

## **The Fifth Sunday of Easter/Music Sunday**

May 3, 2015

Haven Lutheran Church

Readings: Romans 1: 1-17

"Unashamed"

*Grace and peace to you from God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen*

Paul writes to the Christian community in Rome. If you are imagining that his letter is being read in front of a huge congregation meeting in a Vatican-like cathedral, you need to 're-calculate,' as our G.P.S. devices tell us. In ancient Rome, the wealthier lived in the hills and the poorer folks lived in the area around the Tiber River which was very prone to regular flooding. Here is where the early Christians likely lived. When Paul's letter was first read, it was probably in a crowded room in the low-lying poorer district, across the river from the main city center, across the river from the seat of Roman power. Maybe they numbered 100 or less. They would gather in one of a few houses for worship and prayer, teaching and communion.

Paul did not start this Christian community in Rome. Early church history credits Peter with bringing the gospel to Rome after a narrow escape in Jerusalem. He announced the good news of Jesus to a sizable Jewish community in Rome. Some of the Roman Jews became followers of Christ. But about "six to eight years before Paul was writing, there had been trouble among the Jews in Rome.... Claudius, who was emperor at the time, had had enough... and expelled the Jewish community from Rome."<sup>1</sup> They were forced to leave and scattered. As it turned out, some of these expelled Judaic Christians were among the first friends Paul made when he arrived in Corinth. Paul listened to their first-hand stories about that fledgling Christian community in Rome. When emperor Claudius died in AD 54, the Jews were allowed back into Rome. Many returned. At the end of his letter to the Romans, Paul sends greetings to quite a few persons he knew personally or through the stories he had heard.

When Paul wrote to that small, Christian community in Rome, he knew they were living with tensions: tensions within the community between the returning Jewish Christians and the

Gentile-Christian who had never left; tensions with the Jewish community; tensions with the cosmopolitan mixture of people and beliefs who inhabited this powerful city; and tension with an empire and its ruler, whose official titles include “son of God” and whose birthday was called “good news.” Paul knew all those challenges and gives thanks to “the maker of heaven and earth that there is a community in Rome, under Caesar’s [very] nose, who give allegiance to Jesus as Lord, [the true “Son of God”], who have been grasped by the vision of a different kingdom, a different hope, and who share a different faith - a faith in the God who raised Jesus from the dead.”<sup>2</sup>

The church Paul was addressing in Rome may not be like you imagined but you may recognize some commonalities with our times and church. Aren’t we a minority voice that finds itself in conflict with the prevailing norms and beliefs? Aren’t we a minority voice that can be silenced by the indifference or hostility of our neighbors who think we’re odd, outdated and old fashioned? Aren’t we a minority voice that is quieted by our own fears of inadequacies or rejection?. Into our church we need to hear Paul’s strong, joyful voice: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel”.... I am not ashamed to believe in the power of God who raised Jesus from the death... I am not ashamed to place my trust in God who has been working since Abraham to “rescue the entire creation from corruption and decay.”<sup>3</sup> We are not to be ashamed either for don’t we too believe in a God whose grace alone can save us from the despair and death of being the sinful, broken people we are? We are not to be ashamed to trust in a powerful, mysterious God who loves all people and wants each one to know the fullness of that transforming, life-giving love.

No, we should not be ashamed of God or our faith or our efforts to proclaim the gospel in our lives and church. And when we pray and sing here on Sunday, we practice our strong, confident voices. We sing hymns that proclaim glimpses of the grace and glory of God. Our music invites both our minds and our hearts into the wonder of our Lord who is beyond our full understanding and who yet came to live among us and still resides in and among us in the Spirit. Hear and grow in the gospel,

listen and remember what it is we believe as the music crosses barriers and defies limits. On this Music Sunday and each time we gather, let us not be ashamed to sing of God's *Amazing Grace* given freely to us through faith in our Beautiful Savior... Let us not hesitate to offer praise to God for how *Great Thou Art* and humbly answer, "*Here I Am Lord*" ... May we gladly *Lift High the Cross* as we recall what *A Mighty Fortress is our God*...And when we *Gather at the River* or *Come to the Lakeshore* to meet our Lord, let us rejoice that we place our faith in a God whose love is boundless, persistent and bears us up *On Eagles' Wings* through our most dire times.

Fortified by the Lord coming to us in Word, Holy Communion, community AND song, let us leave this sanctuary and enter the mission field of our lives not ashamed to say that we trust and follow Jesus, the very best we can, because it is the only way to live that makes any sense to us. Let that faith and trust in God's faithfulness be our own shameless love song. Don't be afraid. Just be sincere. Don't worry if you sing off key or forget the words but believe in the power of God and the good news of a risen Lord to bring hope and healing into the hearing and hearts of our hurting world. Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 5/2/15

## ENDNOTES

---

1. N. T. Wright, Paul for Everyone: Romans Part I Louisville, KY Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, pp 7-8.

2. N.T. Wright p 6

3. N.T. Wright p. 12