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Romans 1:8-17
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I've been trying this week to contemplate that moment when ink and stylist touch the parchment. Paul wrote these words on a letter to a small handful of people in the city of Rome. He hoped to visit them one day and was writing them in advance. Could he have had any idea of the revolutionary impact of these words, in the way they have transformed amazing people like St. Augusta, Martin Luther, John Wesley, countless saints through history, perhaps some of us in this room? Paul writes *I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of salvation; the righteous shall live by faith.* Remarkable words.

Every time I hear this, *I am not ashamed of the gospel*, it reminds me of the time a few months back when I was driving up I-85 and I pulled off at an exit to get gas, and I was making good time, had a little time to kill. I was hungry and there was a diner attached to this gas station, and I thought, "I will go in and eat at this diner." So I go in, and I always take a book with me wherever I go, and the book that I have in this case has a bright red cover, and it's about Romans and is entitled Not Ashamed of the Gospel. I don't think much about it; it's on the table. The waitress comes up to take my order and she has her pad and I realize she peers over her pad at this book, Not Ashamed of the Gospel. . . . So I thought, OK, and took the book and I turned it over. Of course, the book just said Not Ashamed of the Gospel, so I turned the book back over. About that time a guy that was pumping gas with me sits down at the booth behind me. He notices the book, gives me a thumbs up and says, "Jesus is coming soon." I'm just trying to eat breakfast.

Paul speaks of not being ashamed of the gospel. Many of the early Christians were, or they were at least attempted to be, ashamed of the gospel. The reason is the crucifixion. You and I miss this every time. We think, "Oh, the Cross. It's pretty. . . . There's another one up there that is pretty." A lot of you are wearing jewelry today that is a cross. It's just a lovely thing, but in the ancient world it was an instrument of the most gruesome execution against the grimmest of all criminals. Nothing more shameful ever transpired than crucifixions, and the early Christians were a laughing stock. People said to them "You think God came down to earth and died this most despicable of all deaths, and you think that's anything good." Many Christians were embarrassed. In fact, archaeologists have found graffiti out of the Second Century where critics of Christianity would mock the Christians. They would scroll on the wall, and instead of putting a man on the cross, they would put a donkey head on the cross, like "You Christians are as stupid as mules." What a ridiculous faith.

I imagine many of the early Christians were really drawn to the story of Christ and yet there was a point of drawing back, a point of shame. I wonder how that works for us. On the one hand, we are drawn toward much of Christianity, but I think there's something that causes us to draw back, and I wonder if what causes us to draw back is not the crucifixion but it is actually the lifestyle that inevitably is attached to Christianity. I mean, we want the kind of Christianity, don't we, where we're just like everybody else, only a little more because we've got this little dessert icing of Christianity on the top.

Paul says *Do not be ashamed of the gospel*. What does it mean to have faith? What does it mean in this passage, a sort of charter of faith? Faith is not pretending that facts don't matter. Faith is not like being little children with the train, "I think I can, I think I can." Faith is not saying "I do believe, I do believe, I do believe." Faith is not just an emotion. I had an e-mail exchange with one of our church members late last night. She said, "I'm not sure I believe in God because I don't feel the way I'm supposed to feel."

Christianity sometimes is a feeling, but many times it is not. Faith is not some strong emotional surge that you might feel. Faith in our day begins to look more like courage. Faith is openness to God. God is grasping faith. Faith is sharing in the heart of God. I love Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision, who said, "I want my heart to be broken by the things that break the heart of God."

We live in a world where there are so many differences of opinion over everything. I love Abraham Lincoln's words in his second inaugural where he said, "There are two sides in this country. They both read the same Bible; they both pray to God; they can't both be right." He said, "The almighty has his own purposes." Faith thinks God isn't just on this side or that side but God is beyond all of that. God has larger purposes. Faith. Faith is – it's really something – last Sunday night some of you came to hear Shane Claiborne. The others of you – you disobeyed me – and I've got a notebook, I'm taking names...I raised the median age significantly when I walked in. It was a young crowd, teen-agers, and Shane Claiborne – I felt so square and dorky. You know, he's got dreadlocks and he's so cool. I felt pathetic in there. He gave this great talk where basically he said, "Faith is revolutionary." Christianity is a revolution, and we miss this every time. We don't understand or we do not care to understand the revolutionary nature of Christianity. It is seeing as God sees. It is saying that all of our lifestyle is up to God.

