

Called to Be Saints

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC

August 12, 2018

Text: Romans 1: 1-17

The Apostle Paul is undoubtedly the primary reason you and I are here this morning. Paul, more than anyone else, is responsible for the spread of the message of the Christian Gospel beyond the narrow confines of ancient Palestine. Even though he was not one of the twelve and never even personally met Jesus while Jesus was alive, Paul is the one who spread the message of the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire after experiencing a personal encounter with the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus. This encounter with the Resurrected Jesus literally transformed Paul, known previously as Saul, from one of the most dangerous enemies of Jesus' followers to one of the most dynamic and important leaders of the early church. That's why whether we know it or not, whether we are familiar with him or not, Paul is why we are here in this church on a Sunday morning 2000 years later and a half a world away.

Paul, who appears first in the Book of Acts, is not mentioned in any of the Gospels *because* he was not one of the original twelve disciples. He was well educated having studied in Jerusalem at the school run by the Rabbi Gamaliel. He was well versed in Greek Stoic philosophy and, while he could speak Hebrew, it is most

likely that his first language was Greek. Paul was a businessman, a maker of tents, and also a Roman citizen which is the reason why he was able to do so much to spread the message of Jesus across the Roman empire with ease. As a Roman citizen, not only was he entitled to certain legal rights which he accessed as needed, he was also free to travel throughout the empire as he chose. And travel he did, making numerous missionary journeys throughout Asia Minor where he started churches and encouraged others already in existence.

Paul was a prolific writer of letters and it is these letters, only a portion of which we have, that were his primary means of communication with followers of Christ and the churches into which they gathered across the empire. Before the Gospels were even being written down, Paul's letters laid out the basic foundation of what was to become Christian theology as church structures became more formalized. Paul's letters were often written to respond to questions posed to him in letters he received from those churches. Other letters he wrote proactively if he heard that there were issues brewing in a church. Paul is the author of the oldest portion of the New Testament writings – the First Letter to the Thessalonians written somewhere between 41-44CE, two decades before the first Gospel was written down. The letter to the church in Rome, known to us as the book of Romans, was one of his later writings, compiled and sent to Rome by a friend in

about 57 – 58 CE. It is believed he died a martyr's death in Rome within a few years of writing this letter.

Important to remember about Paul's letters, Romans among them, is that his letters, like those we would write today, were written from the midst of real life, responding to real life issues of real people. Of the 13 letters or epistles alleged to have been written by Paul, scholars generally agree that he was the author of seven: 1 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon, Galatians and Romans. The others were most likely written by others in Paul's name, a common practice in his time. Noteworthy too is that Paul, unlike Peter and the rest of the disciples, believed that his mission was primarily to the Gentiles or non-Jews. This put him at odds with the church in Jerusalem, the oldest gathering of Jesus' followers and led by Peter. The Jerusalem leadership believed that Jesus came only for the Jews and, while Gentiles were welcome to join the movement, they could only do so by converting to Judaism first, including circumcision for adult males. Paul, on the other hand, believed the God of Abraham and David was the God of everyone, not just the Jews. Therefore, for Paul, an expressed belief in Jesus as Messiah was enough for any Gentile to become part of the church in any community. No wonder his relationship with Jerusalem and Peter was so contentious!

Paul's theology, which is in its most complete form in the book of Romans, provided many of the basic building blocks of the Christian theology still foundational to the church today. It is Paul's explanation of such basic concepts as sin, grace, salvation and justification that inform much of how we understand who we are as Christians in relationship to God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. His basic premise was this:

- Jews and Gentiles both sin routinely, Jews because of their strict adherence to the law of Moses for the law's sake, not God's. Gentiles sin because of the complete absence of God's presence in their lives.
- Sinful Jews and Gentiles create unjust ways of living in relationship with God and each other thus becoming caught in an unending cycle of sin.
- This relentless sinning is worthy of God's punishment but God chooses to love without restraint instead, with this love being made manifest or real in the person of Jesus.
- Jesus who lived a sinless life in the eyes of God and sought to teach others to do the same gave the ultimate sacrifice by dying on the cross in solidarity with all sinners.
- God reveals his approval of Jesus' actions through the act of the Resurrection and a "new justice" was created. In essence all people became a new creation of God through the living sacrifice of Jesus.

