

Akron Christian Reformed Church

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Reference: Scott McKnight, *Reading Romans Backwards*

NT Wright, *...Romans Part Two*

Isaiah 42.1-9; Romans 16.1-16; Matthew 3.13-17

Who Are the Romans?

Prayer: We look around, dear Lord, and we wonder how in the world you formed us. We wouldn't have ever considered making this group of people our sisters and brothers. But here we are. Gathered by your Holy Spirit, to worship you, our King and God. For this we give you praise. Be with us now as we hear your word. Help us to overcome any barriers that may keep us from receiving your word. Open our ears, our hearts, our minds, so that we may accept your voice speaking to us and be able to follow the Christ better. Amen.

I'm trying, this morning, to start a new series. I'm going to attempt to look at the letter to the Romans. I never know how far I will get when I begin such an endeavor. So, we'll see.

This means that I'm replacing the lectionary's epistle reading for the next few weeks with readings from Romans. The other two texts though will be from the lectionary. I maintain those texts because this liturgy is deeply impacted by the Old Testament readings for this season.

Romans is the most significant letter that Paul wrote and contains some of our faith's most cherished ideas. For example, who would we be without Romans 8? So, we'll see. I suspect that these sermons will sound more like a lecture than they will sermons. But quoting that great Irishman Mulvaney, "Live with it."

As we look at this letter, I want to keep the Theology of the Kingdom of God at the forefront of our thinking. Romans has traditionally been interpreted through the lens of Church Theology. Indeed, it's the foundation of most Church Theology – which tends to become doctrine. I want Romans, however, to help us form our Kingdom Theology, from which all Church Theology should arise.

We're going to look at Romans by starting with chapter 16. I'm following the lead of Scott McKnight who wrote the book *Reading Romans Backwards*. McKnight's thought is that if you don't understand the setting of the letter you can't understand the letter itself.

The Roman church already understands who they are and what their situation in life is, so they don't need to start at the end, but we don't know them. We need to see the conclusions in order to understand the other bits. Otherwise we will make the entire letter about me being saved through the church. Which is exactly what Christians have done for centuries.

Even though Paul's never been to Rome, he writes a letter to the Roman church. He's met some of the Christians of Rome in other cities -- many of whom are mentioned this morning.

In chapter 16, Paul greets twenty-four people by name. And, as all of you know, it's risky business to start greeting people by name in a public gathering. You're always going to forget someone and they'll always be hurt. And so, I tend to think that this is a fairly inclusive list of the believers in Rome whom Paul has met one way or another. Twenty-four people. But keeping this list of names in the foreground helps us to hear all of the second person pronouns, the YOU's, in the plural not in the singular. That's important for English Speakers. In Romans, "You" almost always means "You All".

(Sometimes Paul addresses individuals by name and then the pronoun may be singular. That's rare and obvious.)

Now, the church in Rome isn't anything like the monstrosity that exists there today. Paul is writing to about five house churches, that probably don't have more than twenty people in each one. Space prohibits larger gatherings. And quite honestly twenty seems like a big number. He may be writing to about a hundred Christians. (I doubt it's even that many.) So, remember, the church of Rome today is completely beyond Paul's experience or imagination. He never thought it would become what it is today. A hundred people at most living in a city of five million people.

This handful of Christians are trying to figure out what it means to be followers of the Christ in the heart of an Empire – a brutal Empire that's an economic powerhouse. Some people are doing very, very well in this Empire. Many are not. There is a great social gap in this city.

This small group of Christians is wondering what their lives should look like? How are they to be different than their neighbors? How does following the Christ define them? They even have to figure out what they're going to do when they gather together.

And the thing is, they're such a mixed lot. They're a jumble of people. It's as if they've been spun together in a bingo wheel, tossed about, then randomly drawn, because there's no cohesion. We can tell from this list of names that some are Roman, some are Greek, some are Jewish. Nearly half of the important people that Paul mentions are women. (ten are named) Some are wealthy and some are slaves. This is the most bizarre and haphazard group of people that could be imagined. They do not share a common culture, a common religion, a common land. They do not share a common experience upon which to build the church. And this, this hodge-podge of people, is the Roman church to whom Paul writes his letter.

In that list of names there's one, Junia that I smile about. For centuries our Bibles called this person Junias. I laugh because this is the first transgender person in the church. You see, Junia is a woman. Paul calls her an apostle. Which means she's an original follower of Jesus. She knew Jesus. Perhaps she's one of the women who watched him die from a distance. And Paul says that Junia was in prison with him. But remember, Junia is a woman. For centuries though the church couldn't imagine a woman apostle who went to prison for her faith, so they changed her name to Junias trying to pretend she is a man. Junia didn't regain her identity until the last half of the 20th century. But they have within their church someone who actually knew and followed Jesus. Not even Paul could claim that. But you can imagine, then, that Junia is very important in this church.

Another interesting name on the list is Priscilla, which is a Roman name. She's mentioned in Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians and 2 Timothy. But Priscilla is always mentioned with her husband, Aquila, who is a converted Jew. We're told that they became refugees in Corinth because of the persecution by Emperor Claudius in Rome (Acts 18.1-2). In Corinth, they made tents with Paul (Acts 18.3). They opened their home to people and taught them about Jesus (Acts 18.26). And their home in Corinth was a house church. (1 Cor. 16.19) After they returned to Rome, when Nero became emperor, their Roman home was one of the Roman house churches. (Rm 16.3-5) We also know that Priscilla and Aquila were itinerant preachers because they travelled with Paul spreading the gospel, and he left them in Ephesus to continue working there when Paul went on. (Acts 18.19) And Romans 16 reveals that at some point they did something dangerous to save Paul's life, but we don't know what that was. (Rm 16.4)

And all of this is done as a team. They're always mentioned as Priscilla and Aquila. Some think that Priscilla was a noble Roman woman who married a Jewish man, maybe even a Jewish ex-slave,

because she's usually mentioned before her husband. I don't know, but this woman is prominent among Roman Christians. (One of my New Testament profs, Andy Bandstra, used to like to say that he thought Priscilla and Aquila wrote the book of Hebrews. I think it made him feel like he was such a rebel including a woman in the writing of Scripture.)

