

Every 3 years the Church spends the summer reading its way through St. Paul's Letter to the Romans.

Romans is Paul's most important writing, the culmination of everything he's learned after decades of planting churches. It's his King Lear, his Avengers: Endgame.

And this morning we are in the heart of that letter. Chapters 9-11 are Paul trying to work out the most important question he has about his faith in God.

If Jesus is who he says he is - if Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God - then why have we have so many Jews, so many of God's chosen people, rejected Jesus?

Why did all those Pharisees and Sadducees reject him when he walked among them?

Why did all those people reject him in front of Pontius Pilate, and why - 30 years later when Paul is writing this letter - why are there so many more outsiders - Gentiles - giving their lives over to Jesus than God's own chosen people?

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If this were just some abstract theological question, we wouldn't need to pay much attention.

But Paul is writing about it because the church in Rome is facing something really difficult and important

And you need to know about it because our church faces something similar, something maybe as important for us as this is for the Romans.

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Originally the church in Rome was made up, mostly,
of Jews who believed in Jesus as the Messiah.

Think about what that church would look like, how they would behave.
Think about Jewish Sunday school teachers, Jewish senior wardens,
Jewish foyers groups!

For the first 20 years of its history, the church in Rome prayed together,
shared their possessions, loved, ate, and argued together ,
and did it mostly sharing a common Jewish culture.

Then in the year 49 Emperor Claudius expelled
most of the Jews from Rome.
They lost everything - their homes, their businesses, their church.

It only lasted a few years,
but when they came back to their church new people were leading it.
And these new leaders were not Jews, they were Gentiles. Outsiders!

Imagine being forced out of your home and your church
and your livelihood for ten years, and when you come back
you find your spiritual home is being run by a bunch of strangers
who sing different songs, eat different foods,
wear different clothes, and pray different prayers.
Imagine how painful & disorienting that would be.

And think about what that was like for the Gentiles.
For ten years they had struggled to keep the church alive.

THEY had sacrificed, THEY had shared, THEY had prayed and cooked
and loved and buried and baptized.

THEY had held it all together until they could be reunited
with their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ.

And what did they get for their troubles? Resentment.

Tension was rising in the Roman church.

Old suspicions, old prejudices, were coming back.

That's why Romans isn't Paul leaning back in his La-Z-Boy
holding forth on some abstract theological questions.

Romans is Paul is trying to hold together a church made up of both
the covenant children of God AND Gentile converts to Christianity.

Paul is trying to weave together two distinct groups
into one beautiful body of Christ.

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Paul asks all the scary questions.

Maybe God was lying to Abraham and Sarah.

Or maybe God has rejected his covenant people.

Maybe God has failed? Maybe God...can't be trusted.

Paul rejects all those possibilities and instead gives two beautiful thoughts.

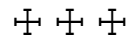
First, he goes back to the scriptures and re-examines
the story of God and God's people to show that
the promise of salvation was always open to the Gentiles.

He goes back to Genesis and shows that Abraham's FAITH in God
was his salvation, not his observance of the Law.

He goes back to Exodus and shows that the Word of God
was not just on the tablets Moses brought down the mountain,
but that the Word is very near you, on your lips and in your heart.

And he goes back to Isaiah and shows how the suffering servant in Isaiah
is an archetype of Jesus,
of the one who will be rejected by his people
and whose death will be the salvation of the world.

By retelling their sacred story, Paul reassures his fellow Jewish Christians
that God's plan for salvation begins with Israel
but was always open to the rest of the world.



The second thought Paul gives us is that beautiful metaphor
of the Church as an olive tree.

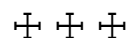
The tree is the true nation of Israel,
God's covenant people who will be the forerunners of the new creation.

And yes, he says, some of the tree's branches have withered and died,
but God has grafted new, wild branches onto the tree,
and those new branches are the Gentiles.

Paul is both encouraging and disciplining the Gentile Christians.
YOU are now part of the tree, he says,
YOU are now part of God's saving people!

But you new branches shouldn't brag about all your recent growth
because it's all one tree, and the root of the tree is Israel.

Paul keeps on driving home this point,
that GOD has grafted together the old and the new,
and that GOD...is always the one who makes it grow.



After those three beautiful, rich, deep chapters,
Paul ends his letter with what sounds like generic, almost cliched advice.

“Do not be conformed to this world,” he says,
“but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.”

“Do not think more highly of yourself than you ought to.”

“We are all members of one body,” he says. “We all have gifts to offer.”

“Let love be genuine. Live in harmony, live peaceably...
be subject to the governing authorities.”

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Paul sounds like a not-very-good graduation speaker,
but that’s only if you missed the division he’s trying to heal in the church.

The church in Rome could easily fade into nothing
if they allow their histories and hurts and prejudices
to be more important than their love and unity,
than their belief that God wants every single one of them there.

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Today, in the American church, in the Episcopal Church,
even here at Holy Trinity, we face a different kind of division,
but one that could make us fade into nothing, too.

Too many of us deeply distrust the people who have different
cultural or political values than we do.

Deeply distrust. And why wouldn’t we?

Billions of dollars get spent every year telling us that

48% of our country is out to get you.

That they want to take away the things in your life that you love.

Whichever 48% you belong to, the message is the same:

they hate you, and you should be afraid.

And all too often, the children of God -

including the children of God here at Holy Trinity - believe this lie.

We eat it up. And we spread it around.

How many times have you listened to NPR or read the Washington Post

or the NY Times and then talked with somebody on “your side”

about Ron DeSantis and “those people” in Florida?

Talked about them like they are a group of evil monsters

who hate black and brown people and are trying to rewrite history?

Talked about them like they are scheming to take away those books

you were never going to read,

and take away your civil rights or your bodily autonomy?

How many times have you talked about them not as seekers of

the common good who have a different vision of how to get there,

but as the enemy of the good, as people with evil in their hearts?

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Or how often have you watched Fox News or Prager University

and then talked about Portland or San Francisco

like it's some lawless hellscape?

Like it's a city full of fools and monsters trying to defund the police,

make shoplifting and homelessness the new normal,

and put a transgender boy on every girls swim team?

How often do you talk about the President not as the person
trying his best to lead our country,
but as a fool trying to tear down the country you think
only your side REALLY loves?

No, you don't say those things out loud...
well, not at church...well, not OFTEN at church....
But I've heard you. I've heard both of you.
And God forgive me, I've heard myself.

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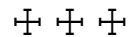
We do have different visions of the common good for this country.
The issues that divide us are real and they matter
and people that we know and love are affected
by the outcomes of these conflicts. Including ourselves.

Christians should be involved in those issues.
We should work and give and raise our voices for the common good
as each of us understands it.

But if you go out searching for an enemy in these conflicts,
I guarantee that you will find one, even if you have to create it.

Paul told the Jews and Gentiles in Rome that because God
had woven them together into one body,
they could overcome their divisions and show the world
the power and promise of God.

Maybe the Holy Spirit is calling us to make that same proclamation,
not just in "mixed" company, but all the time,
on all our lips and in all our hearts.



St. Paul gets the last word.

See if what he told the church in Rome applies to the church in Decatur.

“Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister?
Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister?
For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God.”¹

“So bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.
Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

Live in harmony with one another;
do not be haughty...do not claim to be wiser than you are.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil,
but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.

And if it is possible, so far as it depends on you,
live peaceably with all.”²

Amen.

¹ Romans 14.10

² Romans 12.14-18