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Rom 3: 9-31
06/14/09 Faith MC, MN

A God for All Peoples

W: Letters come in various shapes and colors. I remember once getting a letter on a balloon which I needed to blow up in order to read. That was interesting. Today, in one sense, we are bringing you a letter from the church around the world. While it is not the same as the letters from Paul, we need to remember that many of Paul's letters were meant to be an encouragement to the churches. In many ways that is what Lois and I are charged to do – encourage the mission workers located around the world with MMN.

As you listen to this scripture, remember that Paul is writing to the church in Rome, which is composed of both Jews and Gentiles, but is in a Gentile context. He is writing from his former context, where he was a trained Jewish clergyman. Paul knew that the Jewish context was one where they claimed to have the exclusive insight into the truth about God. Yet Paul knows, from his own experience, that this is too limiting. He is blunt; he uses hyperbole, and is very negative about the ability of the Law to save anyone. As you listen to the reading, in the first part hear how Paul uses their Jewish scriptures to say that God intended a larger picture. And secondly, he gives some insight into what this larger picture might look like.

Scripture Reading

In this sermon we want to do two things: 1) Take a look at what this larger picture includes; 2) Tell you what we have seen and heard.

So, what does this larger picture include? Many things, but we want to talk only about two of them.

First: **God is the God of all Peoples.** No one person or group can claim to have all the insight into the whole truth about God. Some think they have it, but as Paul says, we all fall short of what God intended. A degree of humility is called for, especially as we relate to others who we think are different from us. The whole truth, in fact, lies in God, who is the God of all God's people groups. No one can claim to have all the answers. Even if we have thousands of years of tradition and experience, as the Jews did, we cannot claim to have the whole truth. Even if we have the background of hundreds of years of Christian experience in a N. American context, we cannot claim to know all of what all the world needs. God is doing a new thing all over the world, through Jesus. All are saved through faith in Jesus Christ. This is the bottom line, for Paul. Let us not limit the work of God through our own limited insight.

L: The **second** part of this picture is that **this saving faith is built on a lot of grace.** “We are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”

Paul has just given us a whole list of what faithful Christian practice is NOT. Following the **law of the Old Testament** cannot make us righteous.

We have a similar lament in **Romans 7**, but Paul makes it much more personal to himself. He says, “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.”

The next chapter is **God’s answer** to this wretchedness of being so unable to do what is right. In **chapter 8** Paul states that no matter what, nothing can separate us from the love of God. Nothing can separate us from the love of God! Nothing we do, and nothing that is done to us. Not our sin, not our good deeds.

This grace is indeed **good news** to all of us. This is gospel good news to people in **Lithuania and Ukraine**, where communism ruled until very recently, and where, in Ukraine, corruption still flourishes at the highest levels of government. This is gospel good news to the **indigenous people** who live primitive lifestyles in **Argentina**. This is gospel good news to businessmen and women in **Quito and Riobamba, Ecuador**. This is gospel good news to people in **N. Ireland** who are working hard to teach and model peace-making, and in **Germany** to people who are becoming convicted that military might and killing are not the way of Christ to bring peace to a warring world.

This is also gospel good news to **mission workers** who are putting their best energies and efforts into bringing gospel good news to others. These are mission workers who often long for someone who **understands English**. It is hard to concentrate on a language that is not your primary language. When mission workers finish **their language study**, they can communicate at about a third grade reading level. That is not adequate to discuss the finer points of **theology and other abstract subjects**. It can be very discouraging for workers who have not yet become proficient in the language of the people they are serving.

It is **our privilege** to travel to the locations where the Mennonite Mission Network mission workers are ministering, and to **wrap the arm of the sending churches around them** at the places where they are serving. We **visit** their ministry sites, we **validate** their efforts, we **encourage** them, and we **provide pastoral care**. Sometimes that means leading them in prayer for their work, or leading them in worship in English. Sometimes it means singing English hymns with them. In one case, it meant playing Scrabble in English. Sometimes it requires **counseling** for situations they have encountered in their adjustments to a new culture and setting.

Isolation is a big issue for our mission workers. They are all far from **home**, far from the settings and locations they are used to. They are, except for those who have served a long time, way **out of their comfort zones**. While they are very dedicated and flexible people this can take a toll on marriages, family relationships and working relationships.

W: We have learned that our **mission workers** are people who have the gift of communicating effectively across cultures. As we have begun our assignment, we have seen missionaries in several contexts and cultures. This is exciting. I am amazed at the quality of people who are serving on the field. They are committed individuals, following their call from God and the Church. They work hard and sacrificially. It has been a pleasure to become acquainted.

Our mission workers do an **amazing variety of work: (Pictures)**

Lithuania, Robin Gingerich and Steve & Betsey Dintaman, teaching English & theology at LCC International University.

Odessa, Ukraine, where Mary Raber teaches church leaders at Odessa Seminary. Cliff Dueck, a Canada Witness worker, who is planting a new church in Ukraine.

Formosa, Argentina, where six couples have been working with Toba indigenous congregations, and assisting with Bible translation work: Willy & Byrdalene Horst, Keith & Gretchen Kingsley, and Richard & Ruthanne Friesen.

Ecuador: Don & Jan Rheinheimer, in Riobamba, are accompanying a church plant through its beginnings.

One of the things I am particularly impressed with the commitment of so many of the workers to **accompany** indigenous leaders, rather than do the work themselves, in their North American style. Accompaniment is a way of assisting without taking over, or assuming that we know what is best in their context. The local leaders know what is best in their culture. (This is one of the areas where the North Americans do not always know what is best for other groups of people.)

L: When we first started this assignment, **we did not know** how much our services would be needed or appreciated. The more we do, the more we see that there is a great need and we hope we can continue to offer what is needed.

God's eternal and relentless love for us is gospel good news to Wayne and me as we travel and offer support to mission workers. We will not always get it right, but we know God will love us anyway, and give us the gumption to go on.

God's love is gospel good news to our brothers and sisters at **Faith Mennonite Church** as well. We are grateful to you for the funds you have donated for our continuing ministry with the Mennonite Mission Network. We wish you God's blessing for all the ways you minister right here in Minneapolis/St. Paul.