



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

The Priestly Service of the Gospel

Romans 15:14-24

Fr. William Klock

September 23, 2018 – Trinity 17

Something I do as a pastor several days each week at Morning Prayer is to pray for our church using the prayers that St. Paul prayed for the churches that were in his care. If these Spirit-inspired prayers—prayers like those found in Ephesians 1 and 3 and in the opening greetings of Philippians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians—if they were good enough for Paul to pray as he considered those churches, they're certainly good enough for us! But sometimes I wonder what Paul, had he known us, would have prayed specifically for us. Or, if Paul were writing an epistle to us, how would he have described us? As much as his epistles to the churches are usually aimed at correcting their problems, he usually opens his letters with words of exhortation. For all their problems, these were brothers and sisters in Christ, they loved Jesus, they were serving him and proclaiming him, and for all their faults, they were mostly on the right track.

We see this in Romans 15:14. Paul is now done with the main body of the letter—the theology and what to do with it. Now he picks up where he left off with his initial greeting, where he said back in 1:10-11, that he was planning to visit them. Finally, now, he returns to that point and we see that the letter wasn't just written to teach theology to the Roman Christians or to get them straightened out on their Jew-Gentile problems. Paul wrote the letter to prepare them for his arrival. He wants to use Rome as a base for expanding his ministry and he wants them to be prepared. This is why he wrote to them. It wasn't just because he'd heard about some problems they were having. He's planning to visit and he wants to prepare them for his arrival and for the ministry he plans to base out of Rome.

He begins by exhorting them. Look at verse 14.

I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another.

Paul's almost picking up right where he left off in his greetings in Chapter 1. There he thanked God for the witness of these people. Their faith, he said, was proclaimed throughout the world. That's probably a good place to start before you start telling people—many of whom are strangers—the sorts of things Paul's been telling them in Romans. They weren't perfect, but their faith in the Lord Jesus was real and their witness was powerful. Now he exhorts them again, after telling them the hard stuff: "Don't get me wrong. I'm satisfied with the things I've heard about you and your church." They aren't perfect. Brothers and Sisters, if you ever find the perfect church, do not join it. If you join it, it won't be perfect anymore! Really, no church is perfect. Not yet. Jesus and the Spirit aren't done with us yet, but Jesus has promised that he will someday finish the job. In the meantime, the Romans were on the right track. Paul addresses them as part of Jesus' family—as his brothers and sisters—and says that they're full of goodness. He also knew that even if they hadn't all worked out the implications of Jesus and the Cross, even if they hadn't all done the math and some of them were still "weak" and needing to grow in maturity, the church had the people it needed to teach and instruct the rest.

Paul highlights an important point and one I made years ago when I was preaching on the marks of a healthy church. Paul knew that God's word—and *only* God's word—brings life and then grows and matures that life. We sometimes get all sorts of ideas in our heads about what will mature us in the faith. Usually, our problem is that we're looking for shortcuts. We don't want to spend the time it takes to get to know the word God has already given us in the Scriptures, so instead people get themselves into all sorts of trouble looking for private revelations or relying on what they take to be signs from God.

Assuming these other things happen at all, they're worthless if we aren't first grounded in Scripture. Without Scripture we have no way to evaluate whether or not these other things are from God or not. I'm very skeptical that God will even give any sort of sign or private revelation to someone not already grounded in Scripture, except perhaps something that serves only to point them to the Bible. Other times we look for maturity without Jesus. An awful lot of preachers are proclaiming self-help and pop-psychology rather than preaching God's word and preaching Jesus.

Brothers and Sisters, God's word is *the* source of life. It was by his word that he created life, it's by his incarnate word that he has redeemed life, and it's through his word written that he tells us the story of creation and recreation and gives us understanding of who he is and what he's up to. His word declares his righteousness. A church may not be perfect. It may have all sorts of faults. But if that church is committed to preaching and reading and studying together God's word, it will grow in maturity. Preach God's word. Preach Jesus. And God will bring life. There's no other method or gimmick or programme. It may be slow, but it's certainly sure: God's word gives life. The Roman believers were committed to God's word and I'm sure that's why Paul had confidence that they would mature with time.

