His grace—that is, the grace of God—through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus:*

God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of His blood—to be received by faith. And what does Scripture say: "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness..."

Now, is this all a bit esoteric? Well, perhaps it is, and perhaps this is not quite what you expected me to say this morning, but the placement of this letter to the Romans—this magnum opus of Paul, as the first epistle in our Bible, friends, speaks to the foundational importance of this insight of Paul: Do our good deeds matter? *Not when it comes to our salvation, for there is nothing we can do, as sinful human beings, to merit salvation, BUT—and here's the Good News—Jesus Christ has done the Good Deed that grants us salvation.*

Now, what are some more implications from this line of thinking?

Well, for one, you and I can—and we must—refrain—from believing that anyone is beyond the reach of God’s grace. That’s right: You and I must hold the best hope that someone like Hitler—Stalin—or an Assad or Kim Jung Il—is not beyond the reach of God’s love in Christ Jesus. We must. Any simple reading of Paul’s Letter to the Romans, friends, must make this a rule for us.

And if you think that is hard thing for us to do, well, of course, you’d be right: These people are heinous. We are right to decry—and to oppose them, as well--*but we must also believe there is also a door open to them to show their faith in Christ through repenting of what they have done—and by showing their repentance through doing good deeds: “Who is the One, then who condemns? No one!” Paul concludes: “For Christ Jesus who died—more than that—who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.”*

God does not give up on anyone.

Nor should we....

And, now to another implication from what we read in Romans—and an implication that has challenged—and continues to challenge us: The place of a believer in the life of a faith community, or—to put it another way: How should the Church of Jesus Christ BE the church? How should believers behave? Treat one another?

Now, of course, the most obvious—and correct—answer—is to show the love of Christ—to embody “agape,” as Keith is fond of saying. But the truth of the matter is that you and I friends, may share a faith in Christ Jesus, but we are not the same in many ways—I certainly do not have your dashing good looks, Spencer!---but—in all seriousness—one of the most pressing problems Paul deals with—in his letters—is a belief that differences between believers—in gifts, customs—and a whole host of other matters--is at odds with God’s will.....

Now, in just saying the Letter of the Corinthians, we know the words—the teaching—of Paul here quite well; in fact, we’ve just heard again those memorable words, penned in Chapter 12. Well-known words they are. But words that we may know too well, for they were radical in the day—and they should still stretch us now...

How so?

Well, what is Paul saying here? He is saying that there are no second-class Christians. Period! Now, I imagine most of us—here today—would say “Amen!” to this—and if you feel moved to say that, feel free!—“Amen!” But surely it is part of our nature—as human beings—to make comparisons, friends, is it not? And is it not also our nature to then draw some conclusions, based on these comparisons? I think so--and here’s the next question: How hard is it—and let’s be honest—to make big changes in how you and I see other people—in how we treat them?

It’s not so easy, is it?

You know, it can be easy for us to dismiss some of the reasons—held by believers long ago—for relegating people into second-class categories. The disciples of Jesus, for instance, held to the belief that a person born blind—or afflicted with a disease like leprosy—was carrying the sin of their parents upon them and—as such—deserved to be shunned. But what did Jesus do? Well, he reached out, especially to these hurting individuals—he healed them physically—and then he did something perhaps even more important: He restored them to community life. Remember the ten lepers made clean? What were they to do? Well, they were to show themselves to the local priest. And why? So that they—that is, the ten men—could then re-enter society—even attend the local synagogue, once more.

And what of Zacheaus? Well, the same thing was achieved—he is restored to community life, as it were--but here we should remember that repentance—even making amends—was called for. It is a behavior that Paul adheres to in his letters. Let me put it this way: Does “anything go”, friends, when it comes to the life of a believer in a community of faith? Certainly not! The list of prohibited actions Paul lifts up for us—not just in Corinthians, but in his other letters—points to the necessity of leaving an old life behind to show one’s faith in Christ. Those who continue in adulterous relationships, for example, have no place—Paul tells us—within a community of faith without repentance and a changed life. *But let’s not also lose sight—as our God surely does not—of the power of the Spirit to affect such a turning around—right?*

And what did I just say about how hard it can be for us to make big changes in how we see other people—and in how we treat them?

It is not easy.

But we have been changed how we see other people—and fellow believers--over the years.

Today, for instance, we not only ordain women to the role of elder as Presbyterians: We also ordain—or set aside—women to serve us as pastors.... We did not do this until the second half of the twentieth century, and—of course—it took a far longer period of time for people of color to hold anything like the same rights—and respect—within the walls of many church buildings....

