

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
7 May 2023

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Fifth Sunday of Easter

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Gospel Goodness”

Fourth Sermon in the Series, *Compassion & Commission* (Annual Theme: “Spirit of Curiosity”)

Romans 1:1-17

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel,” Paul writes.

How about you? Can you claim the same?

Recently, a Colorado state representative – a strongly self-identified Christian – said, “*I’m tired of this separation of church and state junk. The church is supposed to direct the government...there have been two nations that have been created to glorify God. Israel, whom we bless, and the United States of America...which God has blessed...*”¹

If THAT is the Gospel, then Yes we ought to be ashamed – but it is not, Paul says...for there is no one people or country that God favors, the Gospel is for All, Jew and Gentile, Greeks and Barbarians, wise and *foolish*.

Even more recently, 21 members of the South Carolina state legislature in the name of preserving Life and their Christian faith, drafted and filed a bill to criminalize women who have had an abortion and charge them with murder, which makes them eligible for execution.²

If THAT is the Gospel, then Yes we ought to be ashamed – but it is not, Paul says...for the resurrection proclaims Life over Death no matter our choices – and women, go figure, were the first ones to preach this Truth!

And you probably know that one Christian denomination is splitting right now over the issue of ordaining clergy in committed same sex relationships and presiding over same sex marriages (the United Methodist Church). And yet another (the Southern Baptist

¹Conrad Swanson, “Lauren Boebert told congregation she’s ‘tired of this separation of church and state junk,’” *The Denver Post* (28 June 2022), accessed on May 7, 2023 at <https://www.denverpost.com/2022/06/27/lauren-boebert-church-state-colorado/>.

²Julia Mueller, “GOP lawmaker decries state bill that could execute a woman over an abortion,” *The Hill* (28 March 2023), accessed on May 7, 2023 at <https://thehill.com/homenews/state-watch/3922160-gop-lawmaker-decries-state-bill-that-could-execute-a-woman-over-an-abortion/>.

Convention) is buckling down even more firmly on their belief that women cannot hold positions of leadership in the church and letters have been circulating outing churches across the south that have women in leadership, listing their names and addresses.

If THAT is the Gospel, then Yes we ought to be ashamed – but it is not, Paul says... “*for there is neither male nor female – for we are ONE in Christ Jesus,*” (Gal. 3:28) – the Gospel Unites, not Divides.

And then, of course, there is the bumper sticker I saw last night as I was (ironically) on my way to the grocery store to pick up juice for our communion today. It read “*God and Country*” with a cross, a flag, and two AR-15’s on either side. Only to come home from that errand and learn of yet another mass shooting in my own home state and home city – and come to find out from my mother today that a woman I know had just left that shopping center 30 minutes before the shooting took place. *Lord have mercy.*

I have to confess to you that I just simply don’t understand these things...how can this be? How can my faith be their faith?

And these are just the things that push my buttons – maybe for you it’s different issues – but whatever it is – with such representations of our faith out in the world, it is indeed embarrassing and shameful to be identified as a member of the same faith group as *those* people.

And yet the minute I have said the words *Those People* – I, too, have forgotten the true Gospel Good News of Christ...that Grace is for All, Redemption is for All, and the power of God that resurrected Christ can never be limited by how small we humans make God out to be, or by how divided we become as we pit ourselves against one another, or by how twisted we allow our scriptural interpretation to become - using the Bible to serve our own agendas and beliefs.

“*For I am not ashamed of the Gospel,*” Paul writes.

Perhaps Paul is not ashamed of the gospel because he understands what the gospel is. Sometimes I think we’ve forgotten...having allowed our country and our culture to co-opt the gospel that is Christ’s.

Remember that Paul is just 5-10

years younger than Jesus and he is writing just 25-30 years after Jesus' death. His letter to the Romans pre-dates the books that we call "gospels" today – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; those books did not yet exist when Paul penned his letter to the Romans. So when Paul uses the word Gospel he's NOT using it to describe the *books in the Bible* that tell the stories and teachings of Jesus – no, Paul is using the word "gospel" with its literal meaning from the Greek noun *euangelion* (oo-an-ja-lee-on), meaning "good tidings," or "good news."³ And this news isn't confined to print on a page – it is a power that has been loosed into the world through the person of Christ.

