

Sinful Serving Saints
Romans 15:1-11

The early church was a messy sort of place. There were different beliefs floating around, as well as different sorts of people. Some more saintly, some less so. And everyone was trying to figure out: so what's the good news? What's the gospel? ("Gospel" means "good news.")

The conversations and controversies were especially colorful in Corinth, a wide-open seaport in Greece. Think New Orleans on Mardi Gras and Las Vegas the other 364 days and you get a sense of what Corinth was like. But, a church was there. Filled with former pagans, who didn't quite want to give up their old lifestyle, filled with formerly Jewish believers, who couldn't quite give up their adherence to all those rituals.

Well, some people were denying that Christ had actually been human; others were saying that no, He really couldn't have risen from the dead. Still others said that salvation was not just a matter of believing in Jesus. . . you had to know a secret prayer or a secret ritual.

No wonder they kept writing to Paul asking for his view of things. Not that they accepted his version as the final truth: Paul is forever having to defend himself and his doctrines against others, but as for us, we accept Paul.

Anyway, in this passage, Paul lays out the core doctrines of our faith, but then talks about who he is response to the gospel message. And by extension, who we are. And by extension, who the church is in response to the gospel.

First, the core of the message: Did you notice that Paul calls the believers, “brothers and sisters,” as if they are full participants in the work of the church? This is key. The gospel message, the good news, is entrusted not just to a few leaders, but to the entire body.

And this message is a message of salvation. Notice that the language is not that of a transaction, but rather of an on-going relationship. Let me explain: Paul does not say “we are saved.” As if it’s a one and done transaction.

He writes, “You are being saved.” And to the extent that the word for salvation and healing are exactly the same, we understand what Paul is trying to emphasize: our walk with the Lord is an on-going sort of thing. It’s not something that can be reduced to assenting to a certain number of doctrines; it’s not a matter of praying the right prayer once. It’s a matter of letting the grace of Jesus Christ indwell ever more fully in our hearts. Every day. In every situation.

In every moment, in every situation, we are invited to ask: how can the healing power of Jesus be at work here? What grace does God want to offer me at this moment; what grace does God lead me to share?

Now, by the way, for Paul, faith is something more than agreeing with doctrine; faith is what we are willing to stake our life on. Faith is our core reality, the foundation upon which we build our lives, the lens through which we discern reality. And some folks in Corinth were having doubts. Or searching for other foundations.

And in this passage, and later, Paul re-emphasizes the core: Jesus, by implication sinless, died for us. And. And, on the third day, arose to new life. As we enter into this salvation relationship, so too to we enter into the promise of resurrection. Resurrection is truth not just for Jesus' life, but for yours and mine.

And Paul reiterates to the congregation the core teaching: Jesus appeared to Cephas, that is, Peter; (in Aramaic the word for rock is Cephas, in Greek, Petros,) then to the Twelve. And yes, I know and Paul knew that by then there were only eleven, Judas having died, but the Twelve was a shorthand way of referring to the disciples as a group. Then Jesus appeared to over 500, many of whom were still alive, and then to James . . . which James? Probably the

Lord's brother.

And then, long after Jesus has ascended into heaven, in a vision he appears to Paul. By the way, reading between the lines, we realize that some were denying Paul's authority because Paul had not been one of the 12 or even of the 500.

But for Paul, this appearance of Jesus to him is reality; this is the event that shapes the rest of his life. And in ways much less spectacular, it is this event that can shape your life and mine as well. As for ourselves, we receive the truth of Jesus to be the bedrock of our lives. That he died for us. That he was raised from the dead.

So, this is Jesus. Revealed as savior of the world. He died for our sins. Rose from the dead, and in his eternal life, we find eternal life. But then, how are we to respond?

Far too many Christians regard faith as a fire extinguisher. Something that just sort of sits there on a shelf somewhere, gathering dust, hardly noticed. Until there is an emergency. Or, maybe during good days we glance at it and say, "Well, good. It's there if we need it." Or they treat salvation as a driver's license. Something you get and then keep hidden away in your wallet.

But St. Paul did not regard faith as an spiritual insurance policy, nor as a fire extinguisher. The faith he proclaims is something living, something he indeed makes the cornerstone of his new life. Indeed, faith is a relationship, not a transaction. But what does this relationship look like for Paul. . . and by extension, how should it look like for us?

First, Paul was always overwhelmed that Jesus Christ should love him. Absolutely overwhelmed. Paul, who always wanted to be the best at whatever he did, notes that he was the best, that is the worst, of sinners. Why, he had just about cleaned out the church in Jerusalem, and was on his way to Damascus to persecute the Christians there, when Christ, in a vision, appears to him.

Paul never forgot this. The depth of Christ's love for sinners. The enormity of his grace. Faith in Jesus wasn't just habit for Paul; wasn't a set of doctrines. It was something he lived and breathed every day.

But notice something else about Paul. He knew himself always to be a sinner. In Romans 7:19 he considers himself perplexed: "or I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." Realizing himself to be a sinner makes him less brittle, less rigid, and more accepting of others who themselves are beset with sin. When he saw a sinner, he understood.

He had been there himself, a chief sinner, and he was still there himself from time to time.

You know for too long, the church has thought of itself as a cosmic police force, called to find sin and root it out. Well, sure, we stand against sin, but that is never the ultimate calling of the church or of a Christian: we are called to share the gospel, the good news, the salvation news of Jesus Christ.

And folks, this notion of being called is so very important. At the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus realized he could not do it himself. So he called people, the first being Simon, or Peter, a fisherman. (That's why the picture on the front of the bulletin.) "Follow me," Jesus says, "and I will make you a fisher of men." That's the call. And that's a call not just for a chosen few, but for the chosen many, that is, all of us. The entire church. Every believer.

That we live in such a way, that we share the grace of Jesus Christ in such a way, that others will find this wondrous new relationship for their lives. Last Sunday I was sharing with the Young Adult Class some shocking statistics. Back in 1960, 70% of Americans were regular in worship attendance. Now, it's below 50% nationwide, barely above 50% in North Carolina. And internationally, the situation is even more grim: 15% of folks in France, less than 10% in Australia.

But folks, let us not be discouraged. The Christian faith has a power that goes beyond culture, demographics, or statistics. Most of the folks in Corinth ignored Christ and the Church as well, but believers kept at it. Kept living the faith. Kept sharing the faith. And the world began to be transformed.

And that same spirit of transformation can be ours today, no matter what times we find ourselves to be living in. But let us take our calling seriously. How we live in response to Christ makes a difference. So may we be faithful in living out our relationship with Jesus.

Let's remember we are sinners, lest we become harsh and condemning to others. Let's remember we are called to serve, lest we begin to think that faith is just something to share with one another.

And let's remember we are saints, lest we live according to the values of our culture instead of the values of Christ.

The early church had saints such as Peter and Paul to reveal the truth of Jesus to the world. And today, Jesus has us. To reveal him again to this generation. And as we live in Christ and he lives in us, then for our world and our time, there is again power for today and promise for

tomorrow. Amen.