



## **Three Sermons on Texts from Romans**

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These sermons were preached at a convocation of alumni of Luther-Northwestern Seminaries in January of 1980, and are here reproduced as delivered. Rather than taking them as model or example of the preacher's art, the reader had best regard them simply as one person's struggle with two great texts from Paul's Letter to the Romans, one from the beginning, the other from the end of the epistle.

The fact that the period in which these sermons were prepared included exegetical study on the epistle is, I think, merely coincidental. To quote one scholar of an earlier generation, "I incline to get from Paul my theology, in the sense in which I have one—and it is from Paul that I get this sense." All my teaching years, I have heard from colleagues and students that Paul is not the only biblical author, and his theology not the only theology in the New Testament. Now, there are sufficient historical grounds for using Paul's "perspectives" by which to view the remainder of the New Testament witness. In contrast to the final form assumed by the synoptic Gospels, for example, the letters of Paul are the most proximate to the event of Jesus' death and raising. But such "scientific" considerations are not the reason for my preoccupation with that "least of the apostles." Nor is the reason that Paul represents the greatest challenge by far to the intelligence of the interpreter, though he is indeed a vast, towering thing, each of his "faces" written with two thousand years of failure at attempts to scale him!

Heritage, kept alive through training in the home, reinforced by education in the great readers of Paul with whom I have fallen in love again and again; Luther above all, to whom my father introduced me (together with Aesop!) when I first began to read; the experiences of the years—these things, rather, have made that mountain of a man my own, his peaks never reached, but for all that still my mountain, the interpreter of my faith and my existence. Far more—Paul is preacher of the Christ to me. For if it is true, as I believe it is, that "Christology stands at the centre of Christian tradition," that "everything else is a prelude and an epilogue, footnotes and glosses," then it is Christ I must have, not only a Christ who calls me to follow him—so that some distance between us might still be preserved—but who has taken me up into his own life and history. There's the

crux of the matter. It is so because, for reasons I do not altogether understand, I can neither believe nor follow nor love Jesus Christ, but I have heard—and the news has struck whatever chord there be in my crabbed, little soul—that he has first loved me and will never let me go. And I have heard it from Paul.

On the plain, it is relatively easy to turn the eye inward without stumbling, relatively easy

to observe one's own faith, hope and love, but on the mountain, dear heaven what a sight—Jesus Christ, “who has made me his own,” to serve him!

#### NOT ASHAMED (Romans 1:16)

Paul has taken to his pulpit again. And you need no degree in philology to note the sudden change in mood or style. The amenities with which the letter begins, that solemn procession of courtesies, loaded to collapsing with a mountain of traditional stuff—“Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord,” and on and on in one of those syntactical curiosities which belonged to ancient rhetoric, Apollos' specialty, but which Paul could never sustain for long because he had other fish to fry—the amenities are over and done with, and Paul is preaching again: “I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God....”

There's no whining martyr behind these words; no readiness to put up with something shameful in the teeth of all common sense, since that way lies sainthood; no thought of having struck a bad bargain with Jesus, and thus of having to hug him all the tighter. The words are a confession, a boast, and by a man who trumpeted it on every point of the compass from the Mediterranean to the Adriatic, “from Jerusalem to Illyricum” who kept his companions huffing and puffing to keep up till dragged to prison at Caesarea by the sea, and then to Rome. “I magnify my ministry,” he said. So much for Paul.

And we? Of course, there's more than one reason for wearing a clerical collar at the hospital, getting attached to the staff of some clinic, having “doctor” printed ahead of one's name on the letterhead, substituting counseling sessions for ringing doorbells like some demented sectarian, but it helps reduce the onus! A clergyman of my father's vintage once built a cabin by the lake and into his cement walk inscribed the legend, “Reverend So-and-So, Master of Arts.” It helped reduce the onus. Someone has always been playing at So-and-So, M.A., but now we are a fellowship with a structure to rival that of any Wall Street bank; with titled personnel to equal that of any royal house; with investments in Pizza Hut, and first-class flights to everywhere, and every other blessed one of us with a degree. “Well,” you say, “a church needs system; not even the first century community was run by whooping charismatics; ‘let everything be done decently and in order’—it was the apostle himself said that!” But when a few seers had predicted we might have a toe-hold on the future, who decreed we couldn't learn from history, but had to repeat what had already occurred to a thousand and one communities here, so that we finally emerged just one more religious thing-a-mabob? And the result of achieving distinction as compensation for our shame is

