

You Are Who You Are

Romans 1:1-17

Letter writing is a lost art in our times. I am reminded of this having just sent Christmas cards to family and friends. In a rush to get them to the mail on time, I hurriedly scrawled a few lines by way of an update or greeting. No time for formalities or carefully thought out themes. Just a few words, a newsflash kind of update and seal the envelope, stamp it, and into the mail chute it goes. Today, in lieu of the letter, we send e-mail which is noticeably more abrupt. There is a kind of urgency about it; a get to the pointedness. And that pales in comparison to the text message - so, so urgent that we no longer take the time to actually type or key in the entire word, preferring instead to use emoji's - little graphic representations of a happy face, a sad face, a perturbed face, etc - or by shortening the word or phrase by eliminating unnecessary letters: BTW by the way, TTYL talk to you later, or the grossly overused, LOL, laugh out loud. But when you open the Letter to the Romans, right away you will notice two things: there are no emoji's and the author is by no means thoughtlessly rambling off a few lines of meaninglessness. This letter is long; it is thoughtfully crafted, and right from the opening lines, it invites your attention.

The Letter to the Romans was written by the Apostle Paul in approximately 57AD. You might remember that Paul was not one of the original 12 disciples or apostles of Jesus. In fact, Paul never actually met Jesus during Jesus three years of ministry. In those days, Paul went by Saul. Saul was completely immersed in his identity as one of the chosen people, his sense of pride and entitlement and power springing from the well of his list of descriptors. He once described himself in this way: "Circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law; blameless." He was a Pharisee; a member of highly educated and devout Jews who prided themselves on carefully observing Jewish law down to the finest of details in an effort to be free from sin. However, you may also remember how often Jesus spoke out against the Pharisees for being so focused on their strict obedience to the law that they completely and utterly overlooked the God who is gracious and compassionate, the God who in His mercy would send a savior. Indeed, the Pharisees couldn't see the forest for the trees and couldn't recognize God in the flesh, Jesus, standing right in front of them. The Pharisees conspired to silence Jesus and His disciples, contributing to the plot to crucify Jesus. But much to their surprise that didn't shut up His followers. They continued the ministry Jesus had started, taking his message of forgiveness from sin to the streets of Jerusalem and to the temple courtyard. They preached with boldness, unashamed and unafraid. Many, hundreds and thousands believed what they heard and began to follow Christ. But not everyone was excited or transformed. Some were angry; others afraid of this new Christian movement. And their efforts to intimidate and silence Christians continued. We read about it in

the Book of Acts. Stephen was an up and coming powerful preacher for Christ. Some Jewish leaders tried to refute him but they couldn't. So instead, they brought trumped up charges against him and brought him before the council made up of Pharisees. But Stephen was not afraid and his speaking truth offended the members of the council who ran at him and dragged him from their chambers out into the city street where they stoned him to death. And Saul was there. They dropped their cloaks at his feet and Acts tells us Saul approved their killing of Stephen. And following that day, Saul began actively persecuting Christians, dragging them from their homes and off to prison. It was during this time, when Saul had asked for authorization, letters of recommendation, to continue this manhunt for Christian believers in the city of Damascus, that he had an identity crisis or sorts. On the way to Damascus, Paul met the risen Christ. In a moment, Paul was blinded by bright light and Jesus spoke to him, specifically asking "Why do you persecute me?" and Jesus told him to go to the city and await further instructions. After three days of being in the dark, a disciple named Ananias came to Saul and told him that it was the Lord Jesus who appeared to him and who was sending the Holy Spirit to fill him. Saul's vision was restored and immediately he joined with the other disciples and began preaching Jesus. And in an ironic turn of events, he found himself the subject of a manhunt and unrelenting persecution. A short time later, Saul's identity transformation was complete when his name, Saul, a strong Jewish name honouring the first King over Israel, was changed to Paul. Though he was not one of the original 12 disciples or apostles of Jesus nor had he ever actually met Jesus during Jesus three years of ministry, Paul ministry and his extraordinary calling to be an apostle that day on the road to Damascus were undeniable by the other apostles and his mission to take the good news of Jesus to the gentiles, to the non – Jews through extensive travels to other countries and his encouragement and teaching to new churches through his letters lead to the spread of the Christian gospel throughout the world. This letter to the Romans is just one example of the amazing ways that God used Paul to communicate and disperse His good news.

