

“Not Ashamed of the Gospel”
Texts: Romans 1:16-17
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“For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith...” Romans 1:16a

When I began my ministry at Morningside, in March of 2005 as seminary intern, my first assignment was to convene a new adult Sunday school class that would meet at 9:45 each Sunday morning in the recently refurbished Session Room. The subject or theme of the class was to be my choice, with two important conditions. The first was that the class needed to be attractive to the many new members who had joined the congregation in recent months. The second condition was that the class needed to start as soon as humanly possible. Well, I was a second-semester seminary student and enrolled in an enthralling class on Paul’s letter to the Romans. We were reading the letter in English and in Greek, we were contemplating the ancient Roman world that was its context, we were considering the impact of this preeminent and brilliant letter on all future Christian theology., from St. Augustine to Martin Luther to John Calvin. In short, the class constituted something close to seminary-geek heaven. I could not have been more at home. What better topic for a new Sunday school class than the letter to the Romans? I could start immediately, with the syllabus already in hand, and surely it would attract throngs of new parishioners, if not drawn by the captivating subject matter then certainly by this catchy title: “New Class: Studying Paul’s Letter to the Romans.” I prepared my notes and procured a stack of Bibles so that everyone would have one. I arrived early to be sure the room was comfortable and the flipchart markers were fresh. I waited. And waited. By 10:00, with three faithful souls in class, I decided it was time to start. Lesson learned.

Romans is a complex and deep theological document. It is not the most accessible or user-friendly of our Biblical books. It does not draw a crowd. If you want to introduce the Bible to someone new to Christianity, better to direct them to the Gospel of John or the Letter to the Philippians. Romans is the high watermark of Christian orthodoxy, an advanced course in the essential tenets of our faith. The content is perplexing and the style is highbrow.

Still, the *context* of this letter bears a striking resemblance to our own. Paul is writing to a community of sophisticated, thoughtful, intelligent, well-meaning, ethical people for whom Christian faith was not an accepted norm but a strange departure. If you were to walk into the office on Monday morning in First Century Rome, and announce with urgent zeal, “I have become a Christian,” you would have been met with the same blank stares and raised eyebrows that would greet you tomorrow morning in midtown Atlanta (I suggest you try it). Then, as now, refined and cultured metropolitan dwellers did not wear their faith on their sleeve. They could identify with a friend of mine who last week told me at lunch: “It’s getting to the point for me where I’m embarrassed to be a Christian. It’s becoming a source of shame.” Can you identify?

In a cultural context where every grand idea and complex subject is reduced to sound byte-sized one-liners, the most sensationalist and polarizing messages are the ones that make

the headlines or bring the lucrative contracts. So we listen as our religious beliefs are drowned out in a cacophony of loud-mouthed preachers with exclusive and judgmental messages. It's enough to leave us all red-faced in embarrassment and shame. Yes, I'm a Christian, but don't make a big deal out of it. I don't want everybody to know.

Into such a setting, Paul's letter rings out with defiant and bold conviction. The passage we read this morning is the theme of the letter and it is a warning sign to the readers. This is no lukewarm dispassionate plea. "Now hear this," Paul writes: "I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God for salvation to **everyone** who has faith." What follows in the letter may be complicated and intricate, but there is no mistaking the heart of its message and of Paul's gospel. No embarrassment. Only faith.

Anyone who knows me for very long learns that I love the New Testament. I have been particularly captivated by the letters of Paul since the first day of my "Life and Letters of the Apostle Paul" class in college, when E.P. Sanders painted a verbal picture of the religious landscape of the Roman Empire in the First Century and then described the unlikely, revolutionary preaching ministry of Paul in that context. In the Introduction to Preaching class at Columbia Seminary, I was moved by Chuck Campbell's depiction of Paul's conversion from an imagined ministry of violent persecution to a ministry of preaching the gospel without shame or apology. Because I love Paul, and because I believe in the power of the words of scripture not only to nourish but also to create communities of faith, I am deeply concerned about the role of the Bible in the contemporary church. I am concerned when this vibrant, diverse, powerful testimony is fashioned into a weapon of oppression. I am equally concerned when Christian believers reduce this witness to a living and active God to mere social statements from thousands of years ago. Both perspectives close the conversation and limit our openness to transformation. This is not our theology of interpretation.