that we have come trendily bringing up the rear. Setting out to be mod, we have ended like those silly parsons from the roaring twenties, reading the marriage service in a diving bell, on the wing of a monoplane, or from a flagpole. I never cared for that hymn, “Jesus, and shall it ever be, A mortal man ashamed of Thee?” I doubt the reason is that it wounded my aesthetic taste. “One O'Clock Jump” or “As Time Goes By” never did—nor does the new hymnal. (By the way, who

assigned Bach two whole hymns, and Carl Schalk only thirty-five?) No, that song raised a kind of Ebenezer to my shame.

What has happened, what taken place to put us at such distance from this text; what has intervened to embarrass us, and prompted us to compensate to the point where we're no match for good, honest, clear-eyed unbelievers? It's the identification of gospel with the power of God has done us in. Paul was convinced that if whatever holds this universe together and gives it coherence, purpose, and which most of us call God, if whatever or whoever exists behind or within everything that is, intends us something good, then the intention is not only expressed or advertised in, but takes it shape, its muscle and bone from the story of a crucified Galilean.

How can this be? The question is not out of order here. We are as impressed by the lack of evidence for the identification of God's power with the message of the life and fate of Jesus of Nazareth as any generation of the clergy has ever been. Indeed, the identification of purpose in the universe with the story of a crucified Jew as sheer, naked assumption, prejudice, has struck us full in the face! It may be that our inability to draw the equation and hence our shame is only the other side of our loss of ideals, so that now we have become sceptics, demanding a mountain of evidence for every tiny ounce of truth. It may be that we needed a whole world hospitable to our faith, and once it turned hostile, we began to doubt and be ashamed. At any rate, what the most ruthless of historical critics could never accomplish, "time, tide and the affairs of men" have done—left us a world in which, though God may not yet be ruled out as possibility, as hypothesis, still the notion of His appearing in a Man of Sorrows, an event everlastingly made contemporary in preaching and faith, has become one veritable waif or orphan of an idea. And, some of us are becoming immoral, hoping, perhaps, to be found out and expelled from a situation marked by inner doubt, inner torment, and public, pulpit confidence.

So then, that word "power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith" really can be read to mean that faith creates its object, makes it up out of whole cloth? Indeed it can! And Paul was as much a realist, as much impressed by the probabilities as ever you or I. At the end of his miserable journey from Caesarea to Rome, Christians came to meet him on the Appian Way, and Luke writes that "on seeing them Paul thanked God and took courage." But when there was no friendly face in the crowd, when every guarantee to his apostleship and preaching was lacking, and to the moment his life was drained from him outside the walls of the Eternal City, he knew enough to hang between heaven and hell, sick and trembling over the possibility of having hoped in Christ "only for this life," as he put it. And he knew also it was inevitable he should hang there, since no disciple is above his Master. For what establishes existence "by faith" is the cross of Jesus in which grace, forgiveness, is a judicial act of execution; a share in the life of God is veiled in a Father's forsaking His Son; reconciliation, life for my

neighbor, is buried in a cruel and inhuman passion; and the future, life with God, the face of Christ and every other saint I've ever known or loved between these two hands, is concealed in an ancient, two thousand year old deed.

But why "by faith," why all this life by things hoped for and never seen; why not something more than an option or assumption, however momentous or "forced," as William James used to say; why not some little thing to inch the equation of gospel and power of God out of probability toward certainty; some little thing to rescue us from the habitual taunt that we are

in love with failure! For openers, why not at least a church in which pastors need not crush their pride and go begging to committees for another call?!

“By faith” because we are human; “by faith” because we have the freedom to undo the good; “by faith” because we have undone a whole world of good and created another in which truth is forever in the dock and Christ forever on the gallows. “By faith” because it is we who have sentenced God to this hiddenness! And He suffered it, without demanding justice; He went into the darkness and the long night we made for Him, but once more He appeared, this time with a new name—“Son of God in power!” What a magnificent turn of events—it’s as though He had reckoned on our evil, given it a home in heart and mind all the while, even before the world began. And all for love of us. Therefore, for that reason, on that account, because of that, no need to be ashamed! No need at all!

#### THE TWO WAYS (Romans 1:16-17)

To whom does the gospel belong? For whom does it have power, and what happens in it? Here’s where the spirits divide. And as long as I can remember, they have always divided there.

