

ON PETER, PAUL, AND MAYBE MARY

CHRISTIAN UNITY SUNDAY

January 19, 2020

Fr. Joseph Wagenhoeffler

Rev. Jeffrey H. Rickards

Father Wagenhoeffler spoke on Peter, but had no written sermon. Therefore, we will start with Pastor Rickards' portion.

ON PAUL

When I became intent on retiring as pastor of Grace Lutheran Church, I established a 'pastoral bucket list.' One of the items on that list was a Bible study on Paul's Epistle to the Romans. For years, I avoided this letter for Bible study, because I thought I was unequal to the task of interpreting Paul's greatest letter. One of the challenges is that Romans does not resemble his other letters. It is more a theological essay than a letter, such as Corinthians, with Paul's personal touch. It contains one of my favorite scriptural verses: *"We know that all things work together for good for those who love God"* (8:28).

For 2,000 years, the Apostle Paul and his writings have been central to the history of the Christian faith. For Martin Luther and us Lutherans, Paul's interpretation of the Gospel message is of the utmost importance. We only know about Paul from what he reveals of himself in his letters, and what Luke adds in his sequel to his Gospel, **the Acts of the Apostles**. Historians place Paul's birth in the city of Tarsus sometime between 7 and 10 A.D. Pope Benedict declared a Jubilee year in honor of Paul for 2008-2009. Every year, we Lutherans mark Paul's passage from Romans on the "justification by grace through faith" on Reformation

Sunday. In my 46 years of pastoral ministry, I have never used that occasion to condemn or criticize our Roman Catholic forebearers.

One hardly needs a special occasion to observe the importance and impact of Paul. No other Biblical author has received so much attention, so much study, so much controversy in the history of the Church as the Apostle Paul and his writings. One Church historian described Paul as the **“conscience of the Church,”** going so far as to say all of the critical turning points of Christian doctrine in the history of Christianity were **“Pauline reactions.”** Perhaps that is overstating things a bit, but it is striking nonetheless to consider how central Paul and his writings have been through the centuries.

In the Second Century, a self-proscribed Christian teacher, named Marcion, argued that Christians should reject the Old Testament, because Paul taught that the law did not justify. In order to defend against Marcion’s dangerous ideas, theologians, such as Origin and Irenaeus, needed to steep themselves in Paul’s epistles. A renaissance of interest in Paul occurred in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries, culminating in St. Augustine’s battle against Pelagius, with Paul’s doctrine of grace as the prize. Of course, it is well known that the Reformation of the 16th Century was deeply inspired by Paul’s writings, especially Romans and Galatians. In the early part of the 20th Century, Karl Barth’s **Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans** gave birth to a whole new theological movement. Today, there has been a flurry of new perspectives on Paul, led by the British New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright.

While any of these encounters with the Apostle are worth closer examination, for us Lutherans, it is Martin Luther’s journey with Paul that continues to stir the imagination for many, and kindle a love for his writings. Luther’s association with Paul began as a love/hate relationship. At the end of his life, Luther would recall this volatile time with vivid immediacy: **“I had indeed been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans. I hated the phrase ‘the righteousness of God,’ for it punishes sinners.”** I wasn’t

until Luther finally understood what Paul meant: to preach a righteousness that was a gift — a gift by which God mercifully justifies us through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul was not describing an impossible standard that could only lead to our condemnation. That would hardly be Gospel, the “Good News!” Paul was speaking of the righteousness of God that was revealed at the cross — God’s insatiable love for us. When Luther realized this, his whole world turned upside down. The bitter became sweet. While wrestling with Paul, Luther found himself also wrestling with God. And, like Jacob of old, Luther would never be the same.

Much of Paul’s life seemed analogous to Luther’s own. As the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge would later exclaim, **“How dearly Martin Luther loved St. Paul. How dearly St. Paul would have loved Martin Luther.”** The clarity of Paul’s Gospel message was important for Luther. In his preface to his commentary on Romans, Luther wrote: **“This epistle is really the chief part of the New Testament, and is truly the purest Gospel.”**

Luther’s journey with Paul continued for the rest of his life. The Book of Galatians was his “Katie von Bora.” After Luther had become one of the most famous (or infamous) figures in Germany, his very first major publication effort was to revise and print his lectures on Paul. Luther invites all to take this journey with Paul.

I close with a quote from a Roman Catholic scholar I have come to admire and appreciate, Michael Gorman, who holds the Raymond Brown Chair in Biblical Studies at St. Mary’s Seminary in Baltimore, MD. He writes this about Paul: **“[He] believed himself to be caught up in a divine mission — a mission not everyone appreciated — to spread a powerful word of good news (the “Gospel”) that would establish an international network of transformed, peaceable, multi cultural communities worshiping, obeying and bearing public witness to the one true God by conformity to His Son in the power of the Spirit.”**

AMEN