Because at that time, Rome really was the centre of the universe. We learn from the opening verses we read together just now that the letter is written to the churches in Rome – not congregations meeting in literal church buildings but house churches scattered throughout the city. Paul has not yet visited them, not yet met them – only heard of them and expresses a longing to come and meet them. But for now, this letter will have to suffice. To our contemporary ears, the letter begins in a strange manner. When I am writing a letter, I begin by addressing the recipient, Dear Samantha, and then I would offer a greeting, then raise the purpose of my letter, ending with a salutation and finally, by identifying myself as the letter writer, sincerely, Allyson MacLeod. But the format for letter writing in the ancient world was almost a complete reversal. And so the letter to the Romans begins, as all of Paul's letters to the churches begin, with Paul introducing himself, and then addressing the recipients, to God's beloved in Rome, before greeting them and moving on with the body or purpose of his letter. You might not even bother to stop to notice this, skipping all the formalities and jumping ahead to the point. And I don't mean to say that all that follows in the remaining 15 chapters of this letter to the Christians in Rome is unimportant or insignificant because of course, it is and has been through the centuries, some of the

most important teaching for the life of the church. But it would be a great mistake to simply skip over these opening verses as trivial.

We are living in what some have referred to as the age of identity. In a time like never before, people are “self identifying” in response to centuries of being identified by and against the dominant culture. We communicate something about ourselves in the ways that we introduce ourselves; sometimes subtle clues about who we are, sometimes directly telling others who we are or how we want to be perceived. We define ourselves often using a standard set of parameters: age, gender, race, marital status, offspring, sexuality, place of origin, language of origin, income bracket, education, profession, religion. How we introduce ourselves says something about what we want people to know about us but it also says something about how we think about ourselves, what we consider the crucial elements of our identity. Others are searching for their identity through a connection to the past. Recently, a friend of ours sent away a swab with some of his DNA to an ancestry search company to receive a graphic representation of his genetic ethnicity, or in layman’s terms, a world map, outlining the countries of origin of his DNA. He is looking to the past to help him identify who he is.

The first 6 verses of Romans 1 are one long and complex run-on sentence. There is so much going on in these first few verses, as Susan Eastman states, “so many weighty matters in such a short span: God's good news concerning His son; the witness of Israel's scriptures; Jesus' identity as descended from David and designated Son of God in power; Paul's mission to the Gentiles; the obedience of faith,”¹ so many important themes, themes Paul will refer to throughout his letter, throughout his life time of teaching and preaching. So many themes that it is easy to overlook or lose sight of what Paul is really saying. The letter begins with the author identifying himself: I, Paul. But that’s not all he has to say about who he is. Who is he? Servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel, and he continues clause after clause for 6 long and complicated verses, every phrase building on the one before it, all to tell us that he is Paul and he belongs to Christ. First and foremost and only, Paul belong to Christ. It is his only identity. A few minutes ago, when I began to tell you about Paul’s former identity as Saul, I quoted from Paul’s letter to the Philippians: “Circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law; blameless.” In that letter he is telling the Philippians that these descriptors, these marks of his identity, these ways of describing himself used to define him, but no longer. He continues by saying that those kind of credentials mean nothing to him now, they are trash, in fact he uses even stronger language than that and I will only come as close as referring to it as manure. All those descriptors, all those labels, all those classifications, they are manure – because of Christ. Once we encounter Christ, that is who we are. We are His. First and last. It is not how we define ourselves or how others define us: it is who we are in Christ. That is the one and only definer. Paul says it again, in his letter to the Corinthians: If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old

¹ Susan Eastman http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=14

has gone; the new has come! And again in his letter to the Galatians: I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. In Christ, our identity transformation is complete; first in faith; trusting Christ and then in obedience; becoming like Him. We are His.

And so Paul, begins his letter to the believers in Rome, simply by introducing himself. And what he says in the next 6 verses is this: I, Paul, servant of Jesus Christ and called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel. he is who he is, because of Jesus. He is who he is because of Jesus. And then he addresses the recipients, the people gathering in house churches in Rome, the people gathered in a cathedral in the Ukraine or in a underground church in North Korea or under a tent in Peru or in a church in Keswick, you are who you are through the gift of Life and the call of Jesus Christ. You are who you are in Jesus. Full stop. Nothing else. Because in the end, nothing else matters.