

“Living By Faith” – Rom 1:16-17, 3:21-28

Some days I wonder why I do it to myself! Here I was, early in the week, looking at the suggested scripture readings for today and wondering which one to preach on. The choice quickly focused upon either the gospel reading from Matthew or the reading from Paul’s letter to the Romans.

Now, it helps a bit to understand some context here. It’s the season of the church year called ‘ordinary’, the Sundays after Pentecost that take us all the way through the Summer and Fall right up to Advent (yes, I know, it’s a bit early to be thinking about Christmas!) It’s a time of the year where we dwell upon some generalities about our faith – as contrasted with the ‘highly-themed’ times of year like Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter. The scripture readings reflect this sense of generalities, and we often get a long series of readings that almost ramble on.

And so, flush with the energy that is a little easier to find early in the week, before the ‘tyranny of the urgent’ has drained reserves, and before meetings have glazed the eyes and school assignments have numbed the brain, early in the week it seemed a really good idea to take the opportunity over the next few weeks to look at the series of readings from Paul’s letter to the Romans – all good, meaty stuff that forms the foundation of much of our faith.

Yeah, it seemed a good idea then, but now, late in the week, on the back side of the power and energy curve, struggling with a depth of material that could take several years (or lifetimes!) to understand and present, it doesn’t seem like such a clever idea! Oh well, let’s give it a try and see if we can unpack and understand at least some of what Paul had to say.

To begin, you will have probably noticed by now that our reading consists of two separate pieces joined together. The first, a small two-verse snippet, is considered by most scholars to be a terse summary of the theme of the entire letter.

For 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. For 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.”

We could easily spend the next hour unpacking just these two verses, and still have material to work with after a break for coffee! We won’t, but there are a couple of really key points that we need to recognize. If these two short sentences contain the theme of the book, what is that theme? The Reformed branches of the church have argued strenuously for centuries now that that theme is ‘faith’ and more specifically ‘salvation by faith’ – and there is some merit to that understanding, because Paul does elaborate on faith later in his letter.

But he covers more than just faith in the letter, and so we need to consider that there is a larger subject that forms the theme for the whole document. A clue to that larger subject lies in the way these two sentences are constructed. Take a look at the beginning – we tend to skip over that start, which does a disservice to the author, because everything after that beginning is phrased as subordinate clauses to that beginning. Curious? “For I am not ashamed of the gospel;” is that beginning that we skip right past. The gospel is the main subject of these two sentences, and thus arguably the theme of the entire letter.

Now before you give me a Homer Simpson kind of “doh!” response, thinking “of course the gospel is Paul’s main theme”, stop for a moment and let the import of this revelation impact you fully. What do you mean by “gospel”? What did Paul mean by “gospel”? Is there any connection between these two gospels – yours and Paul’s?

When I say “gospel”, I suspect most if not all of you immediately think of one or more books in our bible. When Paul says “gospel” he is definitely NOT thinking of one of those

books, because the earliest of those won't even be written for some fifteen or more years later. What then does Paul mean by "gospel", and how is it the theme of his entire letter?

Before we can answer those questions, it might help to recall the issue or issues that Paul was trying to address with this letter – the latest that we have, and the fullest in terms of his development. It seems that one of the key issues that he was speaking to was a foundational question that the church still wrestles with today – who is "in" and who is not "in." In Paul's day the question was more focused around the division between Jews and Gentiles. But in that question is a cloud of related – and important – issues: how can one be reconciled with God, how can one find justification, what is the relationship between Jesus and the scriptures (the Old Testament scriptures, that is), even what is the meaning of life?

Sadly, the church today still wrestles with this question of who's "in" and who's "out", ignoring what Paul had to say. Even those who echo his "justified by faith" declaration want to put human definitions and worse yet human tests on the faith of the one who believes. "How hard do you believe?" "How completely do you believe?" "Do you believe enough to have a big smile and a trophy wife and 2.6 darling children and a shiny new SUV?" There seems to be no end to the ways that people in the church keep inventing to exclude others from being included in those whom God justifies.

For Paul there was no question, only good news in the good news of Jesus Christ. "Good news" is how the word translated "gospel" should translate. (The word "gospel" is an Olde English word, derived from good+spel [speil?].) "Good announcement" might work as well. Not the canned, limited, canonized version of the four Gospels, but the essence of God's redemptive act in Christ. We could here go roaring down any of the countless blind canyons that the church has gone down chasing after the word "redemption", but that largely misses Paul's other main point of God's righteousness. (As an example of the twisted logic that lies down one of those blind canyons, the early church got itself into a position of arguing that in Christ God had actually paid a ransom to Satan!)

For Paul the Christ-event, the good news of God's justification, was that of change, of transformation, and yet of continuity with the past. Was the law overthrown? Not at all, but in and through Christ God had wiped the slate clean (that's the meaning of justification – all charges are withdrawn, the one charged is now totally innocent of all guilt) and only one who is truly righteous – God – can do that legitimately. Paul contends this was not the throwing away of the previous covenant and law through which people could find redemption with God but a change from "then" to "now." Those who did not yet believe were still in the "then" of the law; those who do believe are in the "now" of being already justified, with the ultimate end-day judgment still off in the future.

Moreover, it is clear to Paul that this transformation is available to anyone through faith. There is a distinction that we should note between "anyone" and "everyone" – Paul by no means adopts a universalistic "everybody" position, but rather a universally-available "anyone" position. This is at the heart of his statement elsewhere that there is "no longer Jew nor Greek, male nor female, ..." and that God loves us and treats us equally.

So, here we are, some two thousand years later, still living in the "now" that Paul proclaims, transformed by faith in Christ. What on earth does that mean? How have we been transformed? Have we been transformed? How are we different because of our faith? How are we called to be different because of our faith? Whew! So many questions; such elusive answers.

I believe that the essence of the transformation lies in relationships. Relationships between people and God – relationships between people and each other. The relationship

between God and people changed foundationally in Christ – that’s what Paul is arguing, that a new dimension in that relationship was added, and that we can become part of that new dimension simply through joining with Christ in faith.

I think one can argue that transformation is only meaningful if it is reflected in behaviour. An inner transformation that has no impact on one’s behaviour seems pointless or meaningless, especially when set against the understanding of the foundational nature of relationships. And so the living by faith of which Paul speaks would seem to indicate behaviours shaped or at least altered by the transformation of being justified through faith in Christ.

What would those behaviours look like with respect to the relationship between people and God? A good and healthy relationship seems to imply good communication, particularly listening. Worship is good, devotion is excellent, but listening to God’s loving whisper in your ear is part of that new relationship. What is God calling you to do, to be? Others may suggest, but only you and God know for sure.

And so it is with the other dimension as well, with the people-to-people relationships. As we have been shown mercy, grace, justice, and been justified so too we are called to show mercy, grace, justice, and to justify – wipe clean the slate – of those with whom we come into contact.

It is in these two dimensions – relationship with God, relationships with other people – that we will truly be living by faith the new life given to us in Christ. Thanks be to God for that new life!