

August 20, 2023 Christ the Lord, Pinole

Good morning, thank you for having me. Although she's not here, I am sending my appreciation to Rev. Lois for this pulpit, this opportunity, to share the Good News, the teachings of Jesus.

I also appreciate that preachers, who are kind of teachers, have a choice when it comes to what material they wish to discuss. Of course the words of Jesus, the Gospel, are covered by most preachers on each Sunday, but sometimes it is best to avoid the letters, the Epistles, that are also read. Sometimes they are almost unreadable.

Like today's letter from St. Paul to the Romans. It is super important to Christians – Paul, who often goofs up, gives us the playbook for a living in harmony with God. Most importantly, Paul writes to the Romans not from a first-person I saw Jesus Gospel perspective. He is a follower of Jesus, like us, after the Cross –

St. Paul hopes for, and teaches, the Romans to find joy and peace through God's love.

Let's break down our lesson today from Paul. I love St. Paul the teacher, but sometimes his writing not so much. He's writing to Romans, Gentiles, but in this particular passage he's talking about how God's love, through the message of Jesus, has been blessing all creation, all God's people, throughout time.

God's love – in the form of mercy.

It helps to have a Bible to understand today's reading. We see that it's from Chapter 11, but it is missing a few verses in the middle. My Bible has footnotes – I skip a couple of pages after I read the first part of the passage.

Bibles with footnotes are great to your understanding of God's love. I have a great version of the New Testament. It's the New Revised Standard Version, the translation used by many, including this Church. But the footnotes, the annotations, and lots of explanations, come from contemporary Jewish editors; Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler.

St. Paul is working with people who know olive trees – even the wild branches bear fruit. Paul tells us that God has never abandoned his people, no matter what they have done. Then, as St. Paul sometimes does, he goes on (and on) about Israel being God's chosen, willful people who may seem like a wild shoot on an olive tree, perhaps a tree that has been cut and new growth come from the stump. St. Paul talks to the Romans, to us, who are like wild shoots from all over but will be grafted to the same tree, all branches, Jews and Gentiles, sharing the same trunk, all rooted in God.

At the end of Chapter 11, Paul sums up his inclusive argument by showing how God's love has always been evident and always will be. More footnotes are handy here. It's noted that "Disobedient to God" is literally "not-persuaded with respect to God". So St. Paul is meeting us wherever we are in our faith; "You were once, maybe even now sometimes, not-persuaded with respect to God, but God has always treated you well." Indeed, our mercy is because of the disobedience of our forbearers: even God's chosen people acted in a non-persuaded way in respect to God their Creator. St. Paul, the teacher, might say that non-persuaded is just being uneducated in God's incredible power to love.

Another word for acting in a non-persuaded way in respect to God, is to be acting outside the will of the Creator. Our prayer book puts it very simple on page 848 in the Catechism; "Sin is the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation."

St. Paul's teaching is pretty simple then; the Creator has been and will always be there, ready, and available, to love people. Throughout all history and into all future our free choice can be used to seek our own will or God's will. No matter, the Creator always loves Creation.

So even if I sometimes really don't like his hard-to-follow words, I really do love St. Paul our teacher, our rabboni, as Mary Magdalene called Jesus.

Jesus is my rabboni, and I am right with Mary Magdalene in her love for my teacher and my Savior. I absolutely love Jesus.

But I really don't like Jesus today in St. Matthew's gospel. Seems kind of out of character for our Savior, even rude.

Let's break it down. Overall, it is a story of an outsider, a caregiver, coming to Jesus to ask for the healing of another.

Location – Tyre and Sidon. They were cities known for extravagant wealth. Make this gospel today's gospel – think of a city known for extravagant wealth. Not too difficult.

Now put Jesus there.

Now there's someone asking Jesus to heal – St. Matthew's gospel actually has a very similar healing story in Chapter 8, except it's a Centurion, an authority of the region of Capernaum where Jesus was living. This Centurion asks Jesus to come heal a servant and Jesus immediately says; "I will come and cure." The Centurion then, from his position of power, admits he has no power over Jesus – the Centurion states he is unworthy to have Jesus, God's living love, even as a guest. Even so, Jesus heals.

Jesus is in an unfamiliar region when someone with absolutely no power, a member of a hated group, asks for healing for their daughter. She's a crazy person that came off the street in an expensive city. We can picture her.

We can picture her love, her worry over her child. Surely Jesus knows the love of a parent for a child – it is how our Savior explains God's love for him, for the world.

Instead of an immediate "I will cure", the Canaanite woman gets silence from Jesus.

I see our greatest Rabboni in action in that silence, for that allows the disciples to come and respond. Do they respond in mercy? Nope, send her away, they urge. She's no use, she's in our way.

Now Jesus does something clever – he throws out a statement that aligns with the understanding of the Messiah – I've come to restore God's chosen people and all will then be well.

That's a totally true statement rabboni Jesus, but today's star student, today's power, speaks up.

"Help me".

Jesus makes another statement that the disciples heard all the time – we hear it all the time.

"Not enough resources to help those without power, those that are scorned, those that don't act like us".

Our educated student, the Canaanite woman, responds that even those without power, the dogs at the table, eat of God's plenty. I have now told the truth to you, Savior Jesus, and to your disciples, that there is enough for me to be at the table.

Our Savior heals.

Lessons come in all kinds of different ways. My best lessons from Jesus are sometimes ones I do not like, but they always heal me. Like all the people in Paul's lesson, I can act as if I'm "non-persuaded in respect to God", but I live knowing God's mercy is always mine.

And the Good News learned today is that the love of Jesus will flow to every one of us in Creation. All.

Even a powerful Centurion, an even more powerful Canaanite and to each of us that do our best to walk in the ways of our Creator.

**AMEN**

- Fr Dave Rickert