

Akron Christian Reformed Church

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Ref. *Reading Romans Backwards*, Scot McKnight

Psalms 27, Romans 12.3-19; Matthew 5.1-12

Prayer: Loving God, we are fearfully and wonderfully made. For we did not choose to seek your face. We did not choose your people or your church. We did not choose all of the blessings that have showered our life. But you are the God who formed us. You have called us out to follow you so we may reveal your glory to the nations. We wait this morning, dear Lord, for your Word to fall upon us as a gentle dew. Amen.

In Rome, the *ekklesia*<sup>1</sup> are those people who surround the Emperor and are sent into the Roman Kingdom to implement his wishes. *Ekklesia* is a highly political word.

And it's this political word that Paul calls the believers in Rome. The *ekklesia*. We translate that word as "church."

Paul let's these believers know that what they're doing is highly political. For they've been called out of the kingdoms of this world, including the Kingdom of Rome, to surround the one true King and to go into his kingdom to serve him. And the King they surround is King Jesus.

Paul says, that's who you are in Rome, the *ekklesia* who surrounds Jesus and implements his will. But even more than that, you as the *ekklesia* actually become the body of Christ, (12.5) the image of Christ the King to the world.

To Paul, being the church, means to reveal Jesus as the King.

So, I wondered this week, how are we doing? How are we revealing the Christ to the world? Where is that being done?

And thankfully, I see Jesus revealed by the church in all of those places where people are weak and struggling to survive. Not in the halls of power – to which much of the church is attracted. Not in the US Senate or the White House or the capital building in Columbus. No, Jesus is revealed by the church wherever humble Christians follow their King into the dark corners of the world.

Somehow, these Romans and Greeks and Jews have been drawn together to form the *ekklesia* in Rome. We have no idea what compelled them to begin meeting, but for some reason here they are.

I imagine that all of these people are gathered around Andronicus and Junia as they tell stories about being with Jesus. I'm sure that Priscilla and Aquila's stories about working with Paul, and about the formation of churches all around Asia minor, are also the focus of attention.

But you can only meet so long listening to such stories. There eventually must be a greater purpose. They need to understand what they're doing together, week after week, in these various gatherings.

So, Paul says, you are the *ekklesia*, the church, the body of Christ. You represent the King in the world, and you represent the King to one another. But what does that mean? What does it mean to be the Church in Rome, the *Ekklesia* in Rome?

When you're a parent your kids don't realize that you're constantly shooting from the hip. Most of us had no idea how to be parents before our kids arrived. So, we used common sense and experience to stay one step ahead of our kids. I remember making decisions where I sounded so firm and confident and yet internally I was thinking "I don't know if this is right or not." Paul's doing exactly that in all of his letters to the *ekklesia*. He's trying to stay one step ahead of the congregations, but he's kinda making it up as he goes. Fortunately, Paul is brilliant.

When I was in the seminary I took a class called "Ecclesiology". It was filled with theories and thoughts and definitions about the church that theologians extracted from scripture and reflection. It's really a bunch of made up stuff that's helpful, but it's also theoretical.

Paul and these Romans aren't living in the world of theory. Paul's creating theology on the fly to help these people to live as the church. To be the church. He's gotta create theology so the Greek, Roman and Jew, the slaves and the free, the women and the men, may all be together as a cohesive group. And his most compelling point in chapters 12-14 is that they are to live in harmony with one another (12.16), at peace with one another (12.18), because they love one another (13.8-10).

Paul teaches that the church must be a loving community that accepts everyone, lives at peace with everyone, is generous to one another. Paul expects the people of this new kind of *ekklesia* to sacrifice themselves for one another.

It's a stunning contrast to the Roman *ekklesia* that rules by fear and grants power to the privileged. These small house

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<sup>1</sup> *Ekklesia* literally means "the ones called out" from two Greek words, *ek* -- "out of" and *kaleo* -- "to call."

*ekklesias* are radically different from the politics that surround them.

