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The next few Sundays we will be exploring passages from Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul was a Jewish man from a Greek province, who never met Jesus while he was alive, but who was visited by the Risen Jesus after His resurrection. Christ charged Paul to spread Christ's message to all people, Jews and non-Jews alike... and that's exactly what Paul did. He wrote more of the books of the New Testament than anyone else, and he set up churches throughout the ancient world. He traveled from place to place, meeting all kinds of people, and sharing with them the Good News of Christ Jesus, alongside the Disciples who had followed Jesus when He was alive.

Paul didn't set up the church in *Rome*, however. It was the *capital* of the Roman empire, and a tough nut to crack... yet still it became home to one of the most inspirational groups of early Christians that world had yet seen. And Paul wanted to visit. So he wrote a letter, which we today call the book of Romans. A letter that *complimented* the church in Rome, introduced *himself*, and offered His wisdom gathered from decades of faith in Christ.

In our reading today from Romans, Paul is talking about faith and righteousness. Now normally when we talk about righteousness, we're talking about the righteousness of *people*. Uprightness—living a moral or ethical life.

But “God's righteousness?” Because that's what Paul talks about in this letter... His words: “the righteousness of God is revealed.”

How does one exactly go about judging *God* as righteous or not? “Righteous” is an adjective that applies to *people* on a scale, and in the context of a life of faith you measure *your* righteousness against God, right? It's like standing against the wall in the doctor's office and being measured for how *tall* you are. When it comes to righteousness, *God* is the wall you *measure* by, not the *patient* being *measured*.

So, saying that God is *righteous*... isn't really saying anything at all. It's like saying that *water* is *wet*.

I mean I guess it's true? But *water* is what makes stuff *wet*, so calling *it* wet doesn't really... my head hurts now.

But if we dig into the grammar of what Paul wrote in his letter, we can see that the English language wasn't really built with the kind of nuance that Biblical Greek had, and that there's more *layers* to what he's saying. I won't bore you with a grammar lesson, but when Paul speaks of "God's righteousness," he's speaking about something God *does*, not necessarily about something God *is*. That God *does* righteousness, and in so doing passes it on to *us*.

It's through *faith*, Paul goes on to say, that we recognize God's righteous work, and it's through *living* that faith that we become righteous *ourselves*. Or at least, more righteous than we started.

But how does that happen? How does faith in God make us righteous?

How is it that, as Paul tells us, the gospel "is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith?"

What *is* this power of God, and how *does* it deliver us and preserve us?

Because *that's* what the *Greek* word salvation *comes from means*. So-tay-ree'-ah: deliverance and preservation.

What is this thing God *does*, and what is it that makes this *power* God *has* "righteousness" ...and what does it all mean for *us*? You and me?

Well let's keep going in our Scripture reading today. Paul continues in the first chapter of Romans, which was too long for us to read the *whole* thing this morning, saying that in his experience, without God, we... slide into depravity.

In his travels through the Greek world, Paul saw people who did not know God all the time. And as he tells us in Romans 1, without the influence of God he saw people falling into bad habits, and self-destructive ways of life. He saw people worshiping material things, putting everything they had into things that had no more substance than a silver coin. He saw people killing each other to gain whatever little advantage in life they could snatch up. He saw children rebelling against parents. He saw rich Greek men taking young boys as sex slaves. He saw thoughtless acts of violence, both through word and deed, at every turn.

All of this is what he's seen among the people he's met who do not have God in their lives, and he fears it's a life we all may slide into if we don't have faith.

It seems like a pretty bleak outlook on the nature of humanity. Cynical, even. Especially in the ancient world Paul walked, where Christianity and even the

Judaism Paul came from were barely a blip on the radar of all human civilization. Some might say it was hopeless.

But Paul reminds us of the gospels: the story of Jesus on this Earth.

The circumstances of His birth, the actions of His life, the choices He made, the words of His teachings... His death and resurrection... and his charges to all who follow him... all that and more is contained in the gospels.

