

BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI
THE WORSHIP OF GOD • JUNE 30, 2019
“THE GOSPEL ON BROADWAY”

Litany

Based on Psalm 77

We cry out to you, O God, in our day of trouble.

At night, our hands are still outstretched and don't grow numb.

Let us remember the Lord's deeds, the wondrous acts from times long past.

Your way, O God, is holiness; you are the God who works wonders,
demonstrating your strength among all peoples.

With your mighty arm, you redeem us.

We call to mind the deeds of the Lord, the wonders of old,
your ways were through the mighty waters, yet your footprints are unseen.

The Scripture

Romans 1:8-12

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, asking that by God's will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you. For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.

The Message

What I Learned from You

Nick Larson

The Musical: *Wicked* – “For Good”

In the early decades of the Roman Empire, a new sect of Judaism appeared and spread rapidly, though not in vast numbers, throughout the cities of the Mediterranean basin. They wouldn't have likely stood out among the many religious sects carried from place to place by immigrants and traders. Few people of prominence would have paid attention. Largely outside of our sacred texts, there is hardly a mention of these beginnings.

It's not unlike the theme and backstory to *Wicked*, the musical that our featured Broadway focus comes from today. In that musical, we pick up long before Dorothy or the other Oz characters make an appearance in the story.

It is just as the Apostle Paul would have been working long before Christianity would have had even a foothold in Rome. Our story begins with Paul writing a letter to a small, upstart community in one of the most powerful cities in the world. He was writing about the hope he sees coming to them. Yet, you heard in our text how Paul (at least) has heard about the work of the gospel being done already in Rome. He is speaking to a community he has yet to (and likely will never meet) about how he was changed, because of hearing of the work they were doing.

To better understand his gratitude here, it would be best to understand that Paul was a city person. The city is his language and his home.

Jesus was more a man of sowers and seeds, sharecroppers, and mud-roofed cottages. The Palestinian villages were his roots.

Paul, however, uses Greek fluently in schoolroom metaphors and seems at home amid Greek rhetoric. Paul was dependent on cities, quite literally, as they were his lifeblood as an artisan. According to the Book of Acts, he crafted tents. He would have sold his tents, as he rubbed elbows with the merchants and the traders in the cities of Rome.

I paint this picture, because I believe our ancient stories serve to be our guide. We need to understand the particulars of the text – the people and movements within the context of the situation. That matters. It certainly helps us understand what is going on. They are the parts by which we, as individuals, can follow, to sink deeper into the story, so that we, too, might like thousands before us, find ourselves with each story.

We are just like Paul, roaming from place to place, longing to connect and draw closer. We are longing to be known and to know others. We are longing for our successes to be remembered and our important actions be the ones by which we are known. Haven't you felt this way?

Last week, we talked about that universal human feeling of being lost, about how it holds onto us. Sometimes despite the evidence to the contrary, it doesn't want to let us go. Today, I want you to recognize the feeling of longing, particularly longing for good to come.

Paul, in the beginning passage to his Letter to Rome, is claiming that longing by recognizing that none of us do anything alone. We today, like Roman cities of old, are cosmopolitan in nature. Diversity and difference are the name of our game. The movement of people is constantly expanding and evolving. The city, in that time, was

the Internet of their day, where new civilizations could be experienced, where novelties would first be encountered, and where the tide of public opinion could shift as quickly as whispers about another. Cities were uniquely large for their time, yet often their circumference was walkable in about an afternoon.

So, this is a place of hustling and busting in the streets every day. Think density in city life; thin, shared walls, communal spaces. It is a place where all your interactions would be necessary to sustain yourself. Much like our lives, without grocery stores, gas stations, and without modern amenities like electricity, we would be lost.

Have you ever longed for a community where you didn't have to jockey for position? Where you didn't have to wait in line? Where you didn't have to stand uncomfortably close to a stranger?

You might be thinking of dorm life, like I was, where