Is the gospel yours? Does it belong to you? If you answer, “yes,” then you’ll behave much differently toward it than if you suppose it belongs to someone else. When your car needs repair, you don’t take a plebiscite. You talk it over with the next of kin, proceed to the garage and then wait to pay the robber. Is that how it is with the gospel? Is it something in your possession, of which you may dispose—within certain limits, of course—so that at any given moment you may proceed to its repair or rehabilitation, and without ever taking a vote? And even if you took a vote, gathered a hundred or a thousand others to make some disposition regarding it, wouldn’t the underlying assumption be that somehow the gospel belonged to you, not you to it?

Or is the gospel God’s? Does it belong to Him, so that no one with or without a turned-around collar could ever assume it was his to define, hers to interpret, to preach or teach—that its definition and whatever else belongs to it can never be left to him or her, to us? “Well,” you say, “stated in such fashion, of course the gospel belongs to God.” But it’s one thing to say so and another to behave as if it were. Many concede the gospel existed before the church ever drew breath, but then they adapt it, accommodate it, adjust it, attune it to some real or imagined need. If it’s your house, you can buy a can of Sherwin Williams or you can let the paint peel. But to whom does the gospel belong? Over that question, there’s deep division.

For whom does the gospel have power? When the membership rolls are plumb full to bursting, when it’s time to knock out a wall, substitute an organ

with five ranks for the old wheeze-box, when health results in answer to prayer, when I speak in the tongues of men and angels—is it then the gospel has power? Or, when the summer soldiering is done, the Galilean springtime past and gone, when there’s snow and bloody feet at Valley Forge, when there’s weakness and a cross, nothing but the assurance of things hoped for, that desperate clinging to the word that God for Jesus’ sake forgives me all my sins and forges me to His likeness, is it then, not just then too or then in addition, but *supremely* then, then above all, that the gospel has power to salvation? On this question too, there’s deep division.

And, what happens in the gospel? Everything which ought to happen? Or does it require a supplement? Does the gospel bring remission but need some second thing to hammer existence

into its God-intended shape? Can the gospel really exist like a jewel without a setting? Does it create for itself its own “spring of action sure,” or must that spring come from somewhere outside itself? Is it enough to live and die by the gospel? Or, is all God’s righteousness, that by which He reclaims what once was His—the earth, the stars, the sun and moon and you and me into the bargain—is it all and none of it left over lodged in that news of Jesus’ death and rising? Is the gospel not merely gift but power as well? In the moment I am struck to my knees with the blow of that incomparable love, have I in that moment gained a new Master, become a slave to that love, so that I do the good, not because I must, but because to do anything else is to deny my true self, what I have become? What happens in the gospel? There’s deep division over the question.

But with all the division, there’s no doubt as to where majority opinion lies. And that opinion seems to hang together with our experience. Experience dictates that “possession is nine-tenths of the law.” In some ancient time or far-away place “the wondrous gift was giv’n,” but it’s been left with us now, its exposition and consequent success or failure dependent on human ingenuity or know-how. Experience reads that “nothing succeeds like success.” The power of the gospel is determined by results concretely established. So the resurrection of Jesus is not an event which signals His cross as the hinge of human history; it is rather its cancellation. And, experience teaches that “there oughta be a law,” not merely for bullies and fascists, but for Christians as well. Almost every event in our history is calculated to lean us in the direction of construing the gospel as our own, of assigning its power to whom it can be proved, of denying it can or even should stand on its own. Almost every event in our history runs athwart the notion that anything at all can be given, not earned, that anything not battering the senses can be true, least of all that weakness, cross and death can be an arena for grace, or that it is ever possible to live only with a “yes,” not also with a “no.” It is problematic whether or not a church or fellowship which preaches such strange things, and in such strange and awful contradiction to an entire national experience can long endure.

But what saith the apostle? If the gospel is not God’s, however well or poorly we may state the case—“no hands but ours, no feet but ours” and all that sort of thing—if it is not His, then, lacking any belief in human talent and accomplishment, my assurance has gone clean out the window! For I need what is God’s; I need a place to stand which He has made, a Word which is His—to be sure, refracted through your poor, stammering lips, but something on which He

has staked His life and Godhead, for good and all. You and I draw distinctions. If the gospel were ours, we should reserve it for one smart fellow or another, for the rich or poor, the moral giant or the pigmy, for the greater or less gifted. But God “has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.” Hurrah for God!

