

Grafted to the Tree of Abraham
A Sermon on Romans 15:4-13 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ December 7, 2025

Our New Year began last Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent. You might hear priests and other heavy-duty church people call this year we've just started, "Year A". In Year A most of our Gospel passages will be readings from the Gospel of Matthew. Here is another interesting detail about Year A. In Year A about half of our Epistle passages will be readings from a single book of the New Testament: Paul's letter to the Romans.

So this seems like a good time to spend a little time thinking about the life and work of our patron saint, St. Paul. The first thing to be said about St. Paul is that he was a citizen of the Roman Empire, and he was Jewish. Like all of Jesus' first disciples, Paul was a follower of Christ and he considered himself to be Jewish to the end of his life. Paul was a member of the tribe of Benjamin and a Pharisee.

We can be confident that Paul wrote at least seven letters which are now books in the New Testament: 1 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Romans and a tiny little book called Philemon. But it's likely that these seven letters are just a portion of the letters Paul wrote to the many congregations he started or visited during his ministry. Paul must have written many, perhaps dozens of letters to the congregations he organized during his three missionary trips. It seems likely that most of Paul's letters have been lost, and will never be read by us.

The letter to the Romans is the last, most mature letter of Paul included in the New Testament. By the time he wrote the letter to the Romans, Paul had been preaching and leading congregations for over 20 years. Romans is different from Paul's other letters in several ways.

Part of the difference comes from the fact that Paul had never been to Rome. Paul wrote his other letters to people he knew very well. In Paul's other letters he often addresses very specific, and sometimes practical issues, such as whether it's ok for Christians to attend the festivals for the Roman Empirical Cult, which were like enormous parties. If St. Paul's Church in Syracuse was one of Paul's congregations and he wrote a letter to us, it would probably include practical directions like this, "Please follow the instructions Betsy gave everyone about using the dishwasher."

The letter to the Romans is different from Paul's other letters. In the letter to the Romans, Paul does not address personal disputes or give practical directions. Paul is concerned with big, universal questions such as whether our salvation is a gift from God or whether it comes through our adherence to the Law.

Romans is serious and complex and requires significant attention. Paul's other letters are beautiful and inspiring in many places, but they are always easier to understand than Romans. Paul often uses humor and even sarcasm in his other letters, but not in Romans.

Romans is different from Paul's other letters, because by the time Paul wrote the letter to the Romans, he was wiser, and not so full of self-assurance and bluster. In Paul's letter to the Romans, he does not exaggerate and use sarcasm in an attempt to win the argument. By the time he wrote Romans, Paul realizes he has made some mistakes. He realizes that in his letters and in his preaching, he went a bit overboard with some of his arguments. Paul is aware he has caused confusion and misunderstanding through his vehemence and his lack of carefulness.

There is one other important difference between Romans and Paul's other letters. Paul's ministry was a ministry to share the Gospel with the Gentiles. In Corinth, in Philippi, in other cities and towns where he gathered congregations of people, Paul's congregations were full of Gentile followers of Christ. Even though Paul was Jewish, Paul's mission was a mission to the Gentiles, not to the Jews. So the letters to the Corinthians, the Philippians, the Galatians, and the Thessalonians were written to congregations of Gentiles.

The letter to the Romans is different because the Christians in Rome included Jewish and Gentile followers of Christ. Paul wrote this letter around the year we call 57, in other words about 25 years after the first Easter. As is true today, Rome was one of the largest cities in the region. Paul wrote his letter to several congregations in the city, and some of them had been worshipping in the city of Rome for ten years or longer.

The relationships between the Jews and Gentiles in these congregations were sometimes adversarial. There was a history of tension and conflict between these two groups. The conflict began several years before the letter was written.

As is true in the United States today, the Roman authorities had a habit of blaming many problems on minority groups in the city. The Jews were one of the most visible minority groups, because the Jewish community was fairly large, and they had built several large synagogues. Christianity wasn't a separate religion at this time, but could be seen as a small group within the Jewish faith. So these groups of Christ followers in Rome, which included both Jews and Gentile followers of Christ, probably gathered for worship in the synagogues.

