

# Preaching for Ordinary Time

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## I.

In my seminary years we all learned the distinction between two kinds of time, both signified by a Greek noun. *Chronos* was ordinary time, the time in which we went about our daily business, fulfilled our usual obligations, and brought home our paychecks. *Kairos* was extraordinary time, time filled with unusual significance, depth, and excitement. Theologically, *kairos* was the time of God's special activity, so that for instance in Mark's Gospel, when Jesus begins his ministry, he says quite appropriately, "The *kairos* is fulfilled (Mark 1:15).

The liturgical year and the preaching thereof are marked by three *kairoi* followed by a very long *chronos*. We celebrate Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, and the days of preparation for each, and then suddenly, just as the summer doldrums begin to set in—*chronos*—ordinary time. This is that season where the readings just roll on and on. On any given Sunday half the congregation is on vacation, and for one blessed month, so are we. Time to rest up for the exciting and inevitable *kairos* of next fall. Had God consulted with Christian preachers about the shape of the liturgical year, we would certainly have suggested one more great divine intervention just about August 1 to deliver us from the ordinary routine.

However, Ordinary Time presents us with a couple of preaching advantages. The first advantage is that while we are almost inevitably bound (gladly of course) to preach the Gospel texts for Advent/Christmas and Lent/Easter and are absolutely bound to preach Acts 2 for Pentecost, come ordinary time we might pay extraordinary attention to the lessons from the Old Testament or the Epistles.

The second advantage is that most of us are pretty ordinary people preaching for pretty ordinary people, and there is much to be said for a Gospel that can get us beyond Christmas and Easter and touch us where we usually live—with the jobs, the family, the church committees and the political perturbations that are entirely ordinary.

For ordinary time this year a great many of the epistle lessons are drawn from Paul's letters to the Romans. This essay will look at the assigned texts from Romans and suggest what good news they might proclaim. We will give a quick glance at the gospel and Hebrew Bible lessons for each of the same Sundays.

However the truth is that an enormous amount of our Christian history has been shaped by Romans and by people who have read Romans—St. Augustine, Martin Luther, John Wesley, Karl Barth. When Christian faith needs new energy, time and again Romans has been the source. And the other truth is that Romans is obviously written for ordinary people worrying about ordinary things like how to get along in church, what happens when we die, whether or not to pay taxes, and what to do with those annoying people who always disagree with us. So we begin with Romans and examine some of the passages it provides for ordinary time.<sup>1</sup>

## II.

Paul's letter to the Romans is unique among Paul's undisputed letters because Paul writes to a church he has never visited. Perhaps for this reason he goes into great detail

explaining the heart of his gospel. Though we cannot easily discern what Paul actually knew about the Roman congregations, three themes seem to be important.

First, he wants them to know who he is, what he preaches, and why he has apostolic authority. Second, he wants their support for his travels. His hope is apparently to pass through Rome on his way to Spain, and he needs both their moral and their financial support to make this possible. Third, there seem to be some divisions within the Roman churches. Most likely these include divisions between Jewish and Gentile Christians. It may even be that the Jewish Christians are returning to Rome after being expelled some years earlier along with other Jews. Jewish and Gentile congregations are trying to find ways to live together despite their different histories and customs. This tension may also be related to Paul's long discussion in Romans 9-11 of the role of Israel in God's whole plan for creation.

### III. Some representative texts

#### *Proper 4: Romans 1:16-17, 3:22b-31*

When John Calvin preached, he preached the *lectio continua*. If he was preaching on Romans, he started with 1:1, quit when his time for that sermon was up, and started again wherever he'd left off. What he would not have done is what our lectionary does, leave out Romans 1:18-3:22a. The missing chunk sets the context for the whole letter. Paul is writing out of the conviction that the end of the ages is coming to pass in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God's wrath is being poured on every human being—both Gentiles and Jews. That's the bad news, but it is nothing compared to the good news: the good news is that God's righteousness—God's justice—is being offered to every human being. Every human being is being offered God's righteousness through one human being—Jesus Christ. And every human being has access to Christ in one way—through faith, or through faithfulness.