And this is even *more* subversive of a statement given that "the word gospel would have been well known in the wider Roman imperial world where Paul and his audience lived. For example, a late first century BCE inscription called the Priene Calendar Inscription celebrates the birth of Caesar Augustus, calling it 'the beginning of the good tidings.' [It was believed that] Augustus

is a "savior" sent by divine Providence for the benefit of all humankind. Sound familiar? [So] in *this* context, Paul's letter to the Romans would sound quite provocative because this is NOT the good news of Augustus, the son of the deified Julius Caesar,"⁴ but rather the Good News of Jesus, the Son of God.

More specifically, for Paul, the Good News is that the man who descended from the line of David, has now through his resurrection from death to life proven the power of God for ALL people everywhere. No exceptions. The agent of God's good work is not from the center of power in Rome, but from the margins of Palestine.

For Paul, the Good News is that the God who has been in faithful, covenantal relationship with the people of Israel for centuries – through Christ – is in faithful, covenantal relationship with *all of humanity*. Faith is no longer defined by heritage, ethnicity, and tradition – but is expansive and inclusive of all who are faithful – regardless of where you were born or what you've been exposed to,

³Reference and definition from <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g2098/kjv/tr/0-1/>
⁴Donghyun Jeong, "Commentary on Romans 1:1-17," *Working Preacher* (May 7, 2023) accessed on May 7,

2023 at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/gospel-as-salvation-2/commentary-on-romans-11-17-3>.

religiously or otherwise. This is the message of the entirety of Paul's letter to the Romans. The Good News is that God's Love is for All. God's Grace is for All. And that means the righteousness that comes through faith-filled living is available for All.

"For I am not ashamed of the Gospel," Paul writes.

And this statement is even more powerful when you consider the honor and shame culture into which Paul writes.

First of all, the Greek word here for ashamed is *epaischynomai* from the root verb *aischynō*—which means *"to dishonor or disfigure, to suffuse with shame."*⁵

In the Roman empire, the cross, which was the symbol of crucifixion, was intended to be the most shameful thing that could happen to you. It disfigured your body and dishonored your personhood. Think about it – to be on the cross is to be naked, beaten, publicly mocked, humiliated, labeled, and killed. It was the ultimate statement the Empire

could make against you – treating you as a non-person, stripping you of your dignity, your humanity, and displaying your vulnerability in the most unsafe and dehumanizing way possible.

And so, there is *unprecedented* power in what Paul is writing here, which might be lost on us today if we are not careful.

Because we take for granted that Jesus' death on the cross is just what happened. But that death, that symbol of the cross, means so much in Roman culture. And Paul is writing to the Romans to say, "that THAT thing that can bring the *most* shame upon someone – in *your country and your culture (Rome!)* (Jesus' death on the cross)," Paul says, "that THING that represents SHAME is the very thing through which God does the work of redeeming the world.⁶ God is at work in the world THROUGH shame, not in its silence or absence.

"For I am not ashamed of the Gospel." I will not let the symbol of Shame – through which God works – be something which causes more

⁵Reference and definition from <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g1870/kjv/tr/0-1/>

⁶ Kristofer Phan Coffman, Rolf Jacobson, & Joy J. Moore, "Narrative Lectionary 539: Gospel as Salvation,"

Working Preacher Podcast (30 April 2023), accessed on May 7, 2023 at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/539-gospel-as-salvation-may-7-2023>

Shame. No, the symbol of *Shame* is now the symbol of *Salvation*, Paul writes in verse 16 (salvation from the word, *salve*, meaning – healing, wholeness, fullness of life – shalom).

Even more than the cross event itself, as theologian Kevin Ruffcorn writes, “[Unlike what is happening to Christianity today as people are leaving the church in droves because of things like misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia, Christian nationalism, and the like], being a Christian back in Paul’s day was seen as shameful because Christ-followers were seen as anti-social—breaking down the nuclear family unit and spurning social customs. Christians were seen as anti-government because they refused to worship Caesar as lord. And - it was also rumored that they were cannibals—they ate their leader’s body and drank his blood. Their communities were egalitarian, at a time when class distinctions were viewed as important. The early Christians cared for the widows and orphans, the sick and the needy—those who were marginalized or rejected by the

rest of society. [They pooled their money together and gave away their belongings.] Their love for each other and their care for others changed the way people looked at them. As [the years] past, Christians became admired for their humanitarian works of charity (centering the human person). Outsiders became members of the Christian community because Christians lived out the power of the good news in their lives—they lived their faith...”⁷ and I would add they knew and embodied the *goodness* of the Gospel.