We can be changed—and God continues to work on us, friends! Yes, God IS like a wild goose: Always on the move, and honking: Calling attention—let me suggest—to attitudes—and to practices—of the Church of His Son that say someone is a second-class Christian due to being different. Diversity—as Paul teaches us here—is the means by which the Church of Jesus Christ really IS the Church of Jesus Christ: *“For there are different kinds of gifts—but the same Spirit distributes them. We were all given the One Spirit to drink; even so, the Body is not made up of one part, but of many.*

But if the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But—in fact—God has placed the parts in the body—EVERYONE of them—just as He WANTED them to be...”

Anyone—anyone!—can—and should—have a place in the working of the Body of Christ—here is Paul’s insight. And here is his challenge to us: *Sometimes those we hold of least account, friends, are the very ones most needed for the Church to BE the Church of Jesus Christ...*

As I say, one of the earliest of Paul’s letters, and an effort—on Paul’s part—to lay out his theology—to explain the rationale of how the Church of Jesus Christ should BE the church.

And now, another question: “If the Church of Jesus Christ IS the kind of faith community God intends it to be, what difference does it make—for the world?” I want to travel further down the road now—so to speak—because, to me, Paul’s letters are not limited only to life within the Church: They are also concerned with how the Church—we, the faithful—lead lives in the world.

“How should we practice our faith—friends—when we leave this place?”

“How do we witness to Christ when tomorrow, for instance, we return to school—to work—to other public places?”

Good questions....

Some years ago, the comedian Flip Wilson, was asked about his faith. He claimed to be a “Jehovah’s Bystander”—in his words. And why? They wanted him to be a Jehovah’s witness—but he—quote—“ didn’t want to get involved.”

Well, Paul gets involved, doesn’t he? Doesn’t he? Well he does—and he gets involved in the world in such a way, friends, that he is a source of comfort—and deep challenge—to those around him, especially to the powers that be. And he is fearless—made bold even--by what the Cross of Christ has accomplished—and I turn, now, to his letter to the Galatians:

“Before coming to this faith” he writes, “ we were held in custody under the law—locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed—so The Law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. But now this faith has come, and we are no longer under a guardian—

For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, neither slave nor free—nor is their male and female—for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

The Cross of Christ has made a difference Paul declares—and that difference impacts human relationships—and human society.

But what kind of an impact?

As believers, human beings have struggled with this idea—even wrestled with this passage of Paul-- for years.

For what is Paul saying? Is he saying, for instance, that gender no plays a part in our lives? That we are no longer male—or female? That there are no differences between men and women?

I doubt it.

Is he saying that slavery is wrong—that, in effect, there should be no slaves and no masters?

Well, Paul was a Roman citizen, part of society in which slavery was a fact of life—nowhere, in his letters do we find an opposition to the practice, even in his letter to Philemon in the matter of Onesimus, his run-away slave. But when—in this same letter—Paul urges Philemon to treat Onesimus as “more than a slave” because both Philemon and Onesimus are believers, well, we are onto something—onto something that the Cross of Christ has made possible—and **that something, friends, is the comfort—and the challenge—of being “clothed with Christ”**: Is Onesimus still a slave? Yes, he is. Is Philemon, still a master? Yes—but *their relationship—one to another—is meant to be different because they are both clothed with Christ....* And this understanding applies also to other relationships—male and female, as Paul has noted...

But is the call to Philemon to treat Onesimus as “more than a slave” just confined to life within the church? How should Philemon treat him—that is, Onesimus—outside the church—in public? And what if this treatment—so to speak—is not socially acceptable? What, then.....?

Now, the example I’ve lifted up here does not strictly apply to today—after all, slavery is officially a thing of the past—but the question still applies: How should our faith inform our public lives? How we act, day and day out—how we interact with other people? *You know, I honestly think that what Paul writes here, in Galatians, has implications far wider than even he could imagine*: Could he imagine, one day, that the leading voices calling for the Abolition of the Slave Trade would be Christian? Probably not—but—again—was the desire to free the slaves a logical outgrowth of a desire to treat people as “more than slaves?” What about the Civil Rights movement? Was it is not also an outgrowth of this same desire? What about the Equal Rights for Women movement? Were not these movements also a logical outgrowth of the faith of people “clothed in Christ”—people who believed that one nation—under God—should extend—and protect—the same God-given rights to all people, regardless of their race and their gender....?

Oh, it has been a journey today—and surely it was a journey for Paul so long ago. As he began it, Paul took with him a faith in Christ Jesus that was well-grounded—but surely it was expanded—as our faith always is—by the working of the Spirit—the flight of the Wild Goose.

What are the mileposts on your journey?

What have been the stops, along the way, where your faith has been refined—tested, even?

Let us give thanks to the God who is with us, as we travel—to the God who calls us to grow deeper in faith—and to the God who has saved us—and fashioned us—for a high purpose: To be evangelists—to be “bearers of Good News”

Amen.