When Paul says in Romans 1:16 that he is not "ashamed of the good news," that is the good news he is not ashamed of. ("Not ashamed" is a rhetorical flourish; he is not just unashamed of the gospel, he is joyfully committed to it.)

Then when Paul says in 3:22b that "there is no distinction," he is not proleptically channeling the Declaration of Independence. He does not much worry about whether all people are created equal; what he does care about is that all people are equally able to be redeemed.

In his time and place, he's especially concerned to remind his readers that Israel, which has the law, is not more redeemed than Gentiles who grow up without the law. In our time and our preaching, we might want to think what markers of specialness we tend to claim—our nation, our financial well-being. We love making distinctions, and God loves destroying them.

Two things are indistinguishably, abundantly available. God's righteousness in Jesus Christ. The gift of faith that lets us share that righteousness.

Remember that the faithful folk who put together the Revised Common Lectionary did not assume that the gospel text and the epistle text would shed direct light on each other. In this season we are reading through both Matthew's Gospel and Paul's letter to the Romans—in order, but with major pieces left out.

However for your own thought and sermon preparation, note that here as often, Matthew and Paul are in a kind of conversation, if not an argument. Paul wants to remind us of the centrality of faith. Matthew 7:21-29 reminds us that faith has to bear fruit. Christianity has tensions from the start. Paul would have found Matthew stuffy,

and Matthew would have found Paul veering dangerously close to permissiveness. Preach the Gospel your people need to hear on this day.

*Proper 5: Romans 4:13-25*

Maybe when it came time to preach his gospel, Paul came to the abstract theological conclusion that people are justified, made righteous, through faith and then was pleased to find in Abraham a splendid illustration for his sermon.

But maybe Paul was trying to figure out how he could make clear that the good news was good news for Gentiles as well as Jews, and he searched scripture to find the story of some one whom God had justified, declared righteous, quite apart from the Law of Moses. He found Abraham, who not only got declared righteous long before Moses came along, but who got declared righteous before he was ever circumcised. And to Paul's immense delight in reading about Abraham, he came upon Genesis 15:6, which became Paul's favorite Bible verse ever after: "Abraham had faith (or had faithfulness), and it was counted to him as righteousness."

And then the other lovely thing about Abraham was that God told him he would be the father not just of Israel, but of many nations. Well, really, says Paul, of every nation. Because in every nation people can hear the call to faith and obey that call, and then, whether they keep the law or not, they are justified.

And the final lovely thing about Abraham was that he showed us what faith looked like: It looked like trusting in the promises of God. Despite the evidence that Abraham was getting old and Sarah wasn't getting any younger, still Abraham trusted the promises of God for the gift of Isaac and all the gifts beyond.

Therefore all of us can become Abraham's children, not because we are all descended from him biologically, but because we are all descended from him theologically—we are all given the gift of faith.

This week Matthew 9:9-13 fits beautifully with Paul's claims. In eating with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus lives out Paul's promise: "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Matt. 9:13). Of course Paul would push that one step farther: "I have come to make the sinners righteous, too." Which doesn't mean only to make them upright, but to bring them into the right relationship with God—through mercy and then through (Christ's) sacrifice as well.

*Proper 6: Romans 6:1-11*

Some scholars have thought that Matthew's Gospel was written in part to calm down Christians who had gotten too excited about Paul's claim that our righteousness comes through faith, not through obedience to the law. Paul anticipates such Christian excitement in this passage. Just because God saves us through God's sheer grace, that does not mean that anything goes.

"Think about all of this differently," says Paul. "Don't think about what you are supposed to do; think about who you are. You are a person baptized into Jesus Christ, and when you came up out of those baptismal waters, you were a new person."

Anytime you begin to fall back into the old ways of sin and selfishness and backbiting and boasting, you become a living contradiction in terms, an oxymoron on two feet. That old self-centered you died in the waters of baptism; the new you lives constantly into Christ—and reaches out constantly in love to others. Notice how closely Christ's redemptive act is tied to our baptism. Baptism does not save us, but Christ does, and in our baptism we conform to the salvation we do not achieve.