Of course, these most admirable qualities of the early church soon began to change as the church grew and became institutionalized and connected to the very power structure that had crucified its leader. The closer that Christ became aligned with Rome, and what would become the Roman ‘Catholic’ Church, ironically the word ‘catholic’ meaning ‘all-embracing, universal’. The closer the Church got to Rome, the more distant the Church became to the “lived faith” of which Paul writes in his letter to the Romans.

⁷ Kevin Ruffcorn, “Devotions on Romans 1:1-17–Power of the Gospel,” *A Sane Faith* (30 April 2023), accessed on May 7, 2023 at [https://asanefaith.com/power-of-the-](https://asanefaith.com/power-of-the-gospel/)

[gospel/](#).

And we still feel that distance today. It's like a chasm, at times isn't it? What the Church is today? And what Christ proclaimed back then?

So the question for us is this: can we, like Paul, see the Gospel for its Goodness? Can we re-claim the Christ who is the cause and catalyst of this Good News? Can we, as people who call ourselves Christians, galvanize once again – around the gospel? And *not* be ashamed? But maybe, just maybe, even proud enough to proclaim it?

We are almost always ready and eager to share the “good news” of our lives – an engagement, a birth announcement, a new job, our child's award or achievement, our grandchild's scholarship, our partner's promotion. We have little shame about such celebrations. How much more so, then, could we be proud, eager, and excited to share the Good News of God's Love in our Lives? Which is the agent and origin of *all other* good things, right?

How do we get back to this essence of the Good News? To the simplicity of a message so salvific, so healing and hope-

filled that it can't help but be celebrated?

Well, there are two things Paul gives us today, two concrete things that might just help us grab on to the Goodness of the Gospel once again.

The first reminder is simply to embrace our identity from God and claim our calling in Christ.

And before you say, “calling” is a fancy spiritual word and “callings are for pastors in robes, not for me” – stop right there. We all have a calling – and that calling is rooted first and foremost in the identity claim that we are Beloved – from the beginning. And you thought that was just a word we Calvary pastors throw around to make us all feel warm and fuzzy. No – beloved is a biblical word. From the waters of Jesus' baptism and God saying “*this is my beloved child, in you I am well pleased*” to the Apostle Paul himself who reminds us of this identity when he writes in verse 7, “*to all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints.*” Beloved is a biblical word; it is a God-given identity, it is the most true thing about ourselves that we can name or proclaim.

The world will try to define our calling by our profession; by what we do or how we make money or what we skilled at or what our resume boasts, but Christ defines are calling simply by the fact that we are beloved and therefore as one's who are loved, we have a calling, a responsibility to share and proclaim this same love to others. And it doesn't matter how we do this, what matters is that we do it. We love not to be perfect, but to be present.

Because look. Paul knows the people of Rome are not perfect. He's about to use the next 15 chapters to say as much. But their mistakes do not malform their identity. They are first and foremost beloved, because God creates them as such and loves them as such. And yes, Shame can have a powerful hold on us, which can prevent us from trusting or believing that we are ourselves are beloved.

Shame researcher Brené Brown, (and yes I said "shame researcher" – there is such a thing in social science), writes:

"There is a profound difference

between shame and guilt. [In most cases], guilt is adaptive and helpful—it's holding something we've done or failed to do up against our values and feeling psychological discomfort. Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed [through and through] and therefore unworthy of love and belonging—that something we've experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection. [Unlike guilt] shame is not helpful or productive. In fact, shame is much more likely to be the source of destructive, hurtful behavior than the solution or cure. I think the fear of disconnection [that shame causes] can make us dangerous."⁸

Paul's own life, and his own feelings of shame, exemplify this. You remember, of course, that before Paul was Paul, Paul was Saul. He was a Pharisee, one of a group of Jews who policed the boundary of the law and made sure that Jews and others were faithful to the law of Moses. Saul was extremely passionate, so much so that he persecuted and killed those who

guilt/.

