

Lectionary 19A  
Romans 10:1-17

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*Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. I can testify that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.*

*Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that "the person who does these things will live by them." But the righteousness that comes from faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) "or 'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."*

*But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.*

One of the commentaries I consulted in my sermon preparation this week began with this sentence: "Of all the lectionary readings taken from Romans, this one may deserve to be labeled as the most challenging for the preacher." With those encouraging words, I began to think that maybe a vacation Sunday would be in order. But it was a little late for arranging that, so let's dive in and see what Paul is trying to tell his readers in chapter 10.

It had been over twenty years since Saul, the zealous persecutor of the followers of Jesus, had experienced a life-changing encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus and as a result became a bold apostle who traveled around the Mediterranean area telling the good news of Jesus and founding Christian communities in many cities such as Corinth and Philippi. But he had never been to Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire, and his hope was that he would travel through Rome on his ultimate destination to Spain, where he hoped to share the story of Jesus with the far western end of the empire. Other Christian missionaries had already been to Rome and there was a Christian community there comprised of both Jewish Christians and non-Jewish, or Gentile, Christians. Paul wrote this letter, which we know as Romans, as a way of introducing himself to that community.

Let me quickly summarize what Paul has said to this point. In the first eight chapters, Paul has been explaining his understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He uses a variety of terms to state the theme, but it is the same theme over and over and over: God is righteous. God is faithful to the promises he has made to his people. God is faithful to the goal or destiny he has for his creation. God's love is unfailing. God's grace is all-encompassing. Paul sums up the theme of the letter in the final verse of chapter 8 – “nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Paul then turns his attention to a reality that is personally painful for him. Many, if not most, of his people – the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel; the “chosen” people; the people of the covenant; his brothers and sisters in the faith of Israel – many, if not most, of his people do not recognize that God has established a new basis for righteousness in Jesus. They reject the claim that Jesus is the messiah. Jesus was a Jew. The original disciples were Jews. Paul is a Jew. Paul firmly believes that the death and resurrection of Jesus marks the redemption of all creation, all people – but first and foremost it is the redemption of God's chosen people, the fulfillment of God's promises that go all the way back Abraham.

But if the blessing God promised to Abraham and his descendants -- a blessing Paul knows to have been fulfilled in Christ (Romans 4:11-12) – if that blessing is rejected by those descendants, then God's redemptive word has been defeated. And if God's word can be defeated by Israel's rejection, then what assurance can anyone have of God's redemptive word? How can we know that God's redemptive word, spoken in Christ, may not also eventually fail for us? How can we be sure that the promise God makes to us in baptism is trustworthy? That is what is at stake here in chapters 9, 10, and 11 – can God be trusted to keep his promises or not?

That is the context for the passage from chapter 10 we have read this morning. Paul now returns to a subject that he dealt with earlier – the law, or Torah. Paul understands the law to be God's gracious gift to his people. The law is a good thing, says Paul, unless it is used in a way that God never intended – as a means of becoming righteous, in a positive relationship, with God. Paul used Abraham as the prime example that our righteousness is based solely on faith, or trust, in God, for centuries before God gave the law to Moses on Mt. Sinai, the book of Genesis says, “Abraham believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.”

When God later gave the law to Moses and the rest of Abraham's descendants, it was not as a means for them to become acceptable to God. God had already elected them to be his chosen people. If you look up Exodus 20, where the Ten Commandments are written, you will note that the commandments begin with a simple statement of fact: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” Period. The LORD God declares that he has already established a relationship with the people of Israel. “I am your God. You are my people. Trust me and my promise, and you are thereby in a positive relationship with me -- you are righteous. Now here are some laws for you to use to order your relationships with me and your neighbor. You'll find that if you abide by them, your relationships will be healthy and life will generally go well for you.”

The law is a good thing, says Paul, unless it is used in a way that God never intended – as a means of becoming righteous, or in a positive relationship, with God. That is what Paul sees to have happened. People have turned the law from a “because...therefore” into an “if...then.” God intended the law to be a “because...therefore” – because I have chosen you, therefore you shall live in this way. Understood in this way, the law is a gift. But human beings turn the law around and make it an “if...then” – if you obey these commandments, then I will love you.

It's understandable why we easily fall into this trap of turning our relationship with God into an "if...then" proposition. It's because that's how we experience most aspects of our lives. If we do all our homework and answer 80% of the test questions correctly, then we will get a "B." If we pass the driving test, then we will receive a driver's license. If we earn 23 merit badges, then we become an Eagle Scout. If we sell the quota of thing-a-ma-jigs that the company set for us, then we will get a bonus.

We are trained all our lives to understand that we must do "this" in order to get "that," and so it should come as no surprise that this same mindset tends to color the way we understand our relationship with God. We think that we must have to do something for God to love us; that we are in some way partners with God in our salvation. And how do we think we do that? Well, by obeying the commandments; by being a "good" person. That's what we "do." That's our "part."

The prevalence of this way of thinking about our relationship with God is often seen when someone dies. Friends and family will say, "He was such a good person and did so many wonderful things in the community. I just know he's in heaven." Or it might be at the other end of the spectrum: "He was a good-for-nothing who caused his family no end of trouble. Not much doubt on where he's spending eternity."

Both of those comments presume that keeping the law is the means by which we become righteous before God. When we understand the law in this way, it becomes a stumbling block in our relationship with God, for it assumes our righteousness is based on us. And that, friends, is self-idolatry—making ourselves god. God isn't necessary in this scenario. It's all about us and what we do or don't do.

Paul will have none of this, and he makes his case by appealing to, of all people, Moses! Moses, the one through whom God gave the law. Paul quotes Moses in his farewell speech, given just prior to his death. Moses is exhorting the people to be faithful to the covenant God made with them and says,

*Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe. (Deuteronomy 30:11-14)*

Paul uses a method of scripture interpretation he learned as a Pharisee to discern a further meaning in this text. He interprets these verses from Deuteronomy in this way:

*Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that "the person who does these things will live by them." But the righteousness that comes from faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) "or 'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*

Paul is not implying that Moses was speaking of Christ when he was addressing the people of Israel 1200 years earlier. What Paul is saying is that he sees in scripture evidence that, even in Israel's past, what God wanted for his people was "the righteousness that comes from faith." Trusting God totally ("in your heart") and acknowledging such trust through public confession ("with your mouth"), are what Christ as fulfiller of the law can and does bring about. This is the gospel for all people, says Paul: "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him." And then he quotes the prophet Joel, "For every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved."

Paul then makes a case for the necessity of preaching the gospel. He asks a series of four questions, all which expect the answer "they can't." How can people call upon a God they have not believed? (they can't!) And how are they to believe in a God of whom they have never heard? (they can't!) And how are they to hear without a preacher? (they can't!) And how can there be preachers unless they are sent? (they can't!). Paul concludes: "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ."

This is not only a call to me and all preachers, but it is also a call to you and all listeners. Faith comes from attentive listening. Perhaps that is why the Bible puts so much emphasis on God's Word and on those who hear it, who then in turn must announce it to others. Jesus concluded some of his parables saying, "Let those with ears let them hear," but he also said, "Go and tell." Perhaps that is the only way a redemptive act which occurred in the past can continue to be a present reality for us – in the telling and the hearing of it.

Next week we'll read from chapter 11 and hear Paul's concluding thoughts on whether or not God has rejected his chosen people.