

“What We’re Meant For”
Romans 6: 12-23
A Sermon by Dr. Richard Lischer

Someone has said reading the letters of Paul is like opening other people’s mail. You may have had that feeling as Wes/Melissa read the Epistle lesson for today. After all, the letter was written in the year 50—not 1950 but 50—by an obscure Jewish rabbi to an emerging religious sect gathered in a few safe-houses in Rome. It is not addressed to me. It is like a message in a bottle from another shore. If you’ve ever read someone else’s mail (and I’m assuming you haven’t, unless you’re the parents of teenagers), you know that something doesn’t connect. It’s possible to understand every word in the letter and not have the faintest idea of what is going on.

Some years ago our family found an old letter written by my great grandfather to his betrothed, my great grandmother. It contained this sentence: “Surely, Miss Laura, you are not insensible of the constraints which both nature and fortune have laid upon me in the matter of our mutual necessity.” Can anybody help me with that? What exactly did 19th-century Kentuckians mean by “mutual necessity?” I’m not sure I want to know.

More than 25 per cent of our New Testament is made up of letters whose return address is “P A U L.” You could say these letters are important to us because they are in the Bible and the Bible is the “boss of us.” But they communicate to us at an even deeper level than their official authority. They do for us what Paul was trying to do for his first readers. They show us how we fit in to something larger than ourselves. They offer us a vision of what it means to be a Christian.

The Letter to the Romans is every bit as important to the Christian church as the Declaration of Independence is to the United States. It says, ‘We hold these truths to be revealed by God.’ Paul had never been to Rome; he enjoyed no rapport with the Romans, and relied on no chemistry. He couldn’t say to them, ‘You know me, you can trust me.’ He had to make a case.

In his biography of Harry Truman, the historian David McCullough implies that the little man from Independence, Missouri lacked a world vision. In its place, he often trusted his intuition and played his hunches—went by his gut—which in his talks with Soviet dictator Josef Stalin, proved disastrous.

For many people religion, too, is a matter of intuition or opinion. It is the heart's best hunch. In a recent survey of church goers, a majority said that the church is very important, but a majority of that majority said the church should never try to influence my thought or behavior. That is to say: the church provides great atmospherics, but when you put out the candles and the last chorister has gone home, true religion follows the gravitational pull of ME. It's the heart's best hunch. As one of those surveyed said, "My religion is my own little voice."

When we do open ourselves to God, it is often to what is known as a "God-wink." A God-wink is a coincidence—a transitory clue that there may be someone out there trying to communicate with us. For example, just as you make a difficult decision, the sun breaks through the clouds as if to confirm it. Coincidence or message from God? A bluebird lands on your window sill as you are pondering a marriage proposal. That must mean something (and what if it's a crow?) We've all had them: God-winks.

No wonder Paul is out of favor. Because he doesn't see religion as a benign confirmation of our own best instincts. He has a darker and more complicated view of God and human beings. He knows there is a hidden battle raging within each of us: for some it is a battle between despair and hope, for others between the desires of the self and the needs of other, for others between sexual impurity and faithfulness. In chapter 7 he writes of his own Christian life: the very thing I don't want to do is what I do; and what I want to do most, I fail at. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

Some of you have come here on this hot July morning from the hospital, where you have a loved one. A few of you are homesick. Some of you are tormented by a deed that can't be undone. Some of you are grieving a terrible loss. Many of you—no, all of us—are uncertain about what comes next.

It's just here, where the battle is fiercest and life is most difficult, that you need more than a hunch. Why settle for a wink, when you can have a vision?

Paul sees a history bigger than most of us can imagine. In his vision all people live their daily lives in the shadow of a righteous God. All people have an inkling (or should I say a "winkling") of God's power and divinity. Despite being creatures of time, all people yearn for eternity.

In the chapter before our text, Paul lays out two parallel histories that will eventually become one history. The first is the history of human sinfulness epitomized by a figure named Adam, which in Hebrew means the man of dust. It leads to dust. The second is the history of

God's redemption, epitomized by a figure like Adam—who in I Corinthians Paul calls “the last Adam”—who lifts the whole race from the dust and sets us on a new journey. It leads to light.

What's so intriguing about Paul's vision is that no one is left out. Those, like the Jews, who were once in the story and appear to have fallen out of it, will be included in the end. “For,” as Paul says in Romans 11:29, “the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable.” This is not one rabbi's opinion; it's a sweeping vision of God's personal history with everyone who has ever lived. That's what the letter is about, and that's why I can say it is written to you.

Paul is not trying to convert anybody. Rather, he is saying ‘Since we all acknowledge God, and since some of us name this man Jesus as our New Adam, how shall we live?’

A preliminary answer comes from a soldier's confession during World War I. John Vannorsdall tells the story. Somewhere along the Western Front, with shells bursting, and handsome bodies mangled beyond hope, with grownups wailing like babies, a young man, who is no more than a boy himself, says to a comrade, “We weren't meant for this.” We weren't meant for this. Post that sentence on all the battlefields and prisons of the world; post it above the urban garbage dumps where humans made in God's image scavenge for food, post it above homes filled with abuse. Nail it to this whole mass of damnation, which is our world: “we weren't meant for this.”

True religion doesn't solve every personal problem. It tells us what we were meant for.

We were meant to live to a different standard. Paul calls it grace, and it only comes as a gift from God. Grace means living in the presence of someone who is always for you. Do you know anyone like that? For some it's a grandmother or an old friend or a big brother. Someone who wants the best for you, who doesn't want to see you hurt, who still loves you even when you do something incredibly stupid. Everyone should have such a person. Everyone does.

We respond to such love in obedience. Obedience sounds like a lot less fun than grace. Obedience is like meekness. It looks good on other people.

40 years ago, the anti-war priest Daniel Berrigan said, “I have spent my whole life looking for someone to obey.” That's not what you expect to hear from a 1960s radical. What many interpreted as radical freedom, Berrigan interpreted as radical obedience. Paul says the two are pretty much the same. The most radical freedom there is, the kind of freedom that will always get you in trouble, does not consist in doing your own thing but in following the will of God.

Obedience to grace sets us free for lives of service. That pattern is hinted at in today's Gospel: in which Jesus says, Whoever welcomes you welcomes me; whoever gives these little ones a cup of cold water will not lose their reward. Our local churches participate in something called the Interfaith Hospitality Network. When the volunteers put out the cots for a homeless mom and her three kids and help them with some groceries, I doubt that they are thinking deep thoughts or viewing their actions as a part of some larger plan.

But Paul sees it. His is a healing vision, especially for those who by the world's estimate do not fit the pattern of God's favor, for they will be included, too. Take the Jews, for example, from whom Christians have been estranged for all these years. Included. "For the gifts and call of God are irrevocable." And is it too much to hope that all who acknowledge themselves to be creatures of one God—that they too will have a place in the pattern of God's grace? And what about those who are so sick or poor or troubled that "religion" leaves a bad taste in their mouth, whose trajectories have gone flat and whose histories have been cut short? Included, Included, Included. For grace is bigger than sin, death, and tragedy.

Paul concludes, "The wages of sin is death." That part of the letter we understand all too well. "But the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus." That is the part we can never understand, but only receive.

It's all in the letter—with your name on it.

Amen.