⁸Brené Brown, "Shame vs. Guilt," *BrenéBrown.com* (15 Jan. 2013), accessed on May 7, 2023 at <https://brenebrown.com/articles/2013/01/15/shame-v->

followed Christ until one day he had a mystical experience – explainable only to him – on the Road to Damascus. Perhaps you’ve had an experience like this – something only you can know or explain – but what we know is that he was struck blind and after 3 days he could see again and he had a new name, Paul, - and a new calling...no longer persecuter – but no proclaimer. He stops persecuting those who are against Christ and starts promoting those who are for Christ.

And maybe it’s this change in calling – from persecutor to proclaimer – that causes Paul to speak of shame and no longer being ashamed. Because he had a lot to feel shameful about.

Given *his* history, none of us can make an excuse based on our past that God cannot work through us or call us. What we have done in our past – does not define who we are – it didn’t back then and it doesn’t today, and it certainly doesn’t define our future. You always have been beloved – no matter your behavior – and you are today and you will be tomorrow.

As Paul writes to the Romans, he names his own calling as a

means of claiming his allegiance to Christ and not Caesar but also as a way of relating to his readers. He acknowledges *their* calling too, reminding them they are called to be “saints” and that they, in fact, have been excelling in their calling – so much so that their faith is proclaimed throughout the world.

The fact that the Apostle Paul not only names his own calling – affirming that God has given him a purpose in life – *and* that Paul names the calling of those to whom he is writing reminds me of how important naming our calling out loud is – for ourselves and others. Whatever it is – whether teacher, doctor, nurse, bus driver, actor, social worker, farmer, student, real estate agent, accountant, city manager, chaplain, officer, lawyer, care giver, Lyft driver – whatever it is that you do – before you name what you do, remember that it is WHO you are (God’s beloved) that allows you to do what you do. The calling comes in not what we do for a living, but in how we live our life – do we live our life loving God, loving others, loving self? Embracing our belovedness?

Because Lord knows, in this

world, it's really hard to feel like we are worth anything at all sometimes – and so it's really important that help each other out with this – that we name out loud the giftings and callings that we see in one another; that we remind people that they matter, that they are loved, that we see them, and that we see that God is using them uniquely to bless others, to change the world, to even just create a moment of connection or friendship or hope in an otherwise ordinary day.

Paul uses valuable ink and parchment to pen the words of calling and claiming in his letter to the Romans...so that should cause us to pause and wonder... Could it be that we, as Christians, need to do a more intentional job of naming our identity as beloveds and voicing our calling – out loud – for ourselves and others on a regular basis?

If you've ever had the experience of someone seeing something in you that you perhaps didn't see in yourself – and naming that to you – then you know what I mean. Often we can't see in ourselves what is so obvious to others. We need

All of this leads us to the second

lesson in Paul's introduction to the letter to the Romans, and our final lesson for today: **how to be connected and mutually encouraged in community.**

This is the only letter we know of that Paul sends to a church that he did not found and that he had not yet visited. Meaning – Paul did not know personally know the people to whom he was writing (they were strangers to him) – and yet – he writes with such affection and encouragement. He writes as if he knows their plight – and he does. He knows that Claudius forced the Jews to leave Rome in 49 and that meant that by the time that Nero came to power in 54 – around the same time Paul is writing – and as Nero invites Jews to return back to Rome...well Paul knows that that means that the Church – which without Jewish custom and tradition present had become Gentile run and Gentile led (aka: far less rules and regulations) – that there could be some conflict and different ways of seeing things as the Jewish Christians returned to join the Gentile Christians once again. That's why we read so much about unity in this letter.

Paul is sensitive to their situation and he knows they will

need encouragement – not just for the hard work ahead – but also recognition – for the hard work they have already been doing --- both Jews and Greeks, on their own...trying to follow Christ in a culture and time that proclaims Caesar.

So Paul, by identifying himself as a servant of Jesus, creates connection with the Romans – and establishes a comradeship of sorts – *“I know what it feels like to be a person of this kind of faith in this environment.”* He’s creating a connection with these believers he does not even know. And that connection is rooted in the commonality of Christ.

But even more, Paul says *Thank You* in his letter and he names what he is thanking the Romans for specifically. He says thank you for your faith; I see its fruits; the whole world is talking about it. He is specific in his praise, gracious with his gratitude. It’s like the thank you note you get that doesn’t just say “thanks for the new gadget,” but that adds on, “and this is how that new gadget is enhancing my life...”
Specificity in gratitude.