In the year 49, Claudius, the Emperor of the Roman Empire, expelled the Jews from Rome because of some sort of trouble in the city. The Jews were convenient scapegoats; blaming them for some sort of problem would distract the people from the failures of the Roman government.

The Jews expelled by Claudius included Jews who were followers of Christ. While the Jewish followers of Christ were out of the city, the Gentiles took over leadership of the congregations. They probably continued meeting in the synagogues, because that is where they had met before. The Gentiles were left to lead their congregations alone, without the Jewish followers of Christ, for about five years.

The Emperor, Claudius, was murdered in the year 54. The next Emperor was Nero. Nero wasn't the kind of person you would want to hire as a babysitter for your children or grandchildren, but he did allow the Jews to return to Rome. When the Jewish followers of Christ returned many of them rejoined their congregations of Christ followers around the city.

That is when the conflict between Jewish and Gentile followers of Christ accelerated. The Gentiles had been running the show for five years. Reading between the lines of the Letter to the Romans we can see that some of the Gentiles considered themselves to be superior to the Jewish Christians. The Gentile Christians might have even found some support for this idea of Gentile superiority in Paul's earlier letters, such as the letter to the Galatians. In the letter to the Galatians Paul made harsh statements against the observance of the Jewish laws, which included circumcision and dietary restrictions.

Paul heard about these arguments between the Jews and Gentiles in the churches in Rome. The letter to the Romans is Paul's attempt to describe the right relationship between Gentile Christians and their Jewish sisters and brothers. As Paul composes the letter, we can see the ways he is older and wiser and more intentional.

In the first four chapters Paul goes into great detail about the faith of Abraham. He makes the point that Abraham is the father of the Jewish faith, and yet the law had not been given to the Jewish people during Abraham's lifetime. Abraham lived hundreds of years before Moses. Abraham's faith was a relationship of grace with God. Abraham was the father of the faith, not because of his adherence to a set of laws, but by God's action of creating a saving relationship with Abraham. The faith of Abraham was a relationship of grace, not of works. In Romans the faith of Abraham is like the roots of the tree, and the Jewish faith is like the trunk of the tree.

In chapters five through eight Paul describes the way a new, small branch is being grafted onto the tree of the Jewish faith. The small branch is the branch of Gentile Christians. The Gentile Christians in Rome think they are superior to the Jewish Christians. The reality is they are a new, small, fragile branch that is being grafted onto something that is much bigger and more universal than them. They are being grafted onto the tree of Abraham.

In chapters nine through eleven Paul gives a stern warning to the Gentile Christians in Rome. Then in chapters twelve through fourteen Paul comes to the beautiful conclusion of his argument. And here is his conclusion: our faithfulness is seen in our willingness and ability to be adaptable to one another. Just as God has been adaptable to us, by taking on flesh and becoming a real human being in the person of Christ Jesus, so too, you and I must be adaptable to one another.

All of which leads us to the passage Jim Doyle/Ruth Brown read so powerfully a few minutes ago. *Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.* Paul is speaking of the Hebrew Scriptures, which were written in former days for our instruction, so by steadfastness and encouragement of the scriptures we might hold onto the hope of God.

Allow me to paraphrase the next verse. May the God of Abraham, *the God of steadfastness and encouragement, grant you, Gentiles and Jews, to live in harmony with one another. This harmony is what Christ Jesus gave us and intended for us. Live in harmony with one another so that together you may with one voice glorify the God of Abraham, the one who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Then Paul states the main idea of the entire letter to the Romans. *Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.* Be adaptable to one another, be reconciled to one another, just as God has reconciled us to God through the person of Christ Jesus.

For I tell you that Christ, the Jewish messiah, has become a servant of the Jews in this way. God made a promise to Abraham that he and his descendants would be a light to all nations, to the Gentiles as well as the Jews. And now, through Christ Jesus, *the Gentiles have the opportunity to glorify God for his mercy.* In Christ Jesus, we see the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham.

This is God's intention for us Gentile followers of Christ: that we would be grafted onto this ancient, gnarly, many-branching tree of the faith of Abraham. This is God's intention for us: that we would be reconciled with one another as God has reconciled us to God through Christ Jesus. *May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing, so that we may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*