The last part of the Gospel text for the day (Matthew 10:38-39) might be read as

a further spelling out of what our new life in baptism means. In baptism we lose our old lives for Jesus' sake only to find them again: transformed. And part of that transformation is that the rest of our lives also embody the shape of our baptism, giving up the self for the sake of the Gospel—again and again and again—only to find our truest selves—again and again and again.

*Proper 12: Romans 8:26-39*

In Romans 1-7 Paul spells out the way God makes no distinctions between Jews and Gentiles—or between any of our other human categories. All of us sin, but all of us are redeemed through God's mercy in Jesus Christ, received through our faith or our faithfulness.

In Romans 8 Paul talks about the way we live out that mercy through the gift of God's Spirit. Through God's spirit we are confirmed as members of God's family—"heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ" (8:16).

Then from Romans 8:18 on, Paul tries to bring comfort and assurances to the Roman Christians who notice that even though they have been redeemed through Christ, they are still subject to pain and suffering and loss. Paul tells them that this is because God's work in the world is not yet done, that creation is groaning, but that the sorrows that cause the groaning are the birth pangs of a new creation.

Then in our passage for today, Paul sets out three great hopes.

1. Romans 8:26-27. The first hope is the presence of the Holy Spirit, who is always present even in our sorrows because the Holy Spirit prays with us and for us to God. A teacher of mine once said that when Paul Tillich wanted to talk about salvation, he said that it was all God and all us. Paul (the apostle) says that even when we pray, our prayers are all God, with us and for us.

2. Romans 8:28-30. The second hope is the hope of God's providence. I think the variant reading of Romans 8:28 (which was also the RSV reading) is stronger than the NRSV. "In all things God works for good with those who love God." "He's got the whole world in His Hands" said the spiritual, which may not mean that every benefit and every disaster are directly planned by God. It does mean that God can be at work through benefit and disaster alike.

3. Romans 8:31-39. The third hope is the reminder that God's providential history is shaped by the cross of Jesus Christ. In the gift of the Son we realize that God is always and absolutely for us. The text does not deny that there are principalities and powers, forces that seem strong and sometimes destructive as well. It does deny that such powers can ever separate us from God's love. The richness of this text is inexhaustible.

The parables from Matthew for today are also rich and compelling texts. Sometimes we stumble upon the gift of God's kingdom almost by accident; sometimes we discover it after a long and arduous search. Either way the Kingdom is always sheer gift, and our response is always sheer gratitude.

For this day I would use Matthew or Romans, but not both.

*Proper 13: Romans 9:1-5*

Some distinguished scholars have thought that Romans 9-11 is the heart of the case Paul is making in the book of Romans. We have seen that Paul insists that God's justifying grace makes no distinctions. All are included—Jews and Gentiles alike. Romans 9-11 talks about the way in which Israel and the Gentiles alike are part of God's promise and of God's plan for the whole creation.

9:1-5 makes two claims that may seem to be in tension. On the one hand God has not, does not, and will not desert Israel. God does not hand out a covenant one day and take it back the next. "My kindred according to the flesh. . . are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises, to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen."

On the other hand, wonderful as all the other gifts are, by far the most important gift is the Messiah, who is over all. And Paul lovingly, hopefully, wishes for his kinfolk that they might discover what he has discovered: that the crucified Jesus is God's own love for all the world.

So much does Paul long for his family and friends to become believers that he wishes he might be cut out so that they might be brought in. His words in 9:3 echo Moses' plea to God in Exodus 32:30-32, where Moses asks that he might be blotted from the book of life if only his fellow Jews might be forgiven.

This passage—like all of Romans 9-11—makes for tough preaching. On the one hand, Paul strongly denies any claim that God has turned away from Judaism or that the promises of God to Israel can ever be withdrawn. We need only listen to much preaching in our own time to discover that many Christians are still deeply attached to getting the Jews detached from the mercy of God. Paul will have none of that.

On the other hand, Paul could not deny the unique power and mercy of God in Jesus Christ without denying his own truest experience and deepest convictions. This is not a text about who gets saved; it's a text about who knows what. Israel knows an awful lot, and apart from Israel, we would all be bereft. Now, Christians also know one thing more: that from Israel has come the Messiah, over all. God be blessed forever.

