

A Community In Need of Peace

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Preacher: Tonetta Landis-Aina

- [0 : 0 0] If you are willing, please do join me in prayer. Lord of life, we come into this place seeking life, aware deeply of all that stills life, has stolen from us life this week.
- Lord, we come seeking your abiding peace, your desire for us toward thriving and rest and joy.
- Lord, I pray that in this place today, there would just be a deep sense of the ability to be ourselves, to bring our whole selves, to sense what you are saying, to trust you, to trust in some way this community of faith.
- Encircle us with your love and your grace and the knowledge that we are yours. We belong to you.
- In the name of Jesus, we pray these things. Amen. So last Saturday, as afternoon started to become evening, I sat with my wife and a few friends around a red picnic table.
- [1 : 3 9] We had finally made it to one of the prioritized spots on our vacation list. It was an ice cream shop, y'all. I'm just going to be honest about that.
- They served ice cream flights and we were here for it. Okay. And our draw to that particular creamery was that they used duck eggs. They were harvested on a farm.
- And the ice cream shop was on the farm. So our kids were playing with the ducks. And I was really scared that their fingers were going to be eaten off as they fed the ducks and all of that.
- We were on this gorgeous vacation in the Finger Lakes. And we had this final day, this final full day to just enjoy one another, to chat. Everything seemed really calm, really peaceful.
- And so I did the thing that you really should not ever do when you're having a wonderful time. I compulsively checked my phone. I love it.
- [2 : 3 9] Yes. And you probably know or maybe can guess the first thing that I saw in my notifications, it was the, my first notification was about the attempted assassination of Donald Trump.
- And immediately all the calm evaporated. The news, you know, that piece of news took center stage in our conversation at the table. We were shocked.
- We talked about all the implications for the November election, which y'all know weren't based on any real knowledge, but just like worry and fear. And because we were in a part of this country, the country that we didn't know, we were even like, is it safe to talk freely here?
- How do we feel about this? And a lot of our conversation ended up revolving around the role of violence and the nature of violence in pursuing change.
- And I think that's a conversation that's happened a number of times in this community as we've talked about revolutionary justice. And then after that, in the hours that followed, I kept seeing all these denunciations of political violence from our national leaders.

[3 : 54] And two kind of opposite things started to happen in me. First, I felt this frustration mounting in me, honestly, that those who uphold systems of domination and those who are working to uproot systems of domination, both of them seem to struggle to get outside of the imagination of violence.

They both seem to still be inside this fundamental organizing framework, which has at its root this belief that the world can be purified and remade through violence, redemptive violence.

And I could feel myself, as I thought about all of this, like edging toward hopelessness. Because we often seem so unable to find creative action that will actually dismantle the master's house, and we end up resorting back to the master's tools, to use the brilliant analogy of Audre Lorde.

And then the other thing that happened to me and was happening in me at the very same time was this frustration that we so narrowly define the meanings of violence and political violence.

Why is there such a strong disconnection between the killing, violence in our streets, and the dysfunction that we have allowed and sometimes even supported regarding relationships of power?

[5 : 28] Why don't we register more things that don't make the national news as political violence? One example.

A million people in the DMV are food insecure and about a third of those are children. And that's political violence. It's about how we have structured power, and it steals life, not all at once, but hour by hour by hour.

And then, after these denunciations of political violence, the other thing that I kept hearing that weekend were these calls by national leaders for unity and peace.

Now, some of us in this camp hold in our bodies the memories of how often calls for unity have slickly papered over the need for accountability and have come at the expense of oppressed people.

And because of that, y'all, I tend to talk more about justice than I do about peace. When peace is talked about in any communal way, I feel this knee-jerk suspicion.

[6 : 44] Even when people say they have a call, I have a call to peacemaking, I admit that something comes up in me and says, but what about justice? Talk to me about justice. How is justice playing into this?

But I don't actually say any of that because I also know something about that feels slightly off-kilter. See, peace is this major thread throughout the Old and New Testaments.

It's the trajectory toward which creation is moving and which new creation will be fulfilled. Bible scholar, one of my favorites, Walter Bruehmerman, says, the central vision of world history in the Bible is that all of creation is one.

Every creature in community with every other living in harmony and security toward the joy and well-being, toward the joy and well-being of every other creature.

If you've heard me preach much, you've probably heard me talk about shalom more than a few times. And I like that word a lot because it gives a layered sense of the flourishing and wholeness that God desires and longs to move us toward.