I've told some of you before that Flannery O'Connor once said "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd." The problem is that we're not very odd. Well, a few of you are. We miss out on this oddness and the degree to which we hope to just be normal, and we hope just to fit in, and we hope to just be like everybody else, that's so cool. That is the measure in which we miss what true faith in God is about.

I loved in Claiborne's talk, he spoke of the Amish. He's from Pennsylvania, and he knows that people know the Amish and the way we think about the Amish, right? We go to the Amish country, and it's a pretty place, and we take photos of the Amish country. We see Amish people, and we think "How quaint – people in interesting clothes and they ride around in a horse and buggy." We take a photo of that and we come back and show people, "We went to the Amish country." He pointed out that for the Amish, this is not their tourist shtick – like, "We wear funny clothes and do horse and buggies and people come and take photos of us and we make a lot of money." What the Amish are doing is they're trying to be Christians. They're trying to follow Christ, and they understand that to follow Christ in this world, you've got to be a little bit odd. You've got to be a little bit strange. He imagined out loud for us an Amish boy coming to his dad and saying "Dad, why are we so weird? Why do we wear these strange clothes instead of the clothes everybody else wears? Dad, why can't we have a car? All the other kids have cars but we don't have a car. Why are we so weird?" And he answered this question by highlighting a news story that I'm sure you saw. A number of months ago there was

a shooting in an Amish community. Some people lost their mind and they murdered some Amish. Then the police came and they killed the people who had killed them, and how did the Amish respond to this? Not as we would. The Amish responded to this and they had their own funerals for their own family members, but then they knew there were other people, the perpetrators who had lost family members and they attended their funerals, too, and expressed love and sympathy to their families. There were people across the country who heard about this story, and they sent money to the Amish families. "Here's money to educate your children," and they took some of that money and they gave it to the children in the families of the perpetrators, weird, weird, and very much what Jesus would be about.

There's oddness, there is strangeness about faith. Faith is courage; faith is being odd; faith is making a commitment. I was reflecting the other day, I've been pastor here – time flies, I feel like I just got here – I've been here almost seven years. Goodness, seven years. My first sermon here I reflected on the fact that I got married here. I got married right here and Lisa, who is here today, she and I came up here and we got married here. That's cool to think about, to me. There's a theologian in England named Nicholas Lash, and he says that when we say "I believe" it's the same thing you do when you come up to the altar to get married. When Lisa and I came up here, be very clear, I said to her "I do and I will." I did not say, "I believe that Lisa exists." That's not what my enterprise was that day. Instead, what I was saying is, I said, "I do. I will." What I meant by that is "My life is no longer my own. I'm not doing my own thing any longer. Everything I do from this point forward will be with her, with this person." It's not "I'm doing my own thing" or "I'm doing my own thing and I want you to help me get my own thing done." No, I came up and said, "Our lives henceforth will be one." And that's what faith is. Faith is not saying, "I believe there's a God." No, faith is saying to God "I've lived my life long enough without you. From this point forward, I will not do anything apart from you. My life and yours, oh Lord, will forever be joined."