But we must wonder, what's the point? What's the purpose? So that their individual little souls will go to heaven someday? Is the purpose of the church to be a gathering of like-minded people who may arrogantly gloat at how right they are? Is the church to be a little social club where they all can get together and commiserate about the Empire?

I think Paul understands the church as a diverse gathering of people, who've been called out of the nations, to form a community that stands alongside the Jewish community, in relationship with the LORD God Almighty. And he understands that these people have been called out of the nations by Jesus the King himself in order that they might reveal the glories of the King.

Paul views the church as being a contrast to all of the other communities found within the kingdoms of the world, including the kingdom of the Empire. The Roman *Ekklesia* isn't any place for the outsider, the weak, the poor, the disenfranchised, the powerless.

However, in Paul's mind, the *Ekklesia* of Christ is to be just the opposite. It is to be a place where the weak and the strong alike are gathered before the face of their LORD and King. With no differences. No difference between the rich and the poor, the politically connected and the hiding refugee, the men and the women, and today we'd include the transgender people. In the *Ekklesia* of Christ, unlike the Roman *Ekklesia*, there is no such thing as power, or privilege, or prestige, or hierarchy.

The *Ekklesia* of Christ is a radically accepting place.

The other night at council Christina read the re-rendering of the beatitudes by the Lutheran minister Nadia Bolz-Weber. They're powerful and I think encompass what Paul is thinking about when he calls these misfits The *Ekklesia* of Christ. I've asked Christina to read them again because they reflect who Jesus imagines his followers to be. I think that they reflect who Paul calls "the *ekklesia* of the King."

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the agnostics. Blessed are they who doubt. Those who aren't sure, who can still be surprised. Blessed are they who are spiritually impoverished and therefore not so certain about everything that they no longer take in new information. Blessed are those who have nothing to offer. Blessed are they for whom nothing seems to be working. Blessed are the pre-schoolers who cut in line at communion. Blessed are the poor in spirit. You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are they for whom death is not an abstraction. Blessed are they who have buried their loved ones, for whom tears are as real as an ocean. Blessed are they who have loved enough to know what loss feels like. Blessed are the mothers of the miscarried. Blessed are they who don't have the luxury of taking things for granted any more. Blessed are they who can't fall apart because they have to keep it together for everyone else. Blessed are the motherless, the alone, the ones from whom so much has been taken. Blessed are those who "still aren't over it yet" Blessed are they who laughed again when for so long they thought they never would. Blessed are those who mourn. You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who no one else notices. The kids who sit alone at middle-school lunch tables. The laundry guys at the hospital. The sex-workers and the night shift street sweepers. Blessed are the losers and the babies and the parts of ourselves that are so small. The parts of ourselves that don't want to make eye contact with a world that only loves the winners. Blessed are the forgotten. Blessed are the closeted. Blessed are the unemployed, the unimpressive, the underrepresented. Blessed are the teens who have to figure out ways to hide the new cuts on their arms. Blessed are the meek. You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the wrongly accused, the ones who never catch a break, the ones for whom life is hard – for they are those with whom Jesus chose to surround himself. Blessed are those without documentation. Blessed are the ones without lobbyists. Blessed are foster kids and trophy kids and special ed kids and every other kid who just wants to feel safe and loved and never does. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are they who know there has to be more than this. Because they are right.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are those who make terrible business decisions for the sake of people. Blessed are the burnt-out social workers and the over worked teachers and the pro-bono case takers. Blessed are the kids who step between the bullies and the weak. Blessed are they who delete hateful, homophobic comments off their friend's Facebook page. Blessed are the ones who have received such real grace that they are no longer in the position of ever deciding who the "deserving poor" are. Blessed is everyone who has ever forgiven me when I didn't deserve it. Blessed are the merciful for they totally get it. You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

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That's the implication of the Jesus' beatitude. That's what Paul says is who the *ekklesia* is and that's what happens within the *ekklesia*.

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