[7 : 57] Here's that same scholar again. And just take the depth of this in when we talk about shalom, when we talk about peace. That persistent vision of joy, well-being, harmony, and prosperity is not captured in any single word in the Bible.

A cluster of words is required to express its many dimensions and subtle nuances. Love, loyalty, truth, grace, salvation, justice, blessings, righteousness.

But the term that in recent discussions has been used to summarize that controlling vision is shalom. Both in such discussions and in the Bible itself, it bears tremendous freight, the freight of a dream of God that resists all our tendencies to division and hostility and fear and drivenness and misery.

Shalom is a substance of the biblical vision of one community embracing all creation. It refers to all those resources and factors that make communal harmony joyous and effective.

Shalom. That's this word that I like. I like everything about it. And yet I have to remember that shalom is fundamentally peace. And I have to, and maybe some of us have to, reclaim the vocabulary of peace despite the ways that that term has been hollowed out.

[9 : 32] Because it is necessary to understand what God is up to into this world and what God is up to even in our own lives. Now, enter the book of Romans.

I thought there would be applause there. You know, Romans. You're like, no, not Romans. For the next six weeks, we're going to camp out in the book of Romans.

We're going to move through the series that we're calling Reclaiming Romans as a Gospel of Peace. And despite what you might have heard or been taught about this book, it is fundamentally about peace.

It's about what it means to be the family of God as founded in God's initiation of peace toward us and toward creation.

And I am also aware that that might not be the way you have been taught to think about this. I was taught to think of it mostly, this book mostly, in terms of individual salvation and through the lens of basically a wrathful God having to satisfy our sin.

[10 : 47] I always thought that was the controlling meaning, really, of the book. And yes, some of that is there. We're going to talk about some of that in the series, although a lot of it, you'll see as we dive in, is much more communal and cosmic than we often talk about.

But the fundamental question that Romans deals with actually revolves around God's faithfulness to the Jews. It revolves around, I think Daniel Kirk puts this really well, and it's not something I was ever taught.

The fact that the Jews are not swarming to Jesus as Messiah in the first century is a problem for God. It would have been a problem for the people in these communities in the first century.

How can God be faithful if God's own people are not enjoying the benefits of God's great and final act of salvation? Paul argues that God still is just, righteous, and faithful, even though the majority of the Jewish people have not entrusted themselves to Jesus as Messiah.

To put that maybe a little more simply, the early church was experiencing this influx of Gentile followers, Gentiles, disciples of Jesus, that outpaced the number of Jewish disciples.

[12 : 12] And in the mixed communities, these house churches, there were these live questions about whether God's promises were being fulfilled to God's own people. God betrayed those people.

And then at the same time, there were questions about how Gentile disciples were to regard their Jewish siblings, particularly their Jewish siblings who observed Torah, who kept fast days, who kept kosher, and how Jewish disciples were to think about what it means to be faithful if things like feast days and fast days and keeping kosher are not the measure of faithfulness.

Those are kind of the big questions that are swirling behind the book of Romans, this letter. But underneath those huge questions are also these questions about what does it just mean to be a community, a diverse community of peace in the midst of empire?

We often read this book, and I hesitate to even call it that. We really read it as a theological treatise when it's a letter. It's not actually first about thinking the right things.

It's actually about faithfulness. It's about God's faithfulness in sending Jesus, and then Jesus' faithfulness in sending, and then Jesus' faithfulness to God, and then it's about our response of faithfulness to one another.

[13 : 41] It's about the peace that faithfulness creates. See, I'm in this camp, and far too many of us have had this Romans Road view of salvation.

How many people have heard of Romans Road? Give me a little. Okay, yep. This Romans Road view of salvation, Romans Road view of the book. Some of us may have been led to faith through the Romans Road or led other people to the Romans Road, and I want to say really clearly that I'm sure God has used the Romans Road.

But it does present this vision of Romans that is far too small. Here's a basic version of this that you may have seen and it always ends with a person praying the prayer of conversion, also known as the sinner's prayer.

You might have heard some of these key verses. Romans 3, 23, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Romans 6, 23, hopefully none of this triggers y'all to read these verses.

They're out of context. They're out of context, all right? For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 5, 8, but God demonstrates his own love for us in this while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

[15 : 00] And then Romans 10, 9 and 10, if you confess with your mouth Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. And that's it. For lots of folks, that is Romans.

Totally, that's about it. And I want to say this too as I, you know, poke a little foot of the Romans road. You know, I sometimes think that in progressive circles we're not as great at taking huge truths and boiling them down like this, and maybe it is helpful to do that at times, to make sure, like, what we believe is kind of sticky in our hearts and minds.

