

Romans 10:8-13 “Earning Our Blessings”

Good morning! Glad you all could make it to, “Temptation in the Wilderness Sunday.” Good grief. Haven’t you ever heard of that? “Oh no, does the preacher have another obscure special Sunday to throw at us again this week?” Indeed I do! “And are you going to turn around and say, ‘But we’re not going to talk about that this week’ again?” Indeed I am! I like to be predictable in my unpredictability. Typically the first Sunday in Lent focuses on Jesus’ time in the wilderness where he spent 40 days being tempted by the devil. Spoiler alert: Jesus didn’t give in to temptation and the event launched a three-year public ministry that ended with his death and resurrection. The first Sunday of *every* Lenten season starts out with this story. The lectionary runs on a three-year cycle, and three of the four gospels include Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness in their narrative. So we get it every year whether we like it or not ... *if* we choose the gospel lesson from the lectionary. But it makes sense, because it’s a good story to use to kick off Lenten season. Jesus was tempted for 40 days in the wilderness and there’s 40 days (not counting Sundays) in between Ash Wednesday and Easter. Lent is supposed to be all about Jesus. So naturally, I’m going to be the contrarian again this week and see what Paul has to say in his letter to the Romans.

So just what *is* Paul saying to us here? Well, I think before we ask, “What is Paul saying to *us*,” we need to understand what he was saying to the folks he was writing to. Paul wrote this letter to a church in Rome that he did not start. Peter is often credited for establishing the church in Rome. At the time of this writing, Paul had never even visited the church in Rome. He even says so in the beginning of this letter. The church in Rome at the time was probably a mix of Jews and Greeks who had been led to following Christ by earlier apostolic missionaries. What we know about the early church from both the Book of Acts and other historical accounts of the time, is that the earliest conflicts in the church revolved around whether Gentiles ... that is non-Jews of Greek descent ... could be a part of this “Jesus Movement” since they weren’t Jews. And so here

we are in Rome with this seemingly self-appointed “Apostle” (who wasn’t even one of the original twelve who walked with Jesus) ... here he comes sticking his nose in this church’s business! This guy’s biggest claim to fame is persecuting Christians! These folks are probably thinking, “And he wants to teach us about what it takes to be *saved*?” Whatever that means? What a jerk! He’s a Jew with a Greek education getting all up in our faces about how we ought to be doing church, when things are hunky-dory thank you very much!” Except that they aren’t hunky-dory. They’re pretty messed up, because on one side, you’ve got a group of devout Jews who’ve lived their entire life observing and practicing the Law of Moses so that they could stand out as God’s chosen people ... and on the other side, you’ve got a group of short-haired, pig-eating, football playing, half-pagan, Caesar-worshipping, imperialist, believe-they-know-everything Gentiles who think that they can just come along and be a part of our club because they like Jesus. Ha! Not on our watch buddy.

“You don’t just ‘call on the name of the Lord’ and expect to be one of God’s chosen people! You’ve got to *earn* your blessing just like we did. Did your people spent two generations as slaves in Egypt? No! Did your people wander around half-starving for 40 years in the wilderness looking for a Promise Land after God delivered you from Egypt? No! Did your people spend 60 years in captivity in Babylon after having your temple ransacked and destroyed? No! Did your people have to watch from a distance while the people who remained in your homeland started abandoning their religious and cultural heritage? Started slipping away and forgetting their covenant with God and going back to their Pagan ways? No! Did your people have to sit by and watch your cultural heritage deteriorate as a mammoth conquering empire assimilated you? Oh ... you did? Shoot. I’m sorry. But either way! You are not one of us! You are not God’s chosen people. You are Gentiles. You want to be one of us, then you go over there to the starting line and you run the race that we’ve run and make the commitments that we’ve made, and you adopt our customs and social norms, and then *maybe* we can start talking about “being saved.””

And on the other side, you have the Gentiles saying, “But we *like* your Rabbi Jesus! And he says that God loves *all* of us!” Both sides feel like they’re not being treated “fairly.” The Gentiles don’t feel heard. The Jews don’t feel like their efforts are appreciated. What’s that line from *The Incredibles*? “When you say ‘everyone is special,’ that’s just another way of saying no one is.” Then you’ve got the Greeks who don’t feel like they’re being treated fairly because the very message that Jesus preached - that God is reconciling the whole world - the very message that led them to follow Jesus in the first place doesn’t seem to apply to them. *Everyone’s* saying, “No fair!”

Okay, *now* let’s talk about what Paul might be saying to *us* today. Because it sure seems like there’s a lot of folks in our time and place in history who are saying, “No fair!” And for a lot of reasons too. I was talking to a group of people working with Camp Fire survivors who are starting to see the effects of the fire on kids ... especially high school students. Kids who had stellar grades and were looking forward to going to college. Kids who, for the most part, would be considered model students on the fast-track to being successful citizens. These kids are acting out. Their grades are tanking. They’re withdrawing. They feel helpless and hopeless. They feel as if they were robbed and cheated out of some of the opportunities that they would have received under normal circumstances. They don’t even seem to have the energy to say, “No fair!” anymore because they’ve just given up.

And then there are those who lost their houses. I know of a family who worked so hard to set up a successful homestead in Concow. They did everything right. By the book. It was their dream. The fire destroyed everything on their property. My friend wrote something that sounds straight out of either Job or the Book of Lamentations:

“There is so much PAIN! I hurt everywhere, my body feels crushed with the weight of it and I can't hold back tears that I try so hard for [my kids] not to see. I'm not the type to give up but I feel

like I have lost this battle and no one is fighting it with me. I'm fighting for something that no one else cares about but me. I can't provide the life I wanted to give my children. The dream I worked my whole life to provide for them.” She goes on to say, “It may be time to say goodbye to what I've been working toward my whole life and settle for something, less. And that makes me feel so defeated.”

Again. It's ... not ... fair.

Well, this is a whole different issue when you frame it like that Pastor! What ... are you seriously trying to compare the feelings of some whiney people throwing tantrums because Paul is telling them that Gentiles should have a place at the table with folks who lost everything including their sense of hope and purpose?! Let's be careful now. First of all, I don't think it's “fair” to categorize the Jewish Christians in the first century Roman church as “whiney people throwing tantrums.” They were facing a major paradigm shift that challenged everything they were taught and believed in. “This ... isn't ... fair. This wasn't part of the covenant.” True, but Jesus spoke of a “new covenant” that spelled out God's inclusive love much better than the “old covenant.” If you want to follow Jesus, this is what is involved. As helpless and hopeless as it may seem, God is here to help you through it. God is still walking with you. There is an abundance of grace for you and *everyone*. You don't have to *earn* God's love. *That's* Paul's message to the Roman church. It's a message of encouragement. It's an assurance that God's love, grace and faithfulness is bigger. Bigger than what? Bigger than anything that life can throw at you. Bigger than fires, famines, floods ... bigger than ignorance, selfishness and bigotry. Bigger than the lines that we draw to divide one another into “good” and “bad,” “deserving” and “undeserving,” “in” and “out,” Jew or Gentile, luck or unlucky. God ... is ... bigger. Is that fair? Depends on who you ask, I suppose. If it *isn't* fair, I guess it's one of those occasions in life where I'm thankful that it isn't.