But, again, Paul's point in all this was to let them know he was coming to them and he didn't want that to be a problem. He goes on in verses 15-16:

But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

He's picking up on his opening paragraphs again. He wants them to understand who he is and what God has called him to do. Paul would have been a bit of an odd figure in the world in which he lived. He was a travelling Jew

who, wherever he went, engaged not just his own people, but Gentiles in talk and arguments. He'd set up shop making and selling tents, but he was in the synagogue every Saturday, gathering with the local Christians on Sunday—a strange mixed bunch of Jews and Gentiles. If he wasn't praying while he worked, he was talking or arguing with anyone who would engage him in conversations. He often left his work and preached in public. He was abused, arrested, flogged, and run out of town, but none of that stopped him. Some places he'd stay for a day or two and other places he'd stay for a year. Some people might have compared him to the wandering philosophers of the day, but Paul's message was very different from any philosopher's. He spent his time talking about God and about Jesus the Messiah. He was always working from the Jewish Scriptures, but his message was like nothing any Jewish teacher had ever taught and there were few Jews who wanted to hear it. Paul was kind of a weirdo. The sort of weirdo the Christians in Rome might have had reservations about welcoming. (Maybe this lies in part behind his exhortation to them to welcome one another as Jesus had welcomed them.)

Paul had friends in the Roman church who could vouch for him, but he makes his own case: God has called him to be a minister of the good news about Jesus the Messiah to the Gentiles. It's not very often that Paul talks about Christian ministry using the language of the Old Testament priesthood, but he does that here and it's probably the place where he does it with the most oomph. His work as an apostle and as a minister of the good news about Jesus the Messiah is like the work of the priests in the temple as they prepared sacrifices for the Lord.

Paul's priestly mission was to bring the Gentiles to God as an offering. And not just to bring them, but to see that they were a pleasing sacrifice, made holy by the Holy Spirit. Paul was living out the fulfilment of Zechariah's prophecy. The prophet had written nearly six hundred years earlier:

Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem and to entreat the favor of the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts: In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.' (Zechariah 8:22-23)

That was Paul, proclaiming to the Gentiles the good news that Jesus is Lord and that through him the God of Israel is making all things new. This is Paul's offering to God. This is the offering that gives glory to God because it's evidence of God's righteousness. These Gentiles, submitting in faith to the Lord Jesus, are the fulfilment of God's promises. Their faith and the life they now have in Jesus and the Spirit is the evidence of God's faithfulness.

Through Paul, God was doing exactly what he had promised.

This gave Paul a certain boldness. Look at verses 17-19a:

In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God. For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God...

Paul said that he's been bold with them. We might say that he's been "forward" or "in their faces". As obnoxious as it might have come across, this was part of Paul's unique and God-given personality. It's what God used as Paul went from city to city, engaging with people, and even going back for more after being abused, beaten, and even left for dead. He's proud, he says, of his work. And yet, he also acknowledges, it's not so much his work, but the work that Jesus the Messiah has accomplished through him.

Brothers and Sisters, that's always the way of our work as Christians. We're often tempted to pat ourselves on the back for the things we've done for God, but the fact is that we do nothing for God. God does everything through us.

We come and we worship and when we're done we ought to evaluate our worship on whether or not we've done a good job—on whether or not we've offered to God a pleasing sacrifice—but we can take no credit for the pleasing sacrifices we offer to him, because it is only by the work of Jesus and the Spirit that we can offer ourselves, our lives, our everything to God in the first place. It is the Spirit of God who has united us to Jesus and caused his life to flow through us. It is the Spirit of God who has taken our old, cold, hard, and God-hating hearts and warmed them with his holy fire and filled them with love for God. Like Paul, we can be proud of what we have to offer God, but only when we recognise that it is Jesus who has enabled and done the work behind it.

