

Lent 2, Year A
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
March 12, 2017
Bill Ellis

Historically one of the ways Christians have characterized the difference between our religion and Judaism is to declare that we are a religion of gospel and grace, while they are a religion of law and works. The very text we just heard from Paul's letter to the Romans is often cited as the surest proof of this. This is the reason I am turning from the famous and important story of Nicodemus to the section of Paul's letter to the Romans we just heard. The characterization, no matter how venerated by tradition and repetition is wrong, and it has led to a misunderstanding of our Jewish brothers and sisters, from whom we descended. My concern this morning is not simply to refute an argument, it is to illuminate the gospel as best as my limited powers enable me. Once we understand why the old argument is wrong, we can see why the gospel really is *good news*, and it is good news that applies both to Jew and to Christian, and I dare say everyone else as well.

Paul makes his argument by contrasting those who receive compensation for services rendered and those who receive a gift freely given. The one who gets paid for work done may be glad to have gainful employment, and even be grateful for the job, but that employee is getting what she deserves, what she has earned. That employee, most simply put, has established a claim on the

employer that the employer must honor. The good employee therefore has every reason to be proud of the job she has done, and every reason to expect the employer to honor the claim she has established by doing the work they agreed she would do.

The one who receives a gift freely given has done nothing to deserve the gift, and therefore has no claim whatsoever on the giver. The initiative is all on the side of the giver, and the best the recipient can do is to respond with gratitude for the gift. Sometimes the recipient is transformed by the gift, and the gratitude the recipient feels changes her into a different kind of person than she was before. That change is manifested when the recipient becomes more generous, more compassionate, more merciful than she had been.

This much, it seems to me, is obvious, and all of us have experienced both sides of this contrast many times in our lives. Most of us do now, or have in the past had jobs. The satisfactory performance of that job creates an obligation on the part of those who agreed to pay us, and it is not only unfair, it is illegal in this country to refuse to pay the agreed upon wage. It is a common transaction, and much of our social as well as economic life depends upon it.

So too have we all received gifts freely given. That, as we know, is a very different experience. It isn't Christmas, it isn't a birthday, it just a person who loves us expressing that love in a tangible way. Unless there is a reason to be extremely suspicious, or the recipient is simply ungrateful, a gift freely given moves us to gratitude, and if that gratitude becomes deeply implanted in our

spirits it makes us more generous and apt to give gifts to others. Paul's contrast is remarkably good at making his point, because then, as now, it is a contrast most of us experience frequently.

Notice the remarkably fine thing he does with this example. Paul argues that to the extent Jewish piety declares the Law makes the human relationship with God similar to having a job for which we are paid, rather than receiving of a gift we have done nothing to deserve, Jewish piety misunderstands the whole Abrahamic tradition. God initiated a relationship with Abraham before Abraham did anything to deserve it, and Abraham responded with gratitude, thanksgiving and faith in the One who had been so generous to him. By reading the part of this argument that was left out of our text this morning we discover that to Paul circumcision was thus not a deal Abraham cut with God in order to gain a relationship with his creator, circumcision was a response, "a sign" as Paul put it, of the relationship God offered to Abraham freely and in love. Rightly understood, the Law is not a job description Jews must perform to the satisfaction of God in order to have a relationship with their Lord. The Law is gift and sign of God's relationship with the Jews, a relationship offered to them before ever they did a single thing to deserve it. Paul's insight was that obedience to the Law is how Jews who understand it correctly live that life of gratitude for the love and life God has offered them. In this way Abraham is the father of faith both for Jews and for Gentiles.

It is of course possible to misunderstand the purpose of the Law. Paul tells us he misunderstood the Law's purpose prior to being confronted by God in Christ. Prior to Christ Paul looked at the Law as a job description; do this and God will reward you. Don't do it, and God will reject you. Under the sway of Christ he understood the Law not as job description, but as gift and sign of the life God had offered him before ever he did anything to deserve such notice.

What I want us all to notice - indeed the whole purpose of this sermon is to make this single point - is that it is possible for Christians to misunderstand the gospel in exactly the same way Paul declares he, and other Jews, misunderstood the Law. When a person believes that faith is what we do in order to get God to love us, that is using faith in God as a job for which payment is expected. When a person says "if I am kind, if I am loving, if I go to church, if I give away sufficient amounts of money and volunteer time, if I do this, and if I do that, then God will accept and love me," such a person is treating Christian faith and practice exactly the same way Paul claims that he and other Jews had treated the Law. Such a person will reckon life with God as "not as a gift, but as something due." In the heart of such a person, as Paul said, "faith is null, and the Promise is void."

When that same person responds to the generosity of God freely given in Christ, by becoming more generous, responds to the love of God by becoming more loving, responds to the compassion and mercy of God by becoming more compassionate and merciful, that person has understood that the whole purpose

of the gospel is to transform souls, not create a new kind of spiritual job description for those applying for the position of being righteous. Such a response of gratitude to a gift freely given will be “reckoned as righteousness.”

Paul’s critique of the Jewish attitude toward the Law is thus completely applicable to Christianity. We can use our religion as the means by which we attract God’s attention and get God to accept us. We can, to use Paul’s metaphor, treat it as work for which we earn due and proper compensation. This is to misunderstand the Gospel in exactly the same way, and exactly as fully, as Paul claims he and some of his fellow Jews misunderstood the Law. And as well, we can live into the fullness of the Good News of God in Christ by recognizing it for what it is, the gift of life and love freely offered to the whole world, a gift which transforms those who respond to it in faith by making them more generous because of they know they have received the generosity of God, making them more loving because of the love of God, making them more merciful and compassionate because of the mercy and compassion of God.

Paul’s argument is critical not just for understanding Law and Gospel correctly, but frankly, it is critical for understanding life. We can see our lives, even our very existence as something either that was dumped on us by an indifferent universe or as something we have earned. We can, in other words, see what we are either as curse or reward. We can also look at it as gift and sign of the Creator who expresses love and beauty by creating, by giving life and existence away freely and unconditionally, without any regard to who and what

might be worthy of such a gift. To live as those who are thankful for the possibilities created by life itself is to respond to our own existence as those who know they have been given a gift for which they did not labor. To turn our whole lives into a grateful response for that gift is, I believe, whether Jew or Christian, “to be reckoned for righteousness.”