And if the gospel has power only for those to whom it can be proved, then what of those who can point to nothing within or without to attest to its truth? Is it on that account disqualified? Hundreds, thousands would answer “yes” to that question; whole churches are built on that assumption. But Paul says it is to faith and faith alone—not to faith against sight, nor to faith against my understanding; faith is not eyeless nor without intelligence—but to faith before ever there’s a seeing or an understanding there is power to salvation. And if I must go through life fretting over God’s refusal to burst the clouds at last and show Himself, so that there can be no

shadow of doubt that He exists, no matter—the power is present to faith, for faith is what every creature under heaven can possess, since faith is His gift.

And, if all God's righteousness, all and nothing left, as the edges on grandma's pie, if all of it is not present, resident and at home in that blessed gospel, then it is all over with newness, all over with beginning again. Then, what we are summoned to is just one more trip to Sinai. But with every law there's someone waiting to pare down the demand to the size of his own willing. I'll tell you a secret—it is not merely evil men and women who bring a whole land to ruin, but well-intentioned, pious folk who believe they can will the good, do the good, struggle for the good in response to mere external stimuli. But what I need is not a legislator, rather a Creator; I need total, radical transformation at the core of the self. I need to be made new, created out of nothing by a Spirit which can set me free from "the law of sin and death." Then, if at all, then, if ever, but then surely, I shall sometime do the good, because Christ, not self which ever and anon uses law for its own devices, but because Christ lives in me. "Sometime," for though the life I now live I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me, I do still live it in the flesh. But what is it constitutes a benediction on the status quo, what gives licence to inactivity—the God who is setting me free, that restless, brooding, lean and hungry Spirit of the risen Christ who pounds me on His anvil into what I was always meant to be, or the code, everlastingly tailored to my shape?

Here's where to begin—with the gospel of God, the proof of its power to faith, and in it all the world and us made new. We have not always begun here. Is it possible we have not yet begun here? There seems to be some question whether or not we ever shall begin here. But if, by some great and wondrous power we should begin here, we shall know a truth, clear as crystal, and be a bright shining to the world.

#### ANTI-NARCISSUS (Romans 15:3)

There's an old myth—old as the world itself, I expect—which reads something like this. Once upon a time there was a clear fountain, with water like silver. Shepherds never drove their flocks there and goats never ate there. It was never filled with fallen leaves or branches. The grass was fresh around it, and the rocks

sheltered it from the sun. One day a youth, thirsty and tired with hunting stooped to drink at that pool, and in it saw his own reflection. He thought it was some beautiful water-sprite living in the fountain. He gazed at those eyes, at the glow of health on those cheeks and fell in love with it. He brought his lips near to take a kiss and plunged his arms to embrace the object. It disappeared, but after a moment it returned and renewed its fascination. The youth couldn't tear himself away; he lost all thought of food or rest. He said to the imagined spirit: "Why do you shun me?" His tears fell into the water and disturbed the image. When he saw it disappear, he called to it to stay. By degrees the youth began to lose his strength, and at last he pined away and died. The water-nymphs would have burned his body on the funeral pyre, but it was nowhere to be found. In its place appeared a flower, purple within, and surrounded with white leaves—all that was left of the name and memory of Narcissus.

People who earn their keep with writing books about the differences between one generation and another suggest that nothing fits the generation of the seventies so well as this

myth of that poor fellow who fell in love with himself. But it fits us all—children of the seventies, the sixties, the fifties or the twenties—all of us. Watch white folks and Gentiles when blacks or Jews struggle for their rights; they worry about white folks and Gentiles. Watch men when women object to being used; they worry about men. When farmers run the power company off their land, the power company worries about the power company. When someone wants to paddle his canoe without inhaling Phillipps 66, snowmobilers worry about snowmobilers, and when we've had our fill of being blown to kingdom come with Saturday night specials, the NRA sets up a howl at the mere suggestion we register the wretched things and then lies to the entire populace that our legislatures want to take away our right to bear arms. That myth is appropriate to any generation. We're all in the dreadful dilemma together, all, as some of those dead saints who line my shelves put it in their old, dead Latin, *curvatus in se*, turned in upon ourselves. We are all of us, without exception, Narcissus.