And then Paul tells the Romans he is praying for them, which is

yet another point of connection of faith through Christ. He remembers them, people he does not even know, in his prayers. They are thought of, they are not forgotten. They are not alone.

And then, to top it off, Paul says – you are so important to me I want to build connection with you. I want to visit you. I want to meet with you. I want to spend time with you. Perhaps there is no greater indication of care or importance than to give someone our time.

And Paul is upfront about naming his intentions to come visit and also explaining why he has not yet made it to them. He is upfront, not leaving them wondering or guessing where they stand in his eyes. He could have written without saying “I’m planning on coming to see you,” but he names that intention out loud – thus giving it more weight and import (and accountability!).

There are so many lessons in these three simple acts of saying thank you, praying, and stating intentions for cultivating relationship (offering time and presence) – but more than anything we learn how important mutual

encouragement is. We are not meant to do faith (or life) alone.

Paul says he wants to come and visit the Romans not just because *he* wants to encourage *them*, but also because he knows *they* will encourage *him*. Do you see the full circle-ness of this mutual encouragement? It is proof that Paul means what he says when he writes that they, too, the Romans, have a calling, have a purpose. Not just for the world...but also *for* him and *to* him, as an Apostle. He needs their prayers. He needs their thanks. He needs their relationship. He needs their encouragement.

There is no hierarchy of need with encouragement. *We all* need to be encouraged, don't we? We all need to be told that we matter. We all need to know that someone is praying for us. We all need to be thanked for what we do. We all need to be recognized for our gifts. We all want to be the recipients of somebody else's valuable time.

And so who is going to do that encouraging, praying, and thanking and time-spending? Well, we are. You and me.

And this is the gift of Christian community that rooted first and

foremost in Gospel Goodness...in the Grace that God loves all of us and claims and calls all of us as beloved and is pulling us all together – as a community – for a purpose. ***And even as we have a faith that needs proclaiming to the world, we also have a faith community that needs attention and caring – to and for and with – one another.***

One of the key things that the Discernment Team heard as we listened to all the data from our congregation is that here at Calvary, we care really well for one another, we value caring for each other, and even with this strength – there are clear gaps in this eco-system of caring where some folks are missing out on the care we have to give – and there are also ways in which how we care for one another may not be the best way for someone else to be cared for. There are different needs and points of attention that we have yet to explore and hone in on as a community that 'experiences and shares God's love.' So we are listening and learning through this process what it means for us to embody Gospel Goodness to one another – for all people, in all kinds of ways.

You'll be hearing more about

this soon, and when you do, remember this letter from Paul to Romans and that to name belovedness and claim our call from Christ means – to thank each other regularly and specifically, to pray for each other corporately and individually, to spend time with each other and build connection (one on one and in groups), and to mutually encourage one another – publicly and privately – this is *“how we taste and see that the Lord is good,”* as the psalmist writes.

Paul gives us the best antidote to any kind of gospel shame we might have – and that is the Gospel Goodness of the Good News of God’s power through Christ’s resurrection – which is a mystery that moves the covenantal relationship God had with Israel now to a covenantal relationship God has with the world – is a model that God gives us in Christ – and is a model for how we are to be with one another. Paul understands that. He understands that God sends Jesus to cross time and space and draw us into God’s loving embrace. And that is what Paul is doing for the Romans – even with simple words on a page...crossing time and space to extend a loving embrace through gratitude,

prayer, encouragement, and proclamation.

Gospel Goodness is about relationship. And care.

Today, as we come to the Table of our Lord, can we shake off any shame we might feel...and grab on to Goodness of the Gospel as if our lives depended on it? Because they do. “Salvation” – healing and wholeness and complete wellness – is available for us all...through relationship...through connection...connection to God, to others, and to self.

The “News of the World” will not give us this salvation...but the Gospel Good News will. So let us not be ashamed...of the gospel...or of anything that is Good. God created us for Goodness, and calls us Good, and God sends us into the world to share this Goodness, this Good News with all.

And the gifts of our identity as beloveds and our calling as faithful followers – those are here in the Bread and Cup for us to re-member and receive. So if you feel broken, allow the goodness of God’s grace and love to pull you back together, to heal you, to love you into

wholeness.

And the gifts we are invited to extend to each other – of gratitude, prayer, connection, time, and encouragement – those gifts, too, are here for us to give...to the world...and to one another.

Sometimes, it really is that simple...and, that good.

Amen.