But mostly, I think, this kind of way of doing systematic theology has impoverished our imagination and has disconnected us from what first century Christians in these house churches would have heard when they encountered the book of Romans.

There's this one scholar that compares Romans to that song that we all know. We know the tune really well. We know a few of the lyrics. It's that song that we, like, one day mistakenly chose for karaoke and it did not go well.

And for me, it's a song like Beyonce's 16 Carriages. 16 carriages driving away while I watch them ride with my dreams away.

[16 : 29] Something, something, something. 16 carriages. And you know, the rest of the song, like, you know, her mama's praying, her daddy's grinding.

16 carriages, right? That's what I know. And I think that's what Romans, forgive me, if you're a Beyonce fan, all right?

But my hunch is that Romans has been kind of like that. It's that something, something that we want to reclaim Romans from and begin to understand it as containing a gospel of profound peace.

All right, so we're going to look at some scripture and I'm going to take my cue from a framework that I think is really helpful with this book is we're going to start at the very end of it, actually. And we're, through the series, you'll see next week I'm going to go to the beginning, we're going to go back a little bit because I think to stay grounded in what was really happening in these churches and why Paul is making the argument he does, you kind of have to move back and forth between these heavy theological arguments and the problems on the ground.

So, we're going to go to Romans 16, 1 through 16. Feel free, I think it's on the screen. You can also just look at it in your Bible or on your phone. I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Synchay, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints and help her in whatever she may require from you.

[18 : 09] For she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well. Greet Prisca and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles.

Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Apionetes, Apionetes, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ. Greet Mary, who has worked very hard for you.

Greet Adronicus and Hunia, my fellow Israelites who are in prison with me. They are prominent among the apostles and they were in Christ Jesus before I was.

Okay, that's just the first few verses I read through verse 7 and the rest of the other verses kind of following that way, the beginning of chapter 16. And I want to start here because it gives this very, very quickly the flavor of the churches that Paul is writing to.

We know that he's writing from Corinth and we know that he had never been to Rome. We can also see here how communal, and we don't talk about this enough with Paul, but how communal his ministry was.

[19 : 19] His work is deeply rooted in partnership. It's deeply rooted in collaboration. And what is more, the first partner that he mentions is extremely important.

It's Phoebe, a deacon, a deacon in a church that's near Corinth. She's clearly this very well-off woman.

And she has this church in her home. She's a leader in a church in her home and many people believe that she may have been the leader. She's also somebody who's a benefactor to Paul.

She makes his ministry financially possible. Can somebody just pause and say benefactor? I know some of y'all are artists and poets and praise God, benefactor, okay?

But Phoebe is not just a deacon. She's not just a leader in her church. She's not just a benefactor. She's also the woman through whom Paul chooses to deliver this letter that we know as Romans to the five or more house churches.

[20 : 26] House churches were probably about 40-ish people, something like that. This is the person that he chooses. This is the person who would have, and this is important to understand, Paul would have written this letter, would have dictated it to someone.

That person, Tertius is the name of that person according to Romans, would have given feedback. Probably Phoebe also in the process of talking about the letter and how to deliver it, would have given him feedback.

Then they would, together, Phoebe and Paul, decide how to basically perform the letter. Remember, this is, lots of people can't read. So you've got to perform, you've got to make it come alive, so they would have talked about inflections and body language, and she would have thought about, how do I interpret this when I'm asked questions?

She would have been entrusted to ad-lib. She would have been entrusted to take the questions on what all of this means. when the first hearers of this book, of this letter, encountered Paul's words, they would have encountered them through the body of a woman.

And you can't truly understand Romans without encountering this woman. You can't understand the fullness of the gospel without women.

[21 : 47] There's a reason in this list that nearly one-third of the people that Paul greets by name are women. Like, over and over, they're women, if you look closely.

Women like Hunia, who's an apostle. Women like Prisca, who's named even before her husband is, which was not a common convention. Women like Julia, whose significance is lost to history.

We don't know who she, what she actually did. Paul mentions her, but maybe she's a stand-in for people like those mothers and grandmothers and aunties who talked to us about faith and transmitted faith to us around kitchen tables and on front porches.

There are all these women listed because women have always been a part of the faithful transmission of the gospel. And that's important to keep in mind every time you encounter this letter that can be or feel a little bit intimidating.

And then second, you can't understand the book of Romans apart from poor folks. You can't understand the early church. You can't understand the fundamentals of our faith.

