

I'm not Ashamed!

Romans 1:16-17; Acts 13

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Let us pray. Dear Lord, all over this sanctuary are banners inviting your Holy Spirit to come. So, come among us and rule. We, as an act of commitment, surrender to your rule, to your presence, to your words. Amen.

I wonder how many of you are new to the Rochester area. Anybody new to the Rochester area? You might appreciate this, nineteen years ago, a little bit over that, Diane and I were in Kentucky. It was the time of year when seminary students find out where they're going, if they are seniors and are graduating. In April, I got the call and discovered that I was coming to Rochester as an associate pastor at one of the churches here. At that time, people are naming where they're going. Some are going to New York; some are going to Alabama. And so I said I was going to Rochester, Minnesota; and one of the students said, "I've heard of that before." He scratched his head. "It's famous for something." He scratched it again and again, thinking - "Ah! I know! Rochester is famous for geese."

We took a walk around Silver Lake Park after arriving a couple days ago and discovered there were more ducks there this time than geese. Fifteen years ago when we left Rochester, our youngest child was 3 years old. Fifteen years later we're back and our youngest is 3 years old. We're glad to be back. Our family has done some changing. Nancy mentioned, the three older children are gone for now. We'll see them in a week. We've gotten a chance to talk with them by phone. They are excited to come and see Bethany and worship with you.

Sue, I just so enjoyed the choir. There is a history between choirs and me in Rochester. The choir at Homestead did not particularly appreciate my humor. So, in mercy, they decided that a good going-away present was giving me joke books. Not one, but two – joke books that I was to use and try to improve my humor. Apparently, my association with the Mayo Clinic did not cure my sick humor. Now I think some of those former parishioners may be wondering if I was sent back in desperation. But, I want you to know I was not sent out of sick humor. I want you to know there is something that gives me great pleasure, great confidence, and excitement to be here among you.

I chose the text from Romans 1:16-17 because I want you to know that we have something incredible to share here today. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans in introducing himself, he said, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ." And he wrote that, (and he might have gotten a little guff from his mother) because you see,

his mom was a good Jewish mom and the Apostle Paul, everywhere he went was not leaving his mom a good flavor in her mouth.

You see, as we discover in Acts, Chapter 13 his first trip. He was in Antioch, which is in Palestine. And his first place was to go from there to Antioch in Pisidia. That's like going from Rochester, Minnesota to Rochester, New York. When he got to Antioch in Pisidia and began proclaiming the gospel, the leaders of Antioch, Pisidia expelled him. Then he went to Iconium, and in Iconium in the fourteenth chapter there was a plot to stone him, so he and his cohort, Barnabas, fled Iconium. Then they went from there to Lystra. And in Lystra, they actually did get the job done. They stoned the Apostle Paul. They dragged him outside the city and there he lay with them thinking he was dead. He wasn't. God had protected him even though he had been wounded in being stoned. Not the kind of thing a mom likes to hear about her son, is it? Really? You kinda' want them to kinda' get along with people. Not make so many waves.

Then he went from there on to Philippi. In the sixteenth chapter of Acts, in Philippi he's imprisoned. And the people take him out, learning that he's Roman citizen and that they have actually done injustice to him and they say, "Will you please leave our town?" Well, he went to Thessalonica, and there was a riot in Thessalonica. And then he went from Thessalonica to Berea. And in Berea there was turmoil of a similar kind. By the time he got to Corinth they hauled him to court. But, he was able, because the power of God and the people of God there, to stay two years. So he did. Then he went to Ephesus where there was an incredible movement of God's Spirit, but there was an incredible backlash to what was happening and for two hours – can you imagine – hearing this chant "Great is Artemis the god of Ephesians!"? Two straight hours. They were upset; weren't they? Now, one Anglican bishop commenting on the Apostle Paul said, "you know when the Apostle Paul visits a community they go into a riot; when I visit, they serve me tea."

When the Apostle Paul said, "I'm not ashamed of the gospel," if he was simply talking about a philosophy or some principles, there was some reason for shame, because look at how he causing turmoil in all the communities. But if he was talking about something that literally released and unleashed a power that changes lives, heals lives, that changes the future that really brings liberation and salvation - then and only then - could he not be ashamed. Because something far greater than the pain caused was occurring.

You and I are tempted to shame in our pluralistic culture. We've experienced in the past fifty years, globalization. We've experienced it earlier in Rochester because we are an international city with an international mission. But because of that and the pluralism that brings in, there's this sense that to get along is most important value we ever could have. Guess what! That wasn't the most important value of the Apostle Paul. We're tempted to shame. We're tempted to shame because sometimes that gospel points out that what we're doing is destructive, and people hate it when they find out that what they're doing is hurting.

The Bible paints a picture not of just a rational process, but of an incredible spiritual struggle. Don Williams says about the Bible that it's consistently supernatural and it

pains evil never as impersonal, but as personal, attacking you, having a vendetta against you. So, in our situations, we are tempted to shame. Maybe, simply because of reactions of others, or we're tempted to shame because of the spiritual struggle to shut down the gospel, to make us not want to believe in its power and share its power.