Years ago William Sloane Coffin (a genuine evangelical) told of the conversation he had with Rabbi Joshua Heschel. It was Passover and Heschel said: "Isn't it a shame that God established this wonderful feast to show forth God's mercy, and you don't celebrate it." Coffin said, "Yes, and isn't it a shame that God came in human form to show God's mercy, and you don't celebrate that." Coffin did not become a Jew, and Heschel did not become a Christian. But each bore witness.

Our text for the day from Matthew, the feeding of the five thousand, demands a sermon of its own. Note how it shows Jesus' compassion. Note how it foreshadows the Lord's Supper. Note the abundance of the feast—God gives not only what is needed, but way beyond. It's First Sunday, and if you are celebrating communion this day, think about ways that the table might show forth abundance instead of parsimony. Are those little bread cubes really sign enough?

*Proper 16: Romans 12:1-8*

A woman I know well frequently puts the sermons she hears to the "So what?" test. However careful the exegesis or orthodox the theology, before the sermon is over, she wants to know what difference all this will make for our ordinary lives: "So what?"

The last chapters of Paul's letter to the Romans, beginning with 12:1, are Paul's great "so what" passages. He has told the Romans about God's grace that makes no distinctions, about baptism and the new life, about the presence of the Spirit, about God's shaping history to include Jews and Gentiles alike. But now the great "so what?"

"Therefore" says Paul. "Here's what."

The "Here's what" goes on for several chapters and includes exhortations about getting along with enemies, dealing with the government, and negotiating disputes

over the menu at church suppers. Notice how often Paul's great affirmations are evinced by what seem to be the most ordinary issues. A fuss over vegetarianism calls forth Romans 14:7-8. "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live we live to the Lord, and if we die we die to the Lord" (Proper 19).

Romans 12:1-8 sets up the whole significance of Paul's claims about the ways we live out the gospel. First there is a word about true worship. Romans 1-11 tells us why we should worship God, out of sheer gratitude. Romans 12-15 tell us how to worship God—mind and body transformed, made new, shaped (as in baptism) in the shape of Christ's own self.

In 12:3 Paul spells out the implication of his theological claim. God makes no distinctions. If this is true of God, it is also true of believers. When we all esteem God rightly, none of us will esteem herself, himself too highly. All have sinned and fallen short, Paul has already told us. All are justified by *God's* grace. Don't take yourself so seriously; take your neighbor more kindly.

In 12:4-8 Paul, like many preachers, may be borrowing from some of his own best work (1 Corinthians 12) to remind us that faith is embodied in church. For Paul the idea of solitary Christianity would have been inconceivable. All have sinned; all are graced; we receive that grace through faith; the faithful are the church. Faithfulness in church looks like interdependence and mutual kindness and respect.

Matthew 16:13-20 is the text where the meaning of Jesus for faith comes clear, at least to Peter, and at least briefly, in Matthew's Gospel. The whole relationship between faith and fear in Peter that the text shows forth is worth its own sermon.

If you did want to link Romans 12 to Matthew 16, notice that for Peter—as for the Roman Christians Paul addresses—to come to faith is to come to church. If Peter is the rock on which the church is built, then he is stuck with church. (And church, of course, is stuck, and blessed, with him.)

#### IV.

Our reflections on Romans 12-15 bring us back to thoughts about ordinary time. One can read Romans 1-11 as a rich and nuanced discussion of *kairos*, that great, earthshaking intervention by God into human history in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Romans 12-15, however are clearly about *chronos*, too. The whole creation groans with eager longing for the revealing of children of God. God's reign is coming and is yet to come. Already, the scholars tell us, and not yet.

In the meantime, we have time, even ordinary time. The good news is this: Our times are in God's hands. Feast days and ordinary days. *Kairoi* and *chronoi* too.

Preach that.

#### Notes

1 Excellent commentaries on Romans include Leander Keck, *Romans: Abingdon New Testament Commentaries* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005) and Paul Achtemeier, *Romans: Interpretation Commentaries* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985).

For an overview of the epistle especially intended for lay Bible study, see David L. Bartlett, *Romans: Westminster Bible Companion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995).