

JESUS IS LORD pt 4.

This is fourth sermon in a Lenten series of five sermons on Paul's letter to the Romans. And it has been a very enlightening and revelatory journey for me as I have dug deeply into the apostle Paul's view of sin, salvation, and our relationship with God and other people. I pray that this sermon series has been transformative for you too.

If you have not been here for this sermon series, I pray that you go home and read Romans a chapter at a time, and try to digest slowly what he has to say about the human condition and our relationship with God.

For eleven chapters, Paul defines the word "sin" as living separate and apart from God. Sin came into the world because humanity was not satisfied with being a creature

that was made by the Creator of the universe. If humans were going to live in relationship with an invisible and intangible God, we demand from God that we become equal partners in the Divine nature, masters of our own universe, rulers of our own world, with a nod towards our Creator every now and then.

The story of Adam and Eve is a story of humanity being discontent with being a creature of God and our grasping at the thought of being equal with God. At the end of that story, humanity is separated from God, thrown out of Eden, and given the freedom to live on our own terms with all of the problems and consequences of living a life separate from God. From that point on, humans have lived apart from God, what Paul calls living in sin, and this reality has become

more and more twisted, abstract, disjointed, and just plain wrong.

The apostle Paul writes in Romans that we were created by God to live in relationship with our Creator, but when we began to live in the reality of sin and apart from God, we still have that God-shaped hole in our being that needs to be filled with something like God. So in our twisted reality, instead of seeking out and returning to the One and only God, we fashion our own gods and try to force them into the God-shaped hole within us.

What is God's response to all of this? Freedom...freedom to choose the gods we have made, freedom to live in this twisted reality. Yet, the Bible records that every now and then God tries to salvage this relationship with humanity

from within our sinful reality. God tries the act of covenant love where two unequal parties try to hash out a relationship based on mutual promises of loyalty and fidelity. The parties are unequal because God is still Creator and we are still creatures, that will never change, yet the grace of God continues to try to work out a good relationship once again within our twisted reality of sin.

God sets a covenant rainbow in the clouds after starting the world over with Noah and his family. Yet not long after, the covenant is broken by Noah's sons. God calls Abram into covenant, which works for a while, yet even that covenant is twisted by sin into a fight for wealth and land.

So after many generations, God takes the ancestors of Abraham's covenant people and leads them out of slavery

from Egypt and gives them a new covenant and the Law to guide them in their relationship with God. But the Law and the Covenant became twisted by human sin as we made the Law of God into an idol to be protected, worshiped, and adored in the place of our Creator.

Humans then decide that they since the King of the Universe is invisible and untouchable, they wanted a king that they could see and asked God to set that up. God said that it was a very bad idea, but by grace tried to make the best of what God had to work with, so God anointed Saul and that didn't work out, so God anointed a shepherd boy named David. That covenant worked out better than expected but still even David grasped for equality with God as he played with life and death by ordering the death of Uriah just to

have his wife Bath-Sheba. From David on, the covenant was broken repeatedly, twisted by sin to serve the gods we made for ourselves like power, wealth, fame, and glory. Every king of Israel was corrupted and twisted by sin until Israel fought a civil war, tore themselves in two, and eventually destroyed by the neighboring countries. During this time, God tried many times to bring us back into relationship as Creator and beloved creature as God raised up prophets to speak. But the Bible says that the prophets were killed every time the truth of God's kingdom was spoken.

Then in the fullness of time, Jesus was born to Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus was a human being who was different. Jesus lived his life outside the twisted reality

of human sin and in perfect relationship with God. Jesus demonstrated, called, and invited others to live in a different reality, the true reality, which he called the Kingdom of God. With Jesus, with his life, death, and resurrection, he gave us a choice, a choice we never had before, a choice to be free of this reality corrupted by sin and idolatry, and live in the reality of God.