Jesus knew this was a spiritual struggle and until the Spirit came on him, we hear of none of his ministry. But he said in Luke 4 as he sat down in the temple, he read, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me" anointing me to preach, sending me to proclaim. And it's only in that way that he went. It's only in that way he went to share the good news because it's a spiritual struggle. There's an incredible power encounter when you proclaim the words of Christ Jesus and the good news.

So, first of all, I'm not ashamed because I want you to know, I've been anointed. The Spirit of God is upon me. I've been anointed to proclaim. I have been sent to preach. Do you know, not only hundreds of prayers have been going up here in preparation for our time together; thousands of prayers have covered us? You are being prayed for literally by hundreds. Because you are pivotal to what God wants to do. I'm anointed. God's here with power to anoint you - to send you. You're in spiritual struggle not just a little thing where you offer a little insight; you're in a conflict. That's why I'm not ashamed. Number one, I'm anointed. I can't help but do this. My whole spirit is geared to do this.

There is a second reason the Apostle Paul is not ashamed. It's because the gospel is the power or the dynamite of God. The word is "dunamus;" it means dynamite. Literally, the gospel is power that explodes. It explodes attitudes. It explodes apathy. It explodes deception. It literally liberates, unleashes, breaks the walls. That's what the good news does. It's incredible power and God is using this power to reach right now with words, just with words. They may seem very simple. But, God's reaching right now to you - "I have a purpose for you. I made you. I love you. And, I've got a future for you. I want you. There's a struggle for you. You're pivotal." God loves you. This power is coming right now to you. As I proclaim, the power, the Spirit of God is moving and talking to you. And, God's upfront with you and is very personal with you. It's not about me performing today; it's about God talking with you about your life, your future, your attitude and where you're headed. The Gospel is the dynamite of God, brothers and sisters. It's the dynamite of God. And I watch that dynamite not only explode but literally bring incredible changes to peoples lives.

There is a young woman who is a victim in many ways and felt so inadequate. And, as she began believing the gospel, (see it's the power of salvation of those who believe) as she began believing the words of the gospel, she realized she's not this weak sinner, she is an empowered saint. That woman, in the space of three years, has become a tiger for God. She's raising up leaders, nurturing and caring for other people, mentoring them, leading groups, because she believes the gospel, and the gospel has changed her attitude, her understanding, her life.

A man, eleven months ago, who believed just about everything that he was suppose to believe about the Christian faith - he would show up for church on Sunday mornings (and

Howard he was the head usher at the church where I was serving) but about eleven months ago, his wife died. It was a crushing blow to him. Diane was one of the last ones to care for his wife alive, and one of the last ones to talk with her. During the time following her death, I invited this man to a small group where we had supper together and shared the basics of the Christian faith. It was just a ten-week process, but in those ten weeks the gospel so took root in his life. He learned that the Holy Spirit is not an “it.” The Holy Spirit is a person that he can have fellowship with. He began to have a companion with him, the Holy Spirit. Now he’s preaching. Within eleven months he’s preaching. He’s been invited to Denver to preach. His whole life is changed. He is not simply a believer in certain things. He is a witness of God’s power in his life. You’re not called to be believers. Through belief, you’re called to be witnesses of what you experience. You’re called to be witnesses. And you can only witness what you experience. And, the power of God changes. I watched it change my own life. I have observed it. I have observed it changing people, all kinds of people. I have seen facets of the gospel change not only a heart to make it tender; I have seen God use peoples’ faith and prayer and to bring healing. I have seen healing instantaneously, and I have seen it progressively. What we’re dealing with is something so powerful, so beyond our ability to contain, because it’s God’s power. It’s the power of God. Once you experience it, it changes you. You no longer can just live life with the narrow view – “this natural cause, this natural effect; this natural cause, this natural effect; this natural cause, this natural effect; and then hope God helps out in the process.” No. All of a sudden you realize you’re walking with the Spirit that changes you and changes the world around you. And you have power that can heal people’s hurts, and wounds and their lives.

That’s what we have, and I’m not ashamed of it. I’m not ashamed if it offends a few people. I’m not ashamed, because it’s power to heal. It’s power to liberate. It’s power save. It’s power for everyone who believes it. The appropriation of that power comes as one believes it. That’s the second reason.

The third and final reason why I’m not ashamed is because it reveals something that is so beautiful. Something that is so good. Something that you and I need so badly. It reveals a righteousness that comes from God that’s not ours. There is a righteousness that’s really righteous; it’s not just our perception of righteousness. In the Old Testament, the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, turn to page 2. When you and I were created, we were created to be partners with God, intimate and innocent. Guess what, when you’re innocent, you can be intimate. Any of you have little children around? You know what they’re like when they’re little and innocent. You can know them; can’t you? They’re not disclosing or hiding or concealing anything. You never know what’s streaking around our house. Because there’s an innocence at that age. That innocence means there’s an intimacy. And you and I were designed to be partners, intimate with God, innocent before God. We were created to be partners with God. God wants you for a partner. Don’t you understand that? God and you are to be tight – tight. God made you for that purpose so you can make an impact. Because you are his likeness.

