

“To Be at Peace,”
by the Rev. Ellen Williams Hensle, 3/8/26

Ah, Romans. One of the last things to flow from the Apostle Paul’s pen: a dense theological exhortation to Jesus-followers in Rome, regarded by the great 16th century theologian Philip Melancthon as setting forth all the articles of our faith, and regarded by our great 20th century theologian Karl Barth as “dogmatics in outline.” Paul’s letter to the Romans is a text that has been read and reread, interpreted and reinterpreted throughout the history of Christianity as instrumental for understanding the identity and mission of the church of Jesus Christ.

And here we are, jumping in right in the middle, in chapter 5, with a big old “therefore.” The word therefore is always one to watch out for in the letters of Paul – he uses it at key moments throughout his writings as a marker of transition, as a hinge that turns his readers from the theology he is trying to explain to them toward what he expects them to do with it. So it’s a little unfair to start here in chapter 5 with “therefore,” with no intention of covering what comes before or after it. Maybe we’ll do a Romans sermon series one of these days and start at the very beginning, a very good place to start.

But for now, we start with therefore, and a variety of theological terms – or “big churchy words,” as one of my campus ministry students once called them. Justified; reconciled; saved from God’s wrath. Grace; endurance; hope; glory. Any one of these words could be its own sermon or maybe its own doctoral dissertation. But the word that stuck out to me as I was reading this week was peace. Peace. I guess it’s not too hard to see why peace would be the word this week, with bombs sailing back and forth over the Middle East and US strikes on targets as far away as war ships in the Indian Ocean. So the word this week is peace. Peace.

According to Romans 5, peace is what Christ offers to us. “Therefore, since we are justified by faith,” Paul writes, “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand.” We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We may not understand exactly what Paul means by justified, or just what grace we have access to, but peace – peace is a concept we don’t need a deep theological vocabulary to approach. Peace: the absence of conflict; the presence of wellbeing. A feeling of quiet rest or contentment. A sense of connection. In Hebrew peace is *shalom*; in Hebrew, *shalom* means something more than just freedom from fear or conflict; *shalom* means fullness, wholeness, right relationship.

And that is precisely what the Apostle Paul is talking about here in Romans. He is speaking to a mixed audience of Jesus followers in the empire’s capital city. Some of the Jesus followers he addresses come from Jewish backgrounds, while others come from outside God’s original family of faith: some of these Jesus followers in Rome are Gentiles, ones who have recently turned away from their polytheistic belief in the Greco-Roman gods to follow the God of Israel, the God who sent God’s only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, the God who sent Jesus Christ into the world to dwell among us.

And Paul is reminding especially those Gentile followers of Christ’s way that God loved them so much – God loved them so much that before they ever had God’s name on their lips, before they even dreamed of being obedient to God, God sent Jesus into the world to draw them into relationship with their Creator. They did not have to do anything to earn or deserve or even invite God’s love – God simply offered it to them.

And through that free gift of grace they are justified: justified, which means to be made righteous, or put more simply, to be made right with God. Through God’s free gift of grace they are made right with God. Anyone who tells them they have to earn their place in God’s family has it all backwards. These new believers are already in, already accepted. And not through their own activity but through God’s self-giving love, God’s faithfulness toward all of God’s creation. Though the new believers were once alienated from God, through Christ’s work in the world, they now have a relationship with God, they now have access to God’s goodness – they are at peace with God. They have peace, God’s peace.

This is the promise we belong to as well: that through Christ’s life, death and resurrection, we are made part of God’s family. Not through our good works, not through anything we have done to earn or deserve God’s grace, not even through our intellectual assent to a certain set of Christian doctrines or moral principles. We are part of God’s family because of God’s choice to love us. We are part of God’s family because of God’s love for us, expressed in Christ’s willingness to die for our salvation. Through Christ we are made righteous, made right with God. And so we have access to deep peace, peace which is more than the absence of conflict: peace that passes all understanding.

