

¹Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, ²which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, ³the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh ⁴and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, ⁵through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, ⁶including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, ⁷To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ...

¹⁶For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith."

²¹But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, ²²the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, ²³since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; ²⁶it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. ²⁷Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. ²⁹Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, ³⁰since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. ³¹Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

My dad and I traveled to Europe in 2000, spending three weeks in Germany, Denmark, and Sweden. We didn't have any connections with anyone in Germany or Denmark, and there we traveled simply as tourists. But Sweden was different. In Sweden we had family. Now we had never met any of this family and they had never heard of Wayne and Russell Peterson, but when you travel that far, a second cousin once removed becomes a close relative.

We didn't just show up in Sweden, find their house, and knock on their door. We wrote letters first. We wrote a letter to Ruth in Helsingborg explaining that my dad's grandmother was the oldest sister of her mother. To Margareta and Lars in Stockholm we explained that my mother was a cousin of Lars' cousin. After establishing our family credentials, we described when we would be arriving in Sweden and that we would like to meet them and visit with them for awhile. The letters had the desired effect – when we arrived in Sweden, Ruth, Margareta, and Lars were expecting us and they proved to be most gracious hosts for us.

The letters we wrote to Sweden are in some ways like the letter Paul wrote to the Christian community at Rome. Paul had been an apostle for about 25 years at this time – about the year 57 or 58 A.D. He had gone on missionary journeys that took him through Asia Minor and Greece. Sometimes he traveled with Barnabas, for whom our congregation is named. Paul had a dream of taking the gospel of Jesus Christ to Spain, to the far end of the Roman Empire, and to get there he would travel through Rome, that great imperial city. There was a Jewish community in Rome, though they had been expelled by the emperor in the year 49 for a brief time. There was also a small Christian community there, which is a good reminder to us that Paul was not the only missionary of this era. Because Paul's letters have survived, we know of his ministry, but there were many other Christian missionaries that went throughout the empire, telling people about Jesus and establishing house churches. Some unnamed missionary had arrived in Rome years earlier and had been "pastor/developer" for that congregation, just as Paul had founded congregations in Philippi and Corinth.

Since Paul planned to travel through Rome on his journey to Spain, he writes this letter as a way of introducing himself, in the hope that the Roman Christians will be expecting him and give him a warm welcome when he arrives. His purpose for the letter is to establish his credentials as an apostle by outlining his understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Narrative Lectionary has us spending four weeks listening to sections of this letter. This morning's reading is a bit of a challenge because it includes the first part of chapter 1 and the last half of chapter 3, making a huge jump over the intervening material. What I am going to attempt to do is give you a brief summary of Paul's line of reasoning in this section, but I would encourage you to read all of chapters 1-3 at home this week.

Paul starts out by firmly rooting the story of Jesus in the Hebrew scriptures -- that in Jesus, God is fulfilling promises he made to the prophets and King David. He is eager, he says, to preach this gospel to those in Rome as he has preached it everywhere he has gone. "I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written (and here he quotes the prophet Habakkuk) 'The one who is righteous will live through faith.'"

There are two key words in this passage for which it is absolutely vital that we understand how Paul uses them. Those words are “righteousness” and “faith”. Let’s start with the word righteousness.

Righteousness is definitely a church word. By that I mean that it is seldom used in our everyday conversation, unless we happen to be fans of the old singing group, The Righteous Brothers. Depending on what translation of the Bible one uses, the Greek word used here can be translated “righteousness” or “justice”, and its related verb as “to justify” or “to make righteous”. The choice the translator makes reveals his or her understanding of the concept.

The term can be understood as “distributive justice”, that is, in the sense that one gets what is coming to them. A sentence in a law court is “just” if the punishment meted out is appropriate to the crime committed. A synonym would be “fair”. Something is “just” if it is “fair” to all involved. If that is what the concept means for Paul, then he is using the terminology of the law court to say that we are pronounced “just” by God through our faith in his Son; that is, we are judged not to have broken God’s commands and are freed from the charge and penalties of sin. The difficulty with this understanding of righteousness is that God appears to regard us as something we are not; that is, sinless. I have heard some explain the concept by saying God regards us “as if” we had no sin, but then God’s judgment is based on an untruth, hardly what one would expect from a just and impartial God.

To avoid the problems with this legal understanding of the term, some scholars prefer the translation “righteousness” and have understood it in the sense of an attribute of God. God by his very nature cannot do what is morally wrong, and so it is appropriate to call God “righteous”. The problem with this understanding has to do with what it means that humans are “made righteous”. Does it mean they have a new moral nature given to them? Yet it is clear that even Christians who are “made righteous” by faith are often no better morally than non-Christians who are not so made righteous. Again, to say God regards what we do as moral even when it is not is to introduce an element of sham into divine judgment that is quite foreign to Paul.

There is a third way to understand this term, and it comes out of the way it is used in the Old Testament. There the term is regularly used in connection with the concept of covenant. To be “just” or “righteous” is to uphold the covenant. To be “unrighteous” is to act in such a way that the covenant is broken. In this context, righteousness is used to describe a relationship. [*Explanation of “righteousness” taken from Paul Achtemeier’s Commentary on Romans*]

This is the best way to understand how Paul uses this term in Romans. To say that God is righteous means that God acts to restore or uphold a covenant, to restore human beings to a positive relationship to himself. A synonym might be “faithful”. To say that God is righteous is to say that God is faithful to his promises.

In the end of the passage we read this morning, Paul says that God’s righteousness is seen in the death and resurrection of Jesus: “But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed... the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified [made righteous] by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.”

In other words, Christ shows God’s faithfulness to his positive relationship to human beings, as Christ is also the means by which a restored relationship is offered to us. In the big section we skipped over this morning, Paul systematically made the case that all human beings are sinners and that our chief sin is idolatry – making something other than God the Lord of our life. Because of our sinfulness, we are “unrighteous”, we are unfaithful to the covenant God made with us. But even though we are not faithful, God remains faithful, God remains “righteous”, and God’s righteousness is seen in Jesus. It is the good news of the gospel that Christ represents God’s decision to keep the covenant promises, to uphold the relationship with humanity and renew it again. But, says Paul, it is important that we understand that we enter this relationship with God only because God has upheld it, not because we deserve it or have earned it. Paul calls the action by which we enter this relationship “faith” – that other key term in this passage. The best synonym for faith here is “trust”. When Paul talks about faith, he doesn’t mean a head activity; it’s not an intellectual assent to some set of doctrines. When Paul here speaks of faith, it’s a heart thing – when we trust that in Christ God has in fact restored us to himself, this relationship becomes real and life-giving to us.