God put Adam and Eve in a garden. If you look at chapter 2 on page 2, you’ll note that verse 8, “And the Lord God planted the garden in Eden in the east and there he put the

man whom he had formed and out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life also in the garden and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.” The human family lost that innocence. There are only two named trees in the garden, and they lost that innocence when they took fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Now look at the temptation that occurs in chapter 3, verse 4: “But, the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die for God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be open, and you’ll be like God knowing good and evil.’ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food and it was a delight to the eyes, and the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate she also gave some to her husband and he ate. The eyes of both were opened and they knew they were naked. They sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons.” The passage is talking about a different vision that humanity gained from that tree. That vision – fruit - from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, opened their eyes so now they saw everything in terms as good and evil; right and wrong. They themselves then, became judges and umpires in life. “Oh, Adam. We’re naked. This is bad! Let’s get dressed.” Judging. It’s a moral vision. Do you know why Adam and Eve were banned from the garden and from the tree of life?

Turn now to page 3, verses 22 through 24 of the third chapter. “Then the Lord God said, ‘Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil. And now, lest he puts forth his hand and take also from the tree of life, eat and live forever; therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man, and at the east of the Garden of Eden, he placed a cherubim and a flaming sword which turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.” Do you know why humanity was banned from the Garden of Eden and the tree of life? Because they were now competitors in their vision. They saw good and evil, not God. They became competitive judges. When you and I think about what’s good or evil, we’re thinking in the wrong category. We’re thinking of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When you and I think about Christ Jesus and how he has a will for us, we’re thinking no longer in terms of good and evil, but in terms of the tree of life. In terms of good and evil you’re manufacturing your own righteousness, your own way of saying, “I’m ok, I’m acceptable.” But when you surrender that vision of good and evil, and focus on Jesus Christ, now righteousness will come as a result of your walk with him. The issue for you is not what’s right, what’s wrong. The issue for you is what’s Jesus saying to me? He’s the redeemer and constant for my life. The gospel reveals a righteousness that comes from God when you and I are no longer judges, no longer umpires in our vision.

The only way to get rid of our self-righteous vision is to repent and believe the good news of Jesus Christ. All religions have umpire visions. The Jewish people were to live in a covenant with God, but they became umpires, legalists. You and I, as Christians, can become umpires as well, living out of the knowledge of good and evil versus a relationship with Jesus Christ that changes us. The reason why I’m not ashamed is because the only righteousness that really matters is the kind of righteousness that comes from a relationship of walking with God. Because then you know about forgiveness and

mercy. Then you know about patience, and goodness and faithfulness. It's the fruit of walking with God.

Brothers and sisters this morning, I don't want you to be ashamed. I don't want you to be ashamed about good news. I don't want you to be ashamed of your past. I don't want you to be ashamed about anything. I want you to know God loves you just as you are and will change you as you walk with him. God loves me just as I am and is changing me. So, don't get into this good and evil; right and wrong. Get into, "What's Christ want for my life? What's Christ revealing to me?" I want you to have a tree of life vision. I want you to know there is a power is being released, and the Spirit is up close and personal with you.

Forty-two years ago the Holy Spirit brought together a group of people to launch a mission here. As they launched it, they knew they were to affect the community of Rochester and the region around it. They knew that this was a redemptive mission, that God had a redemptive purpose for the city and area of Rochester and for the world.

Forty-two years later that same God is here. He's bringing us together. Just us. You're the ones that are here today. In bringing us together, God has a redemptive purpose for your life and a calling on it. There is a healing for you. But, there is also a mission for you. God is calling us not to be a people absorbed with our own problems or our concerns. But a people who understand we're in a war, not with other people, but with forces that other people are unaware of. And, we're called to win. And, we're called to teamwork. And, we're called to be instruments of healing and liberation to one another, to this community, and to the world.

So I'm not ashamed of the gospel. It's the dynamite of God - for everyone who believes it - to the Jew, to the Greek, to the person from Rochester, to the person from another nation. Don't be ashamed. Believe it! Let it explode the walls that prevent you from being tight with God and making an impact with your life!

Let us pray – Lord, I thank you for this very special day, this first chance to talk with a people who you love so much. You've known about them. Years ago you were working in their life and preparing them for this moment, and even as a little child you knew about this moment coming for me and you were preparing for me, so that what happens here and in the coming days is explosive in its work and constructive in its effect. You're the answer to the deepest wounds and questions and problems and struggles we have. You're the healing. So, Lord, thank you for this good news. Now may it unleash your work among us. AMEN.