This sense of having peace, of being at peace in relationship with God – it can bring us hope in difficult times, as Paul reminds us here in Romans. When war rages and bombs fly, we can access God’s peace. When our own troubles and sufferings bring disquiet, we can access God’s peace. When we are buffeted about by the winds of the world, we can access God’s peace. We can pause to remember our connection to God and be filled with the inner peace that flows from God’s

great love for us. In fact, why don't we pause and remember together right now? Take a deep breath with me: in... out... in... out...

I hope you felt something settle in your soul just then. In this crazy world, it's impossible to pause too often to remember our belovedness.

And – and you know there's always an “and.” We need to be careful how we think about and talk about this peace we have from and with God. This peace we have from God is not meant to stop at our hearts. This peace we have with God is not meant to keep us from engaging in the world, not meant to keep us from engaging in things that are difficult or dangerous because we'd rather sit in our quiet inner peace place. No, this peace we have with God is supposed to flow out of our lives. This peace we have with God is supposed to flow into peace with our neighbors.

For the rest of his letter to the Romans, Paul will encourage the Jews and Gentiles in the Roman Christ-following community to be at peace with one another: to make room for one another, to welcome one another, to stay open to each other and not let a sense of superiority take over their relationships with one another. And from instructing them how to live together, he goes on to give them instructions for how to live in their world, their world which was just as crazy and mixed up as ours. “If it is possible,” Paul writes in chapter 12, “if it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. According to Paul, living peaceably with all is a hallmark of a life lived in response to God's grace.

I once had the opportunity to ask Beverly Gaventa, noted scholar of this letter – and yes, for those of you who have been around for a while, mother of former PCCH intern Matt Gaventa – I once had the opportunity to ask Dr. Gaventa why she thought Paul gave a caveat to his instruction to live peaceably with all. None of the other instructions in Paul's list of faithful activities in chapter 12 contains this kind of condition: “if it is possible, so far as it depends on you.” In no uncertain terms does he give his other exhortations; in no uncertain terms does he say “let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; contribute to the needs of the saints, pursue hospitality to strangers; bless those who persecute you” and so on. But when it comes to peace – peace if it is possible, so far as it depends on you.

Dr. Gaventa reminded me that though we often think of Paul as setting forth all the articles of our faith, as giving us dogmatics in outline through his writings – even though we often think of him as a towering theological figure, Paul was also a pastor. And by the time he wrote Romans, he was a pastor who had seen some things. He knew how hard it could be to follow Jesus in the real world. And so he had a practical side. And that practical side told him that peace isn't always up to us. We may desire peace, we may work toward peace, but forces outside our control sometimes snatch it away from us. People in power over us often have other priorities. So Paul tells us to do what we can. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Earlier this week I found some scribbled notes from a conversation with a mentor. “Our lament is macro,” he had said in our conversation; “our lament is macro, but our response is micro.” I don't remember the exact context in which he gave that advice, but it continues to ring true. Our lament is macro: we take in what's happening all over the world and we grieve, we mourn, we lament the lack of peace we see around us, the lives lost to war in Iran, Israel, Gaza, Ukraine and beyond, the lives lost to violence here in our own city. We take it all in and cry out to the God who loves us, “How long, O Lord? How long?”

And while we lament in the broadest sense, we do not have to let the enormity of the world's grief overwhelm us; we do not have to let the scope of the struggle keep us from seeking peace in our own lives, in our own communities. Our lament is macro, but our response is micro. What peace depends on us? What one action can you take to make peace, to promote peace in your school or workplace, in your home, in your neighborhood, in this country? What can you do – what can we as a church family do – to bring about the fullness, the wholeness, the rightness of relationship that characterize God's true shalom?

If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. There is much peace that unfortunately does not depend on us. But there is some that does. So we do what we can, with what we have, where we are – letting God's peace rule in our hearts, and letting God's peace flow from our lives, like living water.