

For the next six weeks we will be looking into Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome, known as Romans, which is also the most significant and complex letter in the history of Christianity. Yes, scholars and theologians have spent their lives being challenged by Romans. In this letter Paul is writing to a church he did not found nor had yet to visit, though he knows it is a mixed congregation of Jews and Gentiles, many of whom had been slaves and could not read. Paul has heard about their faithfulness and assumes that they're more seasoned Christians- that they already know a lot about Jesus and show maturity in their faith. This letter to the Romans, Paul's longest and one of his last, was written to encourage and to guide them in their daily living formed by the Spirit in Jesus Christ. Paul, who was once Saul, was a Jew turned apostle who believed Jesus to be God's anointed one and was called to preach Jesus as Messiah. The letter's intended recipients were Christ-following Gentiles...Greeks...non-Jews. These Gentiles needed to understand how they should live as well as how they should interact with the Jewish community, as neither were superior. Romans contains the good news of God's faithfulness and mercy shown in Christ which brings about our response of faithfulness. Paul interprets the gospel as a message addressed to all peoples, offering hope to all of God's creation; therefore, his ultimate purpose in Romans is to invite others to share in passing on that good news. Because Paul has yet to meet those in Rome, he starts with this lovely yet long-winded introduction. Before turning to God's Word, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.** Romans 1:8-17.

Whenever I used to hear "good news" I would get stuck because it reminded me of evangelism, and I didn't like the "E" word. Growing up as a Christian in the south, I used to think that evangelism was only about "cramming religion down

people's throats." Evangelism, to me, was MANIPULATIVE, and I didn't want anything to do with proselytizing! I remember being at Clemson University as a campus ministry intern and being handed tracts at a ballgame. The title? "Ten Reasons You are Going to Hell." I remember reading a billboard on I-85 years ago that stated, "Get right or Get left. Jesus is the answer." I didn't want to be any part of this evangelism stuff. Where's the good news in that? AND to top it off... I grew up 30 minutes from Heritage USA- for those of you who can't remember that- it was home to the televangelists, Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker. Was I ashamed of the gospel? At first I thought maybe I was, but I soon realized that I was afraid and embarrassed to be associated with Christians like these and so I didn't talk much about my faith. For many today, both Christians and nonbelievers, the term "evangelism" is laden with negative associations. It conjures up pictures of preachers offering simplistic versions of the gospel, false promises of prosperity and happiness, and the exploitive use of clever marketing and communication methods to "bring home converts." Don't mishear me. I am not making fun of those for whom this is how they came to faith. What I'm saying is that evangelizing should not be about religiously conquering or manipulating other people as much as it is sharing the good news- how God through Christ has been at work in our lives.

Here Paul defines the good news- the gospel of Jesus Christ as "God's own power for salvation to all who have faith in God- to Jews first and also to the Gentiles" (v. 16). According to some scholars, this is the theme of Romans. I've heard several of you share about God's power for salvation in your own lives, and it is amazing to hear how God has been at work. And yet some of us still hesitate to share. Don't get me wrong, it's my job as a preacher to preach the good news of Jesus

Christ, and I do. I am not ashamed of the gospel. Some of you say...well, yea, you're the preacher- that's your job. Paul's invitation is to everyone, not just to preachers. I, too, have struggled with sharing the good news when I'm not in my context. Several years ago I had the privilege of taking some time off and accompanying two ten year-old boys to Wilderness at the Smokies and the biggest indoor and outdoor water parks in the world (according to their web site at the time). One of the precocious boys I had not met before. I'll call him Lucas. Lucas asked me at the beginning of the trip, "Ms. Jennifer, are you a priest?" I immediately answered NO- then a slightly muffled well, YES...sort of and then I said- as to completely confuse this kid- well, I am a minister, a pastor, a preacher. The look on his face was utter confusion. At one meal in a crowded restaurant, we plowed into our food without having first blessed it, and Lucas chimed in, "Aren't we supposed to say the blessing before we eat?" Embarrassed, I said, "yes, of course, and prayed." Then Lucas asked me later, "Ms. Jennifer, do you talk to people about God?" I said, "Yes, Lucas, I do." He then followed up at dinner time asking if we could talk about God, and we did for a while. At the arcade, tickets in hand at the prize booth, Lucas chose a necklace with a cross as his prize. He said, "This is the cross that represents Jesus. Didn't Jesus die on it?" I was blown away and convicted at the same time. I learned that Lucas and his family didn't go to church. They didn't hold any religious beliefs. Yet, Lucas was hungry to talk about the God he had heard about in Jesus Christ, but it took several attempts on his part to get me to share with him the gospel. I had made several wrong assumptions about Lucas. Was I ashamed of the gospel? Shame is such a loaded word, isn't it? Yet, we all are familiar with shame and how it can get in the way of living our lives as well as sharing the good news. Maybe we're

embarrassed or don't know what to say or don't want to say the wrong thing or don't want to impose our beliefs on others or we think we'll get rejected or offend someone?! This interaction with Lucas was a reminder that people are searching for God, and God is at work- even when we want to take time off from God or work.