And Paul tells us that *through* the gospels—the Good News of Jesus Christ—the power of God *can* reach us. *Does* reach us.

A life of faith is about opening yourself to allow the power of God to transform you. Paul believes that the gospels—maybe the most direct way our *minds* can encounter the presence of Christ—the gospels are the place where that power resides. That's where God put it, and that's where we can find it.

And whenever we open ourselves to the presence of Christ—whether it's through taking Communion, or through prayer, or through engaging with the gospels—God transforms us.

But transforms us from what *into* what? What *were* we, and what is God making us *into*?

I'm reminded of the transformation an *egg* goes through to become an omelet. You've got this refrigerated, hard-shelled *thing* that came from the gross end of a chicken, filled with runny, raw goop that will give you salmonella if you eat it.

But once you crack that hard shell, run a fork through that goop for a while to break it up, and apply heat... you end up with something light and fluffy and delicious that doesn't look anything *like* what you started with.

When I think about what my faith is doing in me, where it's going... I think about where I've been.

I think about what I've done, and what kind of person I have been.

And I remember Paul's words in our reading today: "Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things."

If anything, the messed-uppedness of others should help us to recognize all the ways and all the times that *we've* messed up. *And* the road ahead of us we still have to *go* before we could *ever* put *our* righteousness up against the righteousness of God.

And then I realize what the righteousness of God *was* all along! What *happens* when we open ourselves to God in faith.

What it *is* that God *does* that *is* so righteous. What it *is* we *hear* in page after page of the Gospels.

I think about covetousness—the times I've looked at all the good things someone has and thought, “*They* don't deserve that! If *anyone* deserves it, *I* do. Who are *they* to have everything work out for them, when I can't catch a *break*.” All that malice in my heart that *pretends* it's righteous indignation? FORGIVEN.

I think about deceit—the times I've lied or bent the truth or manipulated someone to get the outcome I desire? FORGIVEN.

I think about all the times I've rebelled against people who really did know better than me. Parents, bosses, friends, girlfriends. FORGIVEN.

I think about the times I've raised my voice in anger, let the feelings bubbling up inside off the leash and *lash* out with words that harm. FORGIVEN.

And I think about the times when my... inconveniences... have eclipsed the needs of others.

I'm the faithless. *I'm* the heartless. I'm forgiven.

God sees how messed up we are, and how bad we can be, and forgives us anyway!

Paul says it himself: “Do you *despise* the riches of God's *kindness* and *forbearance* and *patience*? Do you not *realize* that God's *kindness* is meant to lead you to repentance?”

There it is! To repent. To turn around in your way and be *transformed*.

In the Gospels, the story of Jesus, we *see* that Christ allows us to be transformed, *instead* of condemning us.

The words of Christ in the Gospel of John: “I came not to judge the world, but to *save* the world.”

I stand before you now to tell you that the keys to your transformation, the *power* of God to transform our runny yolks into light and fluffy omelets can be found right here, in the carpenter born in Bethlehem that we see revealed to us in the pages of the gospels. In the Bibles right there in your *pews*, or on your bookshelves at home, or in the local bookstore, or on your smartphone or backed up in the digital cloud.

If we can crack open our shell and let the power of *that* Christ work through what we find inside, we will find true proof of the righteousness of God. We will find that we are *forgiven* by God... and being *forgiven* by God opens up *everything*. The *power* of being forgiven begins to change us into people who might actually deserve it!

[breathe]

What you have done... that thing that keeps you up at night. That thing that you can't stop thinking about, or that visits you when you least expect it.

FORGIVEN.

That *feeling* that you have drags you down, that makes you react in ways a decent person shouldn't, and that floats through your personality like salmonella in a raw egg... FORGIVEN.

That relationship you broke. FORGIVEN.

That property you took. FORGIVEN.

That time you didn't do enough when you *know* you *should* have.

FORGIVEN.

Believe that. KNOW that. Be *delivered* by it. Have *faith* in it.

And let the power of God *transform* you. Amen.