This Kingdom of God reality is so different. God is Creator and we are creatures, Jesus said that God is Father and we are beloved sons and daughters, God is King and we are his loyal subjects, God is the boss and we are God's happy employees. The benefits of this reality of God is that there is no more sin, we live as we were created to live, with the God-shaped hole in our life filled with the only One who fits

it perfectly. Therefore, we can love authentically rather than selfishly. We can enjoy one another's company rather than wondering if there is some hidden agenda. We can live a joyful life that is filled with peace, rather than a life filled with suspicion and trying "to get ours" before others take what we've got. Finally, this life in the Kingdom of God will not end; the resurrection of Jesus promises us life everlasting, free from the consequences of sin, which is death. This is the narrative that the whole Bible and Paul lays out in the first eight chapters of Romans. The ninth through eleventh chapters of Romans is Paul's argument that God by grace is still trying to invite and call the Jews into the Kingdom of God, and perhaps there is still hope for them in the end, because God never forgot the covenant that God made with them through Abraham.

The twelfth chapter of Romans has to do with the nature of the Christian church, those living in the Kingdom of God here on earth, and rhetorically asks what does this new reality look like in a human community? What core values mark who is a Christian and who is not?

Let me answer that question with an 18th century answer from John Wesley: "In response to a question about what it means to be a Methodist, John Wesley wrote a pamphlet that has become a classic, called "The Character of a Methodist: "The distinguishing marks of a Methodist are not his opinions of any sort, his accepting of this scheme of religion, his embracing any particular set of notions, or mouthing the judgments of one man or another. All these are quite wide of the point. As to all opinions that do not

strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think. The rhetorical question is: "What, then, is a Methodist?" "A Methodist is a person who has the love of God in his heart. Inscribed indelibly on the Methodist's heart is the truth that "he who loves God, loves his brother also." His heart is full of love for everyone. This love does not stop with the person's intimate acquaintances, but extends to all of mankind. Even those who hate Methodists receive love in return. Then one of Wesley's most familiar quotations: "And so I beg you, let all true Christians remain united. Is your heart right as my heart is with yours? I ask no further questions; give me your hand. Do you love God? This is enough. I give you the right hand of fellowship."

It is not that theology, beliefs and social issues don't matter for Christians and especially those called Methodists. In the pamphlet, Wesley addresses several key issues of theology, faith and practice. But the bottom line is love.

Paul calls the Romans to exactly that pattern of living: Let love be genuine. Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. The ultimate test for the character of the Methodist is of outreaching love." (Yet Alive....Are We? by John E. Harnish)

And so that is the mark of a Christian and the core value that is the heart of our new reality in Christ; a person who lives in the Kingdom of God are marked by God's agape, authentic, and transforming love. From the root of God's

love poured into us is the fruit of loving God, loving others, and authentically loving ourselves. You read in the book of Acts through Revelation that the Christian church is marked by love, they share their resources together, they bear one another's burdens of persecution and society's hatred of this new reality, they care for the poor and the sick instead of treating them as disposable people, and they give their lives for Christ instead of going back to the twisted reality of sin and death.

With this exposition of the text in Romans over the past four weeks, you can probably guess as to what I'm going to say next. If Christ's agape, authentic, and transforming love is the mark of a Christian, then that is what should define our church as a church. That should be our core value, our purpose, and our mission...to love as Christ loved us.

Instead, the institution of the church talks about recruiting people for the sake of the institution, to get more people in the seats, to get more donations so the programs can run, to get more and more, bigger and bigger, a game of King of the Hill with that other denomination or megachurch which seems to "get all the people". All of this institutional and sinful reality is cloaked in the words, "Making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." I believe that if we walk the path of the institution, we will lose our way as they have in the twisted reality of sin.

We must love as Christ loved us. The mark of a Christian, the mark of a Methodist is loving God, loving neighbor, and loving ourselves in self-sacrificing, authentic, and transforming ways. If we want to talk about more people in our church, then we must talk about it with this

core value of love on our lips and in our heart. For example, we should not keep this good news of God's kingdom and the community of faith and authentic love to ourselves, God's love teaches us to sacrifice our circle of friends in order to go and invite others into this new reality and this relationship with God.

This is our only agenda, this is our only message, this is our only reason to invite others to this church: So that the people we love and invite may be saved from the twisted reality of sin through the love of Jesus Christ demonstrated in his atoning sacrifice on the cross, and to tangibly experience the love of God through this community of faith. Let it be so, O Lord, in us. Amen.