

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday After Easter  
Reformation Lutheran Church  
May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2019  
Romans 1:1-17

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Grace and Peace to You from God our Father and Our Lord and Savior  
Jesus Christ

Preaching Paul is very hard. The man from Tarsus puts it out there so well that his writing can be very hard to top. You can't add to greatness. Even if you're the kind of Christian who has problems with Paul you can't deny his influence or the power of his words. Over the next couple of weeks we will read in church this letter to the Romans which is arguably the most influential writing in the history of religion. To explain Paul in fifteen minutes is a challenge. And it's hard to say things more powerfully, more meaningfully, more clearly than when St. Paul steps up to the plate and belts it out of the park. So when we hear our letter close with Paul's rhetorical brilliance: "I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for the salvation of all the believing" I am tempted as your preacher to simply read this again and say "What He Said." One sentence. Sermon over.

But most of you know your preacher. I usually don't let you off the hook that easily. There's more to say. Because here's the thing – "What He Said" is not really my sermon. It's my excuse. Paul speaks words that are powerful sure, but they are written two thousand years ago. They are far off. I can agree with Paul and say – yep I'm not ashamed of the gospel either. It's a good thing. I love Jesus. I lodge this idea called "gospel" into my head with all the other stuff in there like random facts about the presidents and Martin Luther, facts about Medicare conditions of participation, critiques of roster moves on the Cleveland Indians, and judgments that no matter who they cast as Batman the fans, including me, will be upset. And so with the gospel in my head just as a good idea, and maybe in certain moments the best idea, I'm free to deal with other things. As much as I love reserving these Sunday hours to hear that He is Risen (...) during the rest of the week I go about my business. I am never forced to confront the fact that during the rest of my week at times I am ashamed of the gospel – terrified to be thought of as a "religious guy." I get embarrassed when people apologize for swearing in front of me, bend over backwards to assure people that I'm not "that kind of pastor", I would much rather invite a friend

to my colonoscopy than invite them to church, and behave in a way from time to time behind the wheel of a car that forces me to hide my chaplain badge or take off my collar. As I thought and prayed about these words of Paul I was forced to confront all the ways in my life that I am ashamed of the gospel. At times all these passages of the Bible become mere words on a page and don't matter to my day to day life. "What He Said" becomes so different from "What I Live."

When we turn the good news of Christ Jesus into just an idea – when the words of God in our life are reduced to a simple "What He Said" from a biblical text or a preacher all these other "What He Said, What She Said, and What They Said" start creeping in with nothing to stop them. We start hearing how special we are, how entitled we are, how powerful we are and our pride swells. Or the other things happen. These other words are words telling us how worthless we are, how much we failed, how we can't withstand our worst instincts or our flaws, how much we let down someone who meant the world to us, how much our struggle cannot be overcome. When the gospel was reduced to an idea for me, even an idea I could proclaim and defend, I stopped hearing it. It just became a tool at my disposal, speaking to others but not me. And so I allowed myself to alternately swell with pride and be eaten on the inside from mistakes I made. The gospel became powerless to counteract my aching fears, Paul's "what he said" could not stop ~~waves of depression.~~

*the worst ravages of my own mind.*

But lucky for me the gospel was more than idea from two thousand years ago I had to believe. It is precisely what Paul says it is "the power of God." Not the power of me, not the power of my thoughts, not the power even of my own ability to believe – the gospel is the power of God bringing about what God wants to bring about for God's children. I heard that gospel in my own depths when someone struggling worse than I was after a conversation embraced me and said, "I hope you do beautiful things with your life." That good news was outside of me. It came from the words of someone who was not me. These words reminded me that there was a world outside my head and that life was not a burden but a gift. It was a true "What He Said" – not an idea to be broken down – but a genuine hope built on shared suffering.

And this is what the gospel truly is – God still with us, God speaking to us, God filling this entire creation with the good news that nothing stops God from being with us. The gospel is an announcement. For the ancient

Greeks it meant “news of victory.” It proceeded celebration, joy, freedom. (Marathon – Pheidippides – Paul is like this).

Could you ever imagine a lottery winner having to be asked “Do you really know that you’ve won millions of dollars?” or “Have you decided to participate in the lottery?” No this is silly. For a lottery winner the news is life. It’s not just an idea. It’s from outside them and this is why it’s precisely good news. And for us the gospel is this good news – we’ve had one who did not run 25 miles but bore a cross to get it to us - it is announced as often as we can ... sin, death, the devil are defeated, it is announced every time we say He is Risen (...). And all creation joins that song. Luther once asserted that even the birds proclaim the gospel if we had the ears to hear it.

This is the gospel. A true “What He Said” but the He is not only the Bible or Paul or me as your preacher – we’re only the lowly servants carrying the message. The true “What He Said” is God speaking to us through Jesus. And what He says is this. “You are mine. I have paid every price for you. Nothing can keep me from you. When you are suffering and think you can’t find me I’m beneath you shouldering every cross you carry. When you sin my grace is greater. When you’re naked and afraid I will clothe you with my royal robes and stand with you in front of my Father’s throne. Who you are in me is greater than what anyone says you are. Come here to Reformation Lutheran Church. Meet my friends in the heart of the city. Be in this place where people are fed, where children play, where stories are told, where people who society would otherwise keep apart greet each other like old friends. Come in here even if you’re busy. Make the drive. I’m not through with you yet. I’ve got people for you to take care of. And I want to talk to you over and over again. In me you have life and I hope you do beautiful things with it. I love you.”

And so ... What He Said...

Amen