Paul writes of the amazing harvest he has reaped among the Gentiles. As an apostle, God manifested his power in miraculous ways—in signs and wonders—but none of this was to manifest Paul. None of it was to show Paul's power. It was the work of God through Paul to direct people back to God. Brothers and Sisters, God's people get themselves into trouble when they stop relying on God and start relying on themselves—or when they start to think that the power to transform hearts and minds and lives is our own. We see this in people who stop preaching God's word and start preaching their own ideas. We see it in people who start taking the credit for God's work. And, it inevitably seems to lead to dishonest claims of miracles and signs and wonders as people try to build themselves up. It leads people to rely on manipulation, gimmicks, and high-pressure pitches to make converts. Brothers and Sisters, it is the prerogative of God and the power of God to draw people to himself, to work signs and wonders as he did through Paul and the other apostles, and to transform hearts and minds by the power of the Holy Spirit. God works through us, but it is God who works and we must do the work his way: relying on the power of his word and his Spirit, not on ourselves or worldly means.

This is just what Paul did. He relied on God and used God's means and he says:

...so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ... (Romans 15:19b)

Paul points to a map of the Greco-Roman world and draws an arc that begins at Jerusalem in the southeast, runs up through Syria, across Asia Minor (what we now call Turkey), and then through Greece, all the way to the Balkan coast opposite Italy. What Paul did was remarkable. Before Paul set off on his missionary journeys, no one in Asia Minor or Greece had ever heard of Jesus. Now, years later as he writes this letter to the Romans, there are little churches scattered across Caesar's empire—many of them in the important cities where the new imperial cult of Caesar-worship had taken root. All across Caesar's empire, because of Paul, Caesar's people were becoming Jesus' people and worshipping the risen Messiah as the world's true Lord. What Paul had done was amazing and he knew it. But he also knew that it was God who had done the work.

He goes on in verses 20-21:

...and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation, but as it is written, "Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand."

This is where Paul gets to the awkward bit. He knew that he wasn't the only apostle or the only missionary. Other people were travelling around preaching the good news about Jesus. Sometimes it caused problems as we see in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Paul doesn't want to cause or contribute to those sorts of problems. Tradition says that it was Peter who travelled to Rome and started the church there. We don't have any historical evidence to back that claim up, but that also means we don't have any reason to doubt it either. The

point is that this wasn't one of Paul's churches. Someone else had started it. Someone else had done the first work of sowing the gospel in Rome. Paul didn't want to interfere or get in the way or cause the sorts of problems other had caused for him in Corinth. He had friends, like Prisca and Aquila, who had worked with him in other cities before relocating to Rome. With friends like that, it would have been easy for Paul to sort of hijack the Roman church. But that wasn't his mission. Paul saw his mission primarily a pioneering one. He was called to go to the people and places that had never heard the good news. He quotes from Isaiah 52, a song about Israel's Suffering Servant. That's Jesus. And the passage is specifically about those who would announce his work to the world.

Rome was a huge city by ancient standards. In Paul's day it had a population of at least a million people. There was plenty of room in Rome for pioneering missionary work, the kind Paul saw himself called to do. But that's not the main reason he's headed to Rome. As he said in Chapter 1, he was coming for mutual encouragement: He hoped to encourage them and, maybe more important, he hoped that they would encourage him. Paul had proclaimed Jesus in an arc across the eastern half of the empire—or at least the north half of the eastern half. The Roman Empire was a big place. Rome, however, looked to the west. There was a lot of Caesar's empire beyond Rome that needed to know who the true Lord was and Paul's intent was to use Rome—Caesar's own capital—as a base or a launching point to proclaim the true Lord to the rest of the empire. Look at verses 22-24:

This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while.

From Rome, Paul planned to make a missionary journey to Spain. Spain was sort of the end of the world, at least to the west. Beyond that was just the Atlantic Ocean. It's not hard to imagine Paul going from Spain either north, into France and maybe to Britain, which were Roman territories, but it's even easier to see Paul making his way from Spain back to Jerusalem or Antioch, not this time by sea, but by travelling across northern Africa, proclaiming Jesus in important Roman cities like Carthage. We know Paul's goal was to announce the good news of Jesus across the entire Gentile world and Rome was an excellent jumping off point into these regions that were new to the gospel.

Up to this point, Paul's home base had been Antioch. And this gives us a sense of why he wrote Romans—and why he wrote what he did in the letter. We know from Galatians that Paul had faced a lot of trouble in Antioch and it was trouble centred on this issue of the common life of the church and the way that Jews and Gentiles are called to share in a single faith and single family. Now Paul's planning to move his base to Rome, but the Romans were struggling with this same issue. And so Paul has stressed to them the unity of the Messiah's family with hopes of heading off the sorts of problems he had in Antioch, so that Rome can be a place of support rather than a source of headaches.

