

Now that we have two pastors focused on building up our schools and reaching out to our community, we have all but fulfilled our call from God. The Lord has provided everything we need in order to do his bidding, and it's a free skate from here on out. We have little to worry about now except for making sure we have enough offering envelopes! I'm joking. Building the church is a process, and it takes time. This morning we're going to talk about that and what it has to do with our walk with God and one another.

OPENING PRAYER

ROMANS 1:13-15

I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that often I have planned to come to you (and have been prevented so far) so that I may obtain some fruit among you also, even 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, for my part, I am eager to preach the Gospel to you also who are in Rome.

St. Paul wrote, **“I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that often I have planned to come to you (and have been prevented so far)” (Romans 1:13a).** There are many challenges in ministry, and Paul probably discovered each and every one of them. He was beaten and stoned, he was marooned on a ship, he was imprisoned, he was often hungry and cold.

What had happened in the case of Paul's intended visit to the church in Rome? On another mission he said he was prevented by **“the Spirit of Christ”** from visiting a particular city (Acts 16:7). Elsewhere he said Satan had blocked his way to visit another location (1st Thessalonians 2:18). But here in Romans, if we go all the way to chapter 15, we read, **Romans 15:20-22, “I aspired to preach the Gospel, not where Christ was *already* named, so that I would not build on another man's foundation;.... ²² For this reason I have often been prevented from coming to you....”**

Paul had been busy elsewhere bringing people to faith in places where no one else had preached the Good News, thus the delay in his visit to the church in Rome.

The tricky thing about working with people is that conditions change constantly. Yesterday we had our first food drive. We had no idea what was going to happen. Pastor Cano had been on the phone and writing letters to the families who participated in the Toy Drive for 3-weeks. And then we decided to advertise the event to everyone in Whittier! We had no idea what was going to happen. All we could do was get the food, prepare the grounds, recruit volunteers, and pray: Pray for wisdom; pray for open hearts; pray for a good turnout; and pray for a solid Christian witness.

Proverbs 16:9 reads, **“A man’s heart plans his way, But the Lord directs his steps.”** Flexibility is absolutely essential in ministry. For we don’t want to step on the movement of the Spirit of God. By his grace we ministered to more than 12 families yesterday, families who don’t have a church home.

Paul wrote that he desired to visit the church **“so that I may obtain some fruit among you also, even as among the rest of the Gentiles” (Romans 1:13b)**. On another mission he talked about how he was going to a church to collect some fruit, as in a monetary gift for the upkeep of another congregation.

I’m reminded of a conversation I had with a lady several years ago. She asked me, “Pastor, how much money does your church get from the diocese?” She was amazed when I told her Lutheran churches are self-supporting, that we don’t have a diocese which sends us money, but we have a district office to whom WE send money to support the building of new churches! That’s a tradition traceable all the way back to Paul.

However, here in Romans, Paul was talking about another kind of fruit. He said in the same verse that he intended to obtain fruit from the church just as he did from **“among the rest of the Gentiles.”** He was talking about the fruit of faith, conversions: people giving up darkness for light; people replacing their old heart for the heart of Christ; people turning away from the path of resentment and self-obsession to the path of love and joy in the Spirit of the Living God.

How many times have I heard fellow pastors lecture that it is not about numbers but it's all about preaching and teaching the Word of God correctly? How often have I heard men of God exclaim that when you start counting the numbers of heads in pews, you're on a slippery slope which will lead you to pride or despair? How often have I heard leaders of the church claim that what's important is the quality of worship not the number of people actually worshipping?

If Paul had felt that way, he would never have gotten out of Jerusalem! He would've been consumed with debates with Peter about the proper administration of the Lord's Supper and Baptism, about how much training is enough training for a preacher in Christ's church, and about whether or not it was permissible to eat bacon!

Instead, he wrote, **"I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish" (Romans 1:14)**. In other words, he was taking this Good News about Jesus, this Word of God that saves men from their sins, to as many people as possible, creating churches and raising up disciples.

Paul was concerned about numbers; he did not want to lose a single soul. It seems to me church leadership is too quick to say *sayonara* to people, as in, "It's our way or the highway; and if you don't like it, there's the door." Paul wrote we should always try to be reconciled to our brothers and sisters, that we should take the initiative to make peace, that we should give up our own rights for the sake of others' wants and needs. His goal was to keep the Body of Christ together, growing the flock in a spirit of peace.

That's our goal too. Without apology we can say we will fill up every pew with disciples of Jesus Christ, and if we fail it will not be because we didn't do everything in our power to try.

When Paul wrote that he was **"under obligation"** to preach the Good News he was thinking about how he was a **"slave of Christ" (1:1)**, as he wrote earlier, that God had bought and paid for his very life with the blood of his son, Jesus, and he'd given him his orders, his call, to take this Gospel that had saved him to the world. In his first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul wrote, **"if I preach the Gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the Gospel" (1st Corinthians 9:16)**.

Paul acknowledged that God was his master, that he literally owned him, and that he was bound and determined to fulfill his call.

He wrote to the Romans, **“So, for my part, I am eager to preach the Gospel to you also” (Romans 1:15)**. He had received the Good News of his salvation with joy, and thus he was compelled to share this message with everyone he met.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we’re on a mission, a journey, an adventure. We are ready, ready for whatever the Lord brings us and wherever he chooses to take us. We are going to strive to pluck as many souls from the world and the grasp of the devil as we can. We want quantity, and we want the quality of the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ too; there’s no reason we can’t have both.

And we’re going to pray; we’re going to pray for God’s direction, the intervention of his Spirit, and the success of the Good News, that it penetrates the pride and skepticism of people’s hearts.

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, **1st Corinthians 9:19-23**, **“For though I am free from all *men*, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. ²⁰To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews;.... ²²To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. ²³I do all things for the sake of the Gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.”**

My friends, like St. Paul let us strive to be free in our own hearts, free from pride and sin, free in our spirits that we may be a slave to God for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let us be transformational in our own spirit that when we speak with a white person, we’re a white person, that when we speak with an Hispanic, we’re Hispanic.

Indeed, let us do everything we do **“for the sake of the Gospel, so that we may become a fellow partaker of it”** in the name of Jesus. Amen.