The gospel before all else is about what the Creator God has done through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The gospel is part of a much larger, continuous story, with the fulfillments of promises made by the prophets in the Holy Scriptures. The gospel is the ultimate expression of God's commitment and power to reclaim the world. The content of this gospel message is Jesus Christ in whom the promise of a Davidic messiah has been fulfilled when God raised him from the dead and enthroned him as Lord over all. A promise made and given based on God's righteousness. But what is righteousness? It's a loaded theological word that means to do what is right or just. Paul writes that it's God's own power making things right for all who have faith in God, including the Jews and the Gentiles. In other words, God has accomplished through Jesus what Israel could not do. Through Jesus Christ God is making right the relationship between humans and God. "God is making good on God's promises to Israel. The resurrection of Jesus manifests God's covenant faithfulness, God's justice. God's faithfulness must then be met with a human response of faith" (J.R. Daniel Kirk, workingpreacher.org).

Many of us experience God in Christ and have come to faith in various ways while some of us may not be believers. Those of us who call ourselves Christians respond to God's faithfulness by living by faith (which Paul quotes from the

prophet Habakkuk (2:4)). Paul was not embarrassed to declare his absolute commitment to the gospel- so much so that he was willing to come as a minority and proclaim a new king and Lord who wasn't Caesar- right in the heart of the powerful Roman empire. Even though some of us aren't as articulate or maybe as bold as Paul or we don't interpret scripture through the same lens as other Christians, we all have spiritual gifts to contribute. A few weeks ago I was standing out front after the service in my robe and some folks called me over to a lady in a car who was stopped and wanted to say something to me. I approached her rolled down window and she asked me if I knew a certain scripture verse, but I couldn't really hear her with the road noise. By the time I understood her and said yes, she was yelling, "Then why don't you preach the Holy Spirit at this church? You're a false prophet!" I told her to take care and have a wonderful day, and I meant it. Not only was she holding up traffic, she had said these things in the earshot of a visitor who immediately asked me, "Why do Christians have to be so hateful to other Christians? Shouldn't y'all be encouraging one another?" This past week I heard yelling outside my office window, which is a fairly regular occurrence. It was one voice, so I assumed there wasn't an argument brewing. As I listened more, I recognized who it was yelling "the good news," as he often claims to do. On my way downstairs I looked out onto the street and saw him getting dangerously close to traffic, so I opened the door and called out his name. He asked if he could speak to Pastor Jennifer, and I told him I was Pastor Jennifer. And then he came over to me, lowering his yell to a more polite, conversational tone, and said, "Can I ask you a question?" "Sure," I said. "Where is the man who is over you here at the church? The Bible is very clear that you need a man to supervise you in what you're doing here." What he said isn't anything I hadn't

heard before. I told him that there are different ways to interpret scripture through the Holy Spirit, and God has called me to preach the gospel and even if he disagreed- maybe we could find our commonality in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. To his credit, he said he wanted to learn more, and he was trying his best to be faithful. It's not our job to judge people's faithfulness or to convert them or to change their minds or hearts. Our response to God's faithfulness in our lives is to be faithful and to share the good news. God is the one with the power to transform and to save, not us. For many of us, sharing the good news doesn't mean that we agree with other Christians on all things or that we go out to the street corner and yell at passersby, or use chance meetings to start inauthentic conversations with strangers. But it does mean that when those moments come where another person has opened up their life before us and invited us in, that we be open and willing to tell them about what God has done in our life through Christ. We may not bring it up, like as I didn't initially with Lucas, but God finds a way to have it brought up, especially with those who are spiritually hungry or curious or who are struggling in their faith. Faith is something created in us by God. It is a gift. We don't have to have all the answers or our lives put together before we can share our faith about who God in Christ is in our lives. And isn't it usually when we least expect it or have too many irons in the fire or when our world has fallen apart that God puts someone in our path to tell us the good news?! What does it look like to serve God in your spirit by having authentic conversations about faith? How do we share the good news of God's justice, love, and grace demonstrated and promised in Jesus Christ? Sisters and brothers, like Paul, "I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because the news about your faithfulness is being spread throughout the whole

world” (Rom. 1:8). Let us not be ashamed of the gospel! Let us pray for one another, be encouraged by the faithfulness we find in each other and go out and share the good news of the saving love of Jesus Christ! Because God knows that this world that God so loves needs some good news! Amen.