

I am Not Ashamed of the Gospel

Sermon for the 3rd Sunday after Epiphany

Sermon Text: Romans 1:13-17



I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. ¹⁴ I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. ¹⁵ So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. ¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

I know people who want nothing more than to proclaim the Gospel every second of the day and in all appropriate and inappropriate situations. For example, when they invite guests over, they want the conversations throughout the evening to have a single purpose: that their guests are saved. They plan everything in advance and even memorize specific questions and Bible texts beforehand. With questions and answers, the listeners should be led directly to the point where they feel like sinners and then can confess their sins in a prayer to Jesus. When all this happens, the hosts feel like they are faithful servants of God. Well, I don't know... that can't be what Paul meant when he says: "I am not ashamed of the Gospel!" For most people, it tends not to be like how I caricatured it in my example above. Most people are ashamed of the Gospel. As one pastor said: "I can't come with Jesus to any of my congregational visits." Perhaps after all, it is that we are rather ashamed to proclaim the Gospel! Other than the family first mentioned, talking about Jesus is embarrassing. According to this opinion, promoting a certain religion is fanatical and intolerant. Instead, the rule is: everyone should be saved in their own desired way. Paul didn't want to allow everyone to be saved on their own terms. He didn't want to simply leave people alone in their reality and instead felt an obligation to his fellow man. An obligation to proclaim the Gospel. Paul knows that God created all people and therefore, all people are centered on God. Without God, they are lost. God doesn't want His children to be lost. Instead, He wants to have a living relationship with His children and when this relationship is broken, then we owe it to those people who don't have relationships with God to do everything we can so that the relationship can be renewed. Now, one could say that all of this no longer applies to this current time because when I proclaim the Gospel, it really does sound a bit like invading my neighbor's private garden plot and telling him which plants to grow there and which plants he shouldn't cultivate. Or, as some say: when proclaiming the Gospel, it is just about expanding the Church's sphere of power and influence. In other words, according to this understanding, I break down the fences of my neighbor's garden plot so that my own garden becomes bigger. That is definitely not how it is meant. We already see that when we look to Christ. Christ saved the world not by humiliating it, humbling it, or even commandeering it. Jesus also didn't treat the people in a disrespectful or undignified manner. No, the opposite is true. Jesus allowed people to nail Him to a cross. And that's why Jesus said to His disciples: For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45) And if our Lord and Savior sees Himself as a servant of the whole world, then that also means that we should do that. So the proclamation of the Gospel is not the spread of power and manipulation of others, but a service to the world. In this service to the world, we as Christians are courageous and spare no expense on the one hand. Some are even ready to lay down their lives so that the Gospel is carried into the entire world. But on the other hand, the opposite also applies, which is that we are without power and influence. Paul also knows about these two aspects and makes a connection with the proclamation of the Gospel and the feeling of shame and weakness. Throughout his life, Paul had to deal with this feeling. Many despised him. There were even some from his own congregations that scorned him and there, in those congregations, he had to speak of the folly of the cross and of the power that is powerful in weakness. It seems to me that it is an essential part of the proclamation of the Gospel – that proclaiming it is not done from a position of power or superiority but the exact opposite, in weakness. To this day, for example, one can observe that the church grows rapidly in oppression and persecution while churches that hold a

certain strength or financial power spiritually deteriorate and decline. But how can one speak of strength that is powerful in the weak, when everywhere else, only strength, success, and competence matter?

Paul says: *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.* His reaction to shame is not withdrawal or self-pity. In his preaching of the Good News, Paul points away from himself and points to God's power which conquers shame. It is the power of God that is both the source and the goal of all our work. The reason why Paul isn't ashamed is because Paul speaks about God's power and not of his own talents or intelligence. It is God Himself who is active. God Himself deals with the people. Whenever we hold up our own good deeds instead of God's work or when we confuse human talent with God's power, a terrible distortion of the Gospel occurs. Martin Luther knew all of this very well. In his career as a monk, Martin Luther tried for years to do what only God can actually do. Knowing that God is just, he tried to be just according to God's standards... and failed miserably! During this time, Luther's heart remained closed to God. He didn't understand the Gospel and was distanced from God as a monk. Two things weighed heavily upon Martin Luther at this time. The first was that he had never attained this righteousness. And the second was that he felt that God could not love him because he couldn't make himself righteous. Luther later wrote that in his eagerness to serve the just God, he hated this very same God as well. All this happened until the time when God Himself came onto the scene and opened Martin Luther's eyes which happened exactly as Luther read the passage that is our sermon text today: ¹⁷ *For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."* Martin Luther's eyes were opened and as he understood that the righteousness Paul mentions here is not Luther's own righteousness but God's righteousness which He gives to us. Luther writes: "The moment I understood this it was as if the door of paradise opened."

What kind of Gospel did Luther discover here? It's nothing other than the same thing which Paul discovered in his own life. It is the Gospel of which there is no need to be ashamed. There is no need to be ashamed because we don't speak of our own good or bad deeds here, rather only about God's righteousness which applies to all people. This is God's power which is still at work today. This power is not to be confused with power that wants to dominate or manipulate others. In this world, power is used so that people can exercise violence over others. "With might of ours can naught be done" writes Martin Luther in his famous hymn. When we speak about God's power, something completely different is meant. God's power means that I may know that I am in relationship with God, it means that I don't originate from my own power but from God's power. This power doesn't flaunt itself nor does it boast. It doesn't place itself over others, rather it serves them. It is powerful even in the weak, Paul says. It is simply a quiet knowledge that despite external circumstances and weaknesses, I am still safe in God's hand. In all his preaching, Paul only ever draws from this power and connects it directly to Christ. In the proclamation of the Gospel, Jesus Himself is in the center. It is Jesus Himself who speaks and wants to be in relationship with us. Christ is not a collector's item but becomes very closely connected to us and to our lives. This is through the Holy Spirit. "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him..." (Luther's explanation of the 3rd Article of the Creed) I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength... proclaim the Gospel or love my neighbors. But all of that will be given to us through the Holy Spirit – completely, without any of our own merit. That's why we don't need to be ashamed of the Gospel – it's about our relationship with God. And when it's about our relationship with God, it includes the whole of life and isn't just about me believing this or that to be true or if I do this or that correctly. When we want to convert people by any means possible, the result is often that people often pretend or try to be better than others. The faith Paul speaks of is something different and encompasses the entire life. For example, that's what theologian Manfred Josuttis writes at the end of his life. He describes his path of escape and says: *"In the horrors of the Second World War, in the nights of bombing, on the run through snow and ice, in captivity, sickness, and loneliness, people came to a vital realization: Faith gives strength to live, to suffer, and also to die."* And such faith is certainly nothing to be ashamed of. Amen.