Now, it isn't that playing Narcissus doesn't have its advantages. It surely does. It is politically expedient, for one thing, to be narcissistic, at least to a degree. At the basis of our political life there lies that principle we call "the national interest," which being interpreted means that if we show Afghanistan an open hand or if we do not, it will be because it is to our advantage. Playing Narcissus is economically expedient, at least to a degree. I once knew an independent business man who sold radios and television sets, but couldn't bear to charge friends the going rate, and gave his stuff away for cost. He's no longer in business, but his banker is. And, there may even be personal advantage to playing Narcissus. Robert Ringer's book was a best seller not long ago because thousands had discovered the benefits which accrue to "Looking Out For Number One." A bit of "enlightened self-interest" on the part of a nation, then, and some attention to profit in a business is no doubt necessary, but it's no principle on which to base a life, an existence.

We're made for each other. The child needs the milk man; the milk man needs the bulk dealer; the bulk dealer needs the farmer; and the farmer needs the child. We preach the individual, self-sustained, alone and tall in the saddle, but our physical existence is a network of dependencies. The money in your pocket is proof enough of that. That dollar of yours is a worthless scrap of paper, but be-

hind it still lies the trust of millions to trade with one another by means of this curious tender, and trust, however reinforced by law, spells dependence. The less trust, the more ballooned the dollar, and back to the peanuts with Jimmy Carter! And not merely physical life makes our playing Narcissus an impossibility—we can't even think without one another. Logic, reasoning is a social affair. Hole yourself up in some gloomy tower, reflect till the cows come home, and without the other to corroborate or correct your findings, chances are you'll invent the Arian heresy all over again, or, if you do create something new, it will be because you brought your memory with you into that gloomy tower—the history of a thousand and one attempts by all the living and dead who preceded you. You can't think without the other.

And, you've no identity, no self, no "I" without the other. What made you strong, beautiful and intelligent, or weak, ugly and dull—did you come from the womb already fitted out with such awareness? It was the other in whose eyes you saw attraction or revulsion and took that message to your innards and gave it a home. Part of the hell of existence is that people's

perceptions change—what Peter Paul Rubens believed was beauty four hundred years ago would serve only as a “before” in a Weight Watchers’ ad now—but there it is, you’ve no self without the other.

Now it’s time to play my last card. I know Someone who not merely recognized that He couldn’t live without the other, think without the other, be a self, have an identity without the other; not merely submitted to the inevitable truth that there’s no kind of existence at all without the other, much as we submit to some distasteful business—mastery of the liquid future or the kings of Judah—but who positively revelled in the other, took all his joy, all his pleasure in the other; who used himself up; threw himself away for the other. There never was such a man before, and there’ll never be such a man again. And if to be God means to behave in such fashion as he did, if the word “God” by definition means to be altogether and entirely for the other and nothing held back, so that whatever power He has is only to make us strong, whatever goodness He has is only to make us good, whatever love He has is only to make us lovely—and any other kind of God I neither want nor need; someone in this vast cosmos must not merely put up with me but take delight in me and that for no reason at all!—then all of God was in that Man. You know his name—it is Jesus of Nazareth, the one called Christ.

I know, this occasion is not for the purpose of recruiting Christians among the clergy. The occasion be hanged! The surest, the most certain deliverance from playing Narcissus, from falling in love with self, being for the self, devil take the rest and repeating all the agony, all the misery of humankind to this moment in your own generation, is to become that Man’s disciple and love the other, all the others, just as He loved you—for no reason at all. It may be, the precious few who call ourselves by His name do not serve as any kind of recommendation, but not a miserable one of us has ever been able to detract one whit from the truth that His life and death had one single, one solitary purpose, ground and aim—to be for us, to be nothing else but for us.

One thing I cannot do, and that is call you to imitate Him. That would only allow the difference between you and Him to stand. To be His disciple you must surrender your autonomy. But if you should want to be His disciple and bring the

world some bit of redemption or hope or strength or creativity, if you should desire to turn things ’round a bit, should want not merely to consent to the truth you’re all made for each other, but to take delight, glee, joy, rapture in the other and to the point of burning yourself out, then you’ve made a beginning. preacher! Then you’re ready to hear my text—from Christ’s oldest and greatest interpreter: Paul, one-time Saul and lover of self: “Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, ‘The reproaches of those who reproached thee fell on me.’” There’s your answer to Narcissus!