I returned last night from the Presbyterian General Assembly in Minneapolis, where Presbyterians from an extraordinarily diverse array of perspectives and convictions gathered to pray, worship, and discern together. We read the same Bible, we share the same history, and yet we differ on almost every important issue facing us. This has always been true. It is also true, and please hear this clearly, that the word of God is not captive to any single perspective. Presbyterians have **always** been insistent that human beings never fully grasp the immensity of God's love and grace and justice. We can never claim to have it all figured out; God is always on the move, reforming and remaking us in God's image.

The Bible is not a book full of easy-application answers for common modern day questions, no matter how many bestsellers claim that this is true. The Bible, for Christians, is not merely a collection of historical narratives and moral stories. Christians of mainline denominations can offer an alternative voice to these two extremes. We who believe that the Bible is neither an answer book nor a history book have a role to play in the conversation. But we must be prepared to converse. We must not abdicate Biblical literacy to Biblical literalists. We must read the words of scripture, study them, pray them, discuss them, and apply them. We must take seriously our questions of the texts but also the questions that the texts ask of us.

Karl Barth described the Bible as “a strange new world”ⁱ that we are called to inhabit. If we take this conviction seriously, we might just be transformed by the power of these texts. But we have to be willing to take the risk; to open ourselves to this transformation. To share with one another our own stories of the new discovery and growth that come from serious engagement with these holy words.

This week I heard many of these stories. One of them came from Ramona, a Presbyterian elder and an attorney from a small town. She described that for many years she drew a sharp distinction between the sacred words of scripture and the personal human stories of real people, especially when discussing the question of inclusion in the church. The scripture was God’s uncompromising law, stories were *just* stories. Ramona explained, “Then, when I was elected an elder, I began to read scripture, beginning with the gospel of Luke. I made a life-changing discovery. In the gospels, when Jesus is confronted with a difficult and heated topic, most often he does not cite scripture to prove a point. He tells a story. We call them parables. Perhaps my life, my story, could be a parable as well.” What a discovery!

If there is to be a serious dialogue among Christians of differing viewpoints about the significant moral issues of our time (whatever they may be) we must share the stories of scripture, the stories of our lives, and the place where they intersect. My deepest hope that our forward-thinking congregations will be adequately equipped to speak with confidence and faith, standing firmly on the Word of God and unashamed of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

If you are longing for a renewal of civility and kindness; if you are tired of watching Christian faith used as a weapon to strike blows against those who are different or to build a wall to keep some people out; if you find the scriptures a word of hope and not doom, a word of welcome and not judgment; if you yearn for a place to witness to a faith rooted in the promise of God’s grace and love redeeming the world; if you want to shout from the rooftops that Christian theology is not defined by the loudest and most divisive voices; if you want to recover the power of the Bible scarred and deeply damaged by abuse—then I have good news for you. You are not alone. The time has come for all of us to join our voices and give testimony to a faith with Biblical integrity and real world consequences. Like Paul, we must be unashamed to proclaim the gospel. The world is waiting for this absent voice.

You have taught me many lessons in the five and a half years since I attempted to start a brand new Sunday school class with a curriculum only a seminarian could appreciate. I hope that I am wiser now. But one thing has not changed. I am absolutely convinced that we must read, study, and love the Bible if we are to have a message of hope and love and justice and peace for the church and the wider world in the 21st Century. Paul was not ashamed of the liberating and life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ. Morningside, we must not be either. Amen.

ⁱ Karl Barth, *Word of God and the Word of Man*, Peter Smith Publisher, 1958. p. 28ff.