

December 8, 2019
Second Sunday of Advent

First Presbyterian Church
21 Church Street
Pittsford, NY 14534
www.pittsfordpres.org
(585) 586-5688

Rev. Jim Widboom

Abounding in Hope

Romans 15:4-13

If you look at this passage you see one word repeated six times. Too much repetition of a word, an idea, or an event may mean we are becoming obsessive. Counting itself may be a mild symptom of an obsessive personality. Some folks keep their obsessions under control, but then triggered by one word or thought, like a tape recording the entire event is retold verbatim, to make the same point again. Obsessive thinking in marriages can be a problem you just sometimes put up with.

What is the word, our good NT friend the Apostle Paul uses six times in this passage? Shall I let you look it up? This was his obsession, it can be argued that from the very beginning in his earliest letters is never loosened or lessened or lost in his entire corpus of NT documents. Close to the conclusion of his ministry, he goes all out, six times in as many verses.

Not everyone likes the writings of the Apostle Paul. He is prickly and sometimes full of himself. But the question we must ask is the apostle's obsession with this subject a reason to not pay attention to it. Or are we happy that he did not let it go, that is, this view of the grace of Christ and to whom it applied.

His obsession of course is that the Gentiles are included. Included, embraced, and welcomed into this expansive, gracious, and generous experience of the steadfast love of 'the God of Israel,' in the ministry of Jesus Christ. The faith of Israel applies also to Gentiles, Paul argues.

The letter to the Galatians is Paul's telling of his own meeting with Jesus Christ, and how he changed from a persecutor of the followers of Jesus to become their best advocate. He is called on the road to Damascus by Jesus to be an apostle to the Gentiles. What irony of the Lord that in meeting Jesus, Paul does a 180, and becomes the chief witness to all those he went after ruthlessly. He consults Peter and James in Jerusalem, the pillars of the church and asks 'am I running in vain,' with the revelation of Jesus to me that this good news is for Gentiles also. Peter and James say 'no, go ahead.'

Paul's calling to Gentiles leads to the first conflict in the church, and the church's first council meeting to answer this question, "are Gentiles allowed into the community of Jesus without becoming Jews first" (Acts of the Apostles, chapter 15). The apostles decide, 'yes, they are welcome also, and need not keep the law of Moses or be circumcised in order to be part of the community of Jesus Christ.' This first church council decides Peter will be the apostle to Jews, and Paul, the apostle to Gentiles.

The obsession of Paul grows. In the letter to the Ephesians, he argues that in Christ, Jew and Greek are now one humanity, that cross of Christ has brought peace between the two. He says it is mystery that has been God's intention from the beginning.

And in Romans, his most persuasive letter, he outlines a new way of understanding the forgiveness and righteousness of God in Jesus Christ which includes Jew and Gentile. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, Jew and Gentile. And the grace of Christ is offered equally to both.

And now at the end of the letter to Romans he writes to the church that he must first go back to Jerusalem to bring an offering he has received from the Greek gentile congregations for the poor saints of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem. The offering was a sign of peace and good will, that Greek believers were brothers and sisters with Jews in Christ.

Our passage for today 'takes the cake' whether God intended Gentiles to be part of Christ's community. Paul picks up every OT text he can find to make his case.

Jews who did not receive the gospel, saw Paul's witness as a dangerous watering down of the faith of Israel, and they, with similar tenacity and fortitude bring the case against Paul all the way to Rome for the emperor to decide.

Now, why does the apostle end this passage of several OT verses of Gentiles' place in the prophecy of Israel with this verse about hope, Romans 15:13, '*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit?*' Why end with hope when it seems Paul is so perfectly convinced. What happened?

By the end of the first century, what the apostle had believed and hoped for had not happened. Less and less was the community of Jesus Christ part of Judaism, but more and more separate and finally in the public eye a new faith with even traces of anti-Semitism beginning to show itself into the 2nd and 3rd century.

I believe this hope of the apostle should be renewed annually at least, during Advent and at the birth of Christ at Christmas, that God's intention and work in Christ has made us one new humanity, that we may have hope and joy in believing this, so that we may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

A couple stories. First, Jan and I moved to Brighton in 1988. I had accepted a call to serve a congregation on South Clinton Avenue and Field Street in the city. One Advent soon after we arrived, a good friend invited us to a performance of "Amahl and Night Visitors" at an Episcopal Church on East Avenue. It was a dark and cold night, and dark also in the church as we listened. I remember the shock I felt when seeing the magi, in full dress, coming down the center aisle of the church, looking so foreign, with headdress I had never seen, singing with such dignity and strength. They were foreigners from far away coming to bring gifts to Israel's new king. That was the beginning of this Gentile thing that the apostle became obsessed with, that the glory of God, providence of God, the intention of God included everyone. May God renew us with joy and peace in believing, so that hope overflows in us, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Another story. It's not a small thing that Jews and Gentiles are one in Christ. And neither is it small that the apostle says, slave and free are one in Christ, and that male and female are one in Christ. Two millennia, we are still working this out. The story is this. At the church I served last year, the church secretary became a good friend. As time passed, as I learned more

about the congregation, I would come to her and tell something I thought should be addressed and changed. Most were very small. The first was getting the hallway painted and removing banners from the 1990s. Every time I brought something to Mary, the secretary, that needed attention she would say, 'good luck with that, Jim.' Her words became a challenge to me. Some small things we managed.

Unlike getting a hallway painted and taking down older banners, Paul's witness is not small, but huge—that in Christ, Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female are one in Christ. Notice the grammar. It isn't 'will be one in Christ,' but 'are one in Christ.' It has happened.

And the last story is this. I worked for 17 years with two different Rabbis as a protestant chaplain at the Rochester Psychiatric Center. The first was Rabbi Laurence Skopitz, rabbi at Temple Beth David on St Paul Blvd, and Jewish chaplain at RPC. We were stuffed into a very small office, the two of us almost working on top of each other. The rabbi, now and then, would remind me to stay away from his part of the office, or he threatened to begin building settlements in my space. We became very, very close friends. And in spite of our religious differences we found ourselves 'cut out of the same cloth.' I treasured that friendship. Laurie died now 12 years ago. He still is an inspiration to me. I hold to the apostle's faith that Gentiles are included, 'grafted onto the trunk of the tree which is Israel' and are one in Christ. I am not sure how this is supposed to look today, it remains a mystery to me.

So may our faith this season deepen and find new strength so that we can abound with hope that in Christ something new and fresh has happened in the world, in the cosmos, as John's gospel says, ...that the witness of the apostle Paul in Romans is still valid for Christian believers, and this prayer that for us to abound in hope, with joy and peace in believing, that Christ was born for all, still has efficacy for us. Let us not lose the apostle's obsession in our believing.