Paul did make it to Rome. But did he ever make it Spain? We don't have any evidence that he did. But the fact that he wanted to go to Spain and that he wrote Romans to prepare the way points us to something important. Consider that sometimes God allows us to think big in terms of gospel ministry and even to make plans for big things, not so that we can actually accomplish them all, but because the preparations we make ends up fulfilling other purposes he has in mind that we may never have considered. Brothers and Sisters, God's plans are bigger and greater than we can ever imagine, even when we thinking at our biggest and grandest. After all, we tend to get full of ourselves when we accomplish *our* plans. Paul reminds us,

the important thing isn't what we plan, but what God plans. The important thing is not what we accomplish, but what God accomplishes through us.

It's easy to become discouraged when our big plans don't pan out. But consider that the work we do in preparing for those big plans and even the work we do that seems to fail, may be the work that is important to God. Paul had big plans to take the good news about Jesus to Spain. To get ready for that mission, he needed to prepare the Roman church to be his new home base. To do that he wrote this letter—easily the most important letter he ever wrote and a letter that has inspired some of the greatest reforms and renewals in the history of the Church.

I'm reminded of one Sunday night just after we'd begun our church planting work in Portland. Three Sundays a month a little group of us would gather for Bible study and to pray for the work we were doing. Once a month we had a worship service. That service was what attracted people. We'd done some advertising and were getting ready to kick things off and suddenly everyone involved but me had to be out of town. Veronica's mom was sick and she had to go to Kelowna. My warden had a family emergency and he and his family couldn't make it. I, at least, had to be there. And we needed an organist. We were meeting at a Lutheran church. I called their pastor and asked if they had an organist who would be willing to come and play. They did. I emailed her the hymns. I set everything up at the church. I had all our books and literature out. Our substitute organist came and was ready to play. And the two of us sat and waited and waited...and no one came. My discouragement was apparently obvious. That's when this elderly organist told me her own story. She and her husband had been church planting missionaries in Jamaica many years before. Her husband had rented a church building and for years they had services, but they rarely had more than four or five people. That small group gathered each week and prayed and sang and prayed some more, but it never grew. After a number

of years the LCMS mission board called them back home. She said that it was a disappointing venture, but several years later they met a man at a mission board meeting. The board had decided to try again and sent another church planter to Kingston. He rented the same place to worship and within months he had a healthy and vibrant church. He sought out this couple to thank them for the years of prayer they had put into that place. What they thought had been a failure, he told them, had been a success. The timing wasn't right for a church plant when they'd been there, but it had been the right timing for a group of people to till the soil with prayer so that seed would grow when the time for planting came. I can't tell you what an encouragement that was to me. Our experience church planting was very similar. When we finally shut things down to move here we felt like we'd been spinning our wheels for five years and had accomplished little, if anything. And yet, the little group we built and ministered with was there just at the right time the following year to assist a congregation as it withdrew from the Episcopal Church to form a new congregation of the Anglican Church in North America. We had big plans for God, but his plans were even bigger. The small work we did, thinking we were spinning our wheels, ended up becoming an integral part of something else God was working on and that we had no knowledge of.

Brothers and Sisters, it's easy to become discouraged when we pursue our own plans and don't see them fulfilled. It's easy to be discouraged when we pursue ministry on our own power and with our own ideas, gimmicks, and philosophies. It's easy, too, to become discouraged when we do things God's way and nothing much seems to happen. But here's the difference: When we do things God's way, when our church is committed to preaching, studying, and reading God's word, when our church is committed to being obedient to Jesus in administering his sacraments, when our church prays together and walks together, no matter how little seems to be happening, we can be sure that God is at work in and through us, because we

are doing what he's told us to do and are relying on him—not ourselves—for the power to do his work. No matter what we see happening, we walk in hope knowing that God's word never returns void, but gives life wherever it is proclaimed.

Let us pray: Father, as we prayed in the Collect: May your grace always go before us and always follow us. Teach us to live consistently in your grace as a church. Teach us to live in the power of your word and your Spirit, trusting in nothing else, that your power to give life might take root and accomplish the work you have called us to do. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.