Martin Luther, very interestingly, read over this passage that we are looking at today. He read over it and over it and it absolutely changed him. It changed the face of Western Europe and the church forever. And he looked back on that time when he studied this passage and what it meant and here is what he said: "I was captivated with the remarkable ardor to understand Paul's epistle to the Romans, but this righteousness of God stood in my way. I hated this idea of the righteousness of God, this idea that God is just and punishes sinners. I've lived basically without reproach, but I had a disturbed conscience. I could not believe that God was satisfied with me. I did not love God. In fact, secretly, I was angry with God. But finally, by the mercy of God, as I meditated day and night on these words, I began to understand that the righteousness of God is a gift of God. I felt I was altogether born again and had entered Paradise itself through open gates. Another phase of scripture showed itself to me." There are several things about this that are fascinating to me. One is Luther says, "I had an ardor to understand these scriptures. I studied them day and night." Sometimes you and I don't know the Lord the way Luther did because we're on kind of a quickie religion. We grab a Bible verse here and there and we pray for about 18 seconds, and we wonder why God seems so distant to us, but Luther said, "I had an ardor to understand. I meditated on this text day and night."

I had another e-mail exchange yesterday with someone. I sent an e-mail to some of you who joined the church over the last few years, and one of the questions I asked in it is 'Have you been following [Year Through The Bible](#)?' It's an unfair question because if you have you can

say "Yes and it's great." If you haven't, you'd hate to tell me, the perpetrator of Year Through The Bible. You know, you hate to say, "James, I just delete your e-mails. Sorry, man." I know you hate to tell me that. But there are some of you I know who delete the e-mails, and this one person said, "I delete the e-mails." She said, "The reason I do this is I'm so busy. I've got a couple of young children at home, I work, my husband works, and we're just really busy. We wish we had time." I'm not fussing about anybody being busy. I'm busy, we're all busy. Martin Luther was busy. But what Luther found is that when he spent time, had this ardor, wanted to know God, spent time with the scriptures, what he discovered was that God was not his enemy, God was not a stranger, that God was his friend and that God loved him. He was totally changed. God was not distant. The righteousness of God was not God waiting to pounce on us. Rather, the righteousness of God was that God looks down at us in our business, in our mortality, in our craving to be normal and to fit into a society that has gone crazy. And Jesus looked down at that and he came down and he took on our pain, he took on our affliction, he entered into our world and evil men saw him and they nailed his beautiful holy body to the shaft of an olive tree, and that is what God has done for us. Faith is when we say "Thank God, that God did this for us."

I want to close with a reading. It's from Edward Kennedy's autobiography. I know when I say that there are a couple of conservatives in the room who are going to say, "He's quoting from a liberal" but I've got you because earlier I quoted from Lincoln, so we've got a Republican and a Democrat today, so it's OK. And the fact is, those divisions don't really matter at the end of the day, do they? It's not like God looks down and says, "Conservatives go to heaven, liberals are toast or liberals go to heaven and conservatives are toast." Here's what Edward Kennedy wrote. If you think about his life, his story as he tells it, it's the way you and I would tell our story. It's a little bit self-indulgent at times. Yet he said, "I made so many mistakes, things I wish I could do over." He tells a lot about what he and his family have suffered. Our families have all suffered, but the Kennedys sure suffered plenty. As he wrote these words, he had been diagnosed with a brain tumor that he knew would kill him, and here's what he wrote "All my life the teachings of my faith have provided solace and hope, as have the wonders of nature. This faith has been as meaningful to me as breathing or loving my family. It's all intertwined. My faith and the love of following its rituals have always been my foundation and my inspiration. Those foundations have been shaken at times by tragedy and misfortune, but faith remains fixed in my heart, as it has been since childhood. It is the most positive force in my life, and the cause of my eternal optimism. I have fallen short in my life, but my faith has always brought me home. Life can be violent and grim, but then I think of the resurrection, and I feel a sense of hope when I've started down a spiral of depression or negativism or loss. I have been lucky enough to see another side. I believe that if you have a warm and embracing heart, faith can have a powerful impact on your outlook. Life is eternal. Work continues. It is a calling, an opportunity to do things about injustice or unfairness. It helps to have a goal." That's the part I like the best. "Faith is having a goal." And our goal isn't "I want to have a lot of fun and get ahead in the world." No, our goal is God, our goal is the story of God and Jesus, our goal is to have faith, and faith is when we say "I've got a goal, I do, I will." For the righteous shall live by faith and not be ashamed of the gospel.

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