

Rev. Kimberly B. Glenn

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in their sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

What is your opinion of the Apostle Paul? On a scale from 1 to 10 with 1 being “I don’t like what he says at all” to 10 being “I am a huge fan of Paul’s writings,” where would you come down? Those are the questions asked when I took New Testament II in seminary. New Testament I had focused strictly on the gospels. New Testament II was a course that took a hard look at the letters written by the Apostle Paul and those attributed to him that were likely not written by him. Scholars have verified that this letter that Paul wrote to the Romans is from Paul’s hand.

I admit that I was one of the students who placed my mark close to 10 on that scale. I was not alone, but the class as a whole placed their marks all over the spectrum. Some felt that Paul was misogynistic, that he had disdain for women. Some felt that he was anti-gay. They were suspicious of Paul’s message. By the end of the course we had worked through those arguments and most of us felt from reading the original texts that Paul had been misunderstood on those and other points that are controversial issues in today’s society. When a poll was taken at the end of the course, the majority of the marks had moved to between 7 and 10.

I believe that in Paul’s letter to the Romans we find his most well developed systematic theology. Scholars believe that Romans was written late in Paul’s life. By that time he had worked through his understanding of what God had done for the world by coming into the world in the person of Jesus. Remember, Paul was once known as Saul and he had a reputation for violent attacks on the followers of Jesus. You see, Paul was raised as Jew and spent his formative years studying under a

devout and learned rabbi. He knew Judaism forward and backwards. He was passionate about Judaism. He even remained passionate about Judaism after he was transformed into a Christ believer. In Romans, he brings together his Jewish understanding of God acting through the Mosaic law with his new understanding of the same God acting again by breaking into real time in the person of Jesus.

Paul's letter to the Romans presents a clear, well constructed and well developed theology. When we engage the text, not just read the words but really inwardly digest them, the words can act on us to change us, too. We have the opportunity to identify with the ways in which Paul identifies with Christ. For Paul, the relationship that he has with Christ is felt intimately. You can sense that he was deeply moved and affected by all that his relationship with Christ gave him. That relationship gave him an inner sense of gratitude and motivation to spread the possibility of that relationship to everyone. No longer was God acting only on behalf of the Hebrew people, in Christ the grace of God was made available to all people.

In the reading from today, Paul implores us to avoid letting sinful desires lead us away from the way of life made available to us through Christ. For Paul, God affirmed our humanity, our human-ness, by becoming human himself. Then in Christ's death and resurrection God absorbed our frailty and proclivity to sinfulness into himself, granting to us forgiveness through a relationship with Christ. And yet, because we are human and have the free will to choose to persist in sinfulness as opposed to receiving the grace that has been given us. Paul urges us to "no longer present (our) members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present ourselves to God as instruments of righteousness." Another translation for the word instrument is weapon. In this day and time, weapon seems to me a more useful image. The way we are engaging with each other in our discourse is as if we are at battle.

We have a choice. It seems that today, in this politically over-charged, over-heated environment people seem to fall so easily into using words as weapons of wickedness. Incivility is rampant especially in our newest vehicle of interaction; in the widespread use of social media. Our members, as Paul calls them, are the parts of our bodies. In his day and time inappropriate use of our sexual organs was the greatest temptation. Sadly, the human desires of the flesh still has potential to steer us down the wrong path, a path that can lead to abusive and ruptured relationships. But today the new temptation is using 140 characters in a tweet to insult, blame, critique and otherwise anger people. We are using our lips, our voices, our typing fingers as weapons. Sometimes that leads to violent behavior, as if the words were not violent enough. Have any of you looked recently at the comment section on a Facebook page or a blog? The comments are rude and seem very spontaneous, not well thought out. I noticed flowing posts while watching a live stream from PBS Newshour this past week. Flying across my screen were icons of angry faces with far and between thumbs up icons interspersed. It disgusted me. The words that were used in those comments were intended to pierce, cut, wound and destroy their target. This is not using our body, mind and spirit as instruments of righteousness, is it? How can we regain our civility and move toward being weapons for justice?

Paul's answer that we find in the reading this morning is to realize that as Christians we are no longer held hostage to the desires of the flesh which is the dominion of sin. When we are united with Christ in baptism, we are given a new lease on life. Our new life is one in which our human-ness, our proclivity to succumb to worldly temptations is blanketed by God's grace. Forgiveness is at hand. When we realize that God's love for us is stronger than we are we turn back to God. When we move in the direction that God would have us move, Paul says we are justified; we are

in right relationship with God. When we make that turn to God, God sends his Holy Spirit to help us on our way. Paul says, in that way we are sanctified. We are freed to live a full, eternal life right here and right now.

Eugene Peterson who produced the Bible translation known as the message translates the last verses of this passage this way: As long as you did what you felt like doing, ignoring God, you didn't have to bother with right thinking or right living (and I add civil discourse).

Peterson continues with his translation. In his words Paul says, Where did it get you? A dead end. But now that you've found you don't have to listen to sin tell you what to do, and have discovered the delight of listening to God, what a surprise! A whole, healed, put-together life right now, with ore and more of life on the way!

When a person invests all his or her time and energy feeling spiteful and angry, or even some of their time feeling that way, that time is lost; it is abandonment of the free gift of God's grace that leads to joy, wholeness and abundant life.

At this time of year when we celebrate our nation's independence from the rule of England, we also implicitly celebrate the way of life that freedom allows us. In God's economy of grace, we are only truly free when we are all free from oppressive human systems. We know freedom best when we know it through God, and for Christians, through Christ in community with others. For the Apostle Paul, and for me too, a full, abundant life can only be lived out in such a community. May God continue to bless each one of us and continue to bless the whole community of St. John's; and may God bless the United States, too.