Now that we have a basic understanding of Paul, let's turn our attention to our focus for the next few weeks -- Paul's letter to the Romans. Its format is pretty typical for letters of its time and context. Unlike letters we would write, Paul's letter begins with his own name as the sender. He then goes on to describe for his readers who he understands himself to be which is also part of the reason he is writing to them. He calls himself an apostle or messenger of God on behalf of Jesus but also compares himself to the prophets of the Old Testament. Only after he spells all this out in some detail does he finally state to whom he is writing -- "To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints." Then, he concludes this introductory part of the letter with a fairly standard greeting -- "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

So, in this first paragraph Paul states who he is and, just as importantly, who they are to him -- God's beloved, called to be saints. And this was simply extraordinary because these were Gentiles he was writing to. Roman Gentiles. Perhaps there were some Jews among them, but this was primarily a gathering of Gentiles accustomed to being at best ignored and at worst scorned by Jews when it came to talking about following Jesus. And here was Paul telling them they were beloved of God! He hadn't even met them yet. He didn't know any of them personally and yet he was already assuring them they were beloved of God. They had to

be awestruck by this point alone but Paul wasn't done yet. He also assured them they were called to be saints, each and every one of them. In doing this, he is greeting them as more than just people, as more than an ethnic or religious identity. He is greeting them as God's beloved, called by God's own self to be saints, called to be holy people, God's holy people, every day of their lives. I'm guessing they couldn't believe what they were hearing.

We should stop here a moment to note that Paul's meaning in his use of the word we translate as "saints" is not what you and I usually think of as saints. We think of saints as holy, special people, set apart from the rest of us. But, Paul was not talking about these Romans as saints who had already reached some sort of spiritual perfection that others should envy and attempt to emulate. Far from it. In telling them they were called to be saints, Paul is reminding them that they are *not* perfect and that this lack of perfection, this awareness that they would always be striving to live as Jesus' taught, is precisely why they were called to be saints. For Paul, this call to be saints is a call to continue to work and strive to live a new life in accordance with the teachings of Jesus Christ, to make real the new creation in God that Jesus revealed in his life, death and resurrection. In other words, Paul is reminding them at the very beginning of his letter that he already knows they are not perfect. He knows they have issues and problems and points of confusion among them. But that's not what matters.

Instead, what matters is that they are already taking the first steps along the path to discipleship and imperfect though they may be, it is the journey of faith in its entirety that matters.

This, dear friends, is the bedrock of that sentence the Deacon speaks right here every Sunday as our service begins: “No matter who you are or where you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here.” Every time we say this, we are echoing these ancient words of Paul’s. We are reminding ourselves and everyone who steps through our doors that we already know we are not perfect in faith, in living life each day as Jesus would want. We are not perfect, yet we know we are still called by God to make a difference in the world we live in each day. We are called to love the unlovable, to aid the sick and afraid, the hungry and the homeless. We are called to be patient with one another even when we feel snappy. We are called to lend a hand with a task needing done and share our resources, financial and otherwise to support the mission of God through this church.

No matter who we are or where we are on the journey of faith, we are more than welcome here. We are called to be saints here and in the world each day. We are reminded that the church is where we learn what that means and how to do it. We are called to give thanks here for God’s presence in our lives and all the possibilities it reveals. In these beautiful words Paul is reminding us right here this morning that we are beloved of God and

entrusted by God with the work of saints. Dear friends, we are not called to consider becoming saints. We are called to remember we already are saints in God's eyes. So, the question then becomes, what are we going to do about it?? Amen.