[22 : 53] The list of names in Romans 16, 1 through 6, includes names that are Jewish and Greek and Latin. The majority of people on that list would have been slaves or former slaves.

While there are some people of noble birth listed by Paul, most of the churches in Rome seem to reflect the world of the Roman Empire. The world the Roman Empire had created of subsistence conditions, barely making it.

So when you look at a list like this, when you, you know, you take it home and you pray over it in your devotional time, which I know y'all all do, you can imagine this kind of major analog or modern analog of it in a city like D.C.

Think about a pastor sending an email and sending greetings to folks in the church with names like Sarah and Vivek and Keisha and Men and Julio.

Each name would reflect something about cultural background and ethnicity and first language. But from the conditions on the ground, we know that many, if not most, of the people on that list, despite the diversity, in a place like D.C., would find it difficult to flourish financially, would grapple with socioeconomic conditions.

[24 : 19] This is basically what we confront when we read and think about Romans. The conditions of those who struggle to materially thrive have to encircle and influence our understanding of the gospel through and through.

And then finally, we can't understand Romans without considering the ones that Paul calls the weak and the strong. The weak and the strong. You're going to hear about this a lot in the series.

Perhaps better translated as the unempowered and the powerful. You can't understand the gospel unless you understand what it is to be constantly, the call to be constantly deconstructing our categories of weak and strong.

I'm going to say a little bit more about that specifically next week, but I have to say it in the introduction because it's so core. So I'm going to read a bit of scripture from Romans 14 just to give you a flavor of this and to help ground us in this as we go forward.

So this is Romans 14, 1 through 13. Welcome those who are weak in the faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything while the weak eat only vegetables.

[25 : 38] Those who eat must not despise those who abstain and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgment on slaves of another?

It is before their own Lord that they stand or fall and they will be upheld for the Lord is able to make them stand. Some judge one day to be better than another while others judge all days to be alike.

Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. I'll stop there, but if you keep reading 14 and 15, you'll see this persistent focus on the weak and the strong.

Paul considers the strong to have the greater responsibility and the strong would have been mostly Gentile disciples of Jesus who did not keep kosher, who did not observe Jewish holidays.

They would have been people who struggled with disdain of their Jewish siblings. They would have been seen themselves as practicing freedom and they would have been the people who had the most privilege in Roman society.

[26 : 47] And then Paul calls this other group the weak. Those people would have been mostly Torah-observant Jews, disciples of Jesus.

They would see the freedom that the weak, that the strong practice as out of bounds. They would have been despised in Roman society. They would not have had much privilege.

And Paul tells each group to do more than coexist with each other. Paul counsels them to more than tolerance.

He tells them to accept one another, to upbuild one another, to please others above themselves just as Christ pleased God. And he asks them to do what is still sometimes difficult for us, us as a multi-theological community and us as a community of varying ethical practice.

I counsel y'all. I know about this varying ethical practice, all right? They will counsel to live together in peace, to upbuild one another.

[28 : 01] Here's how Scott McKnight says this to sum up the situation in Romans. Our issue is their issue. The issue is the inability of the privileged and powerful to embody the gospel's inclusive demand and include the disprivileged and the disempowered.

The mirror of this issue is the disempowered claiming their own kind of privilege and power. The reality is privilege and power used to create and enforce various forms of injustice, including racism.

The letter deconstructs privilege and power and replaces them with peace. you cannot understand Romans without understanding this dynamic happening in this community.

As we move toward communion, I want to encourage you to take some time because I just barely skimmed that section. So I want to encourage you to this week take some time to just read Romans 14 and 15 pretty short, but it'll help you think about your own place in this idea of the weak and the strong in a community.

Those who practice greater freedom, those who don't feel as comfortable practicing such freedom, those who have more privilege in society, those who have less. And I encourage you to sit with it and encourage your, or consider your call.

[29 : 25] And then I also want you to keep in mind the good news that is deeply present in Romans and in these ending chapters. While so often we hope for these comprehensive theological arguments, theological arguments that are often abstract and dropped from heaven to help us understand the gospel, what we get in Romans is the God who reveals herself in the midst of the details of our lives.

The details of things like the strong and the weak, the details of our relationships, the push and pull and the challenge and the comfort. The book of Romans testifies that our theology must always be interpreted through the lens of our calling to be the family of God.

And that family must always ground itself in God's movement toward peace and the flourishing of all. Amen. Amen.

And I want to bear to be as a moment