So, they're a diverse group of strangers, as they wonder, what in the world they're doing together, at the beginning of this new religion, following an absent King, in the heart of an oppressive Empire. Can you imagine?

There are, necessarily then, struggles of privilege and power within the Roman Church. Because we know those struggles existed within Roman culture. Those who are wealthy, or who are Jewish, or who are more Roman all exerted power, trying to control the direction of the church.

That's why Paul equalizes the playing field by calling everyone brother or sister. When Paul gives everyone the status of sibling, he removes the other cultural status symbols and titles. Plus, Paul is indicating that siblings must learn how to love and live with one another, even when they're very different from one another. (McKnight pp 3-4)

That's also why Paul urges this nascent church to greet one another with a holy kiss. This is revolutionary. For the first time it wasn't the lower-class people who are expected to kiss the upper-class. No. They are all to kiss one another. Paul is leveling the hierarchy within the Roman church.

I find one name to be the most interesting, however. Right at the beginning of the chapter Paul writes:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.

Phoebe is probably a Greek convert because her name means "Titaness". Which is what the Greek goddesses are called. And no Jewish family would name their daughter after Greek goddesses.

Being a letter courier, in that time, has more meaning than it does to us. Phoebe isn't just a nameless messenger who delivers a letter.

She would have practiced the reading, probably in front of Paul, so that the people could imagine Paul being present with them. Phoebe is Paul's image and voice to the Roman church. She's chosen to stand before them as Paul's proxy. She's to read his letter to the various house churches, and to answer questions about the letter and Paul.

I also suspect that she's chosen because of the prominence of women in the Roman Church. The Christian women of Rome hear the words of Paul through the voice of a woman. And I know, for most of us men, that doesn't sound like much. That's because we're used to having a voice. We're used to having status. We're used to having power. The fact that the voice of Paul is a woman most likely conveyed another equalizing message to the church – there is no difference between male or female.

When I first started here, I told Debbie that every Sunday we must hear a woman's voice either reading Scripture, or acting as liturgist, or preaching, because for far too long women's voices were shut out of the church. Women were told to be silent. And I suppose that most men never even thought twice about what we were doing. It didn't mean much to them that a woman spoke in every service, but there were some women who commented about it to me.

It's a power issue that Paul is confronting when he sends Phoebe to read his letter. And it's a power issue that Paul's addressing when he writes: "I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you." In other words, don't discriminate against her!

Also notice that Phoebe isn't just anyone, she's a deacon in the church of Cenchreae. (Cenchreae, by the way, is the seaport for Corinth.) Which means that Phoebe has some experience of leadership within a church. She's someone who can answer their questions about how things work within the church.

Plus, Phoebe is a benefactor. Wright says being a benefactor "means that that she belongs to that class of people who put their private means at public disposal. To be called a 'benefactor' is a great honor." (p. 135) Phoebe is a benefactor to many people, even to Paul. She gave him considerable sums of money.

Phoebe is someone to be reckoned with all on her own, but she also has Paul's authority, so, she may be trusted and respected. And I suspect she's powerful. There's something extraordinary about this Phoebe.

I spent a great deal of time this week just thinking about this small, hidden, diverse, powerless, Roman church who are trying to follow their King in the heart of this ruthless, all consuming, powerful kingdom of Rome.

I wonder if they felt insignificant? I wonder if they felt like their efforts wouldn't ever lead to anything? I wonder if they had any thoughts whatsoever about the next generation, or the next, or the one after that? I wonder how they managed to hold everything together? How did they get the rich and the poor, the free and the slave, the male and the female, the Greek and the Roman and the Jew, all working together as the single body of Christ in Rome? What did they sacrifice in order to be the church as they followed their Lord and King? What dangers did they endure? How did they seem different from their neighbor?

I imagine they must have felt ineffective. I doubt that they could see a future for this church. There's so few of them and Rome is so big.

One must conclude that the Holy Spirit herself is creating this weird congregation. One must conclude that God is the one who gathered together this oddball group of people. Right here, before our eyes, in this little list of names, we discover a mystery. The mystery of God creating his church in Rome. I marveled at that this week.

You know, this letter to the Romans may have something to say to us because it occurred to me this week that we aren't all that dissimilar to the Roman church. I did a very rough, quick count of an old church directory and there are about 75 adults who worship regularly at this place. When you add in the kids we're just a little over a hundred. So, our size isn't much different from this Roman Church.

We too are a tiny church, in the middle of an Empire that threatens to swallow us. We too are trying to figure out what it means to follow King Jesus in our daily lives in a world that just doesn't care. We too have a tenuous future as a church. Who knows if there's going to be another generation after us that calls itself ACRC. It's difficult to imagine. We too come from diverse backgrounds, we are from diverse economic classes, with diverse educations and titles. We too must always consciously keep the church level. We too must united as sisters and brothers.

So, perhaps there's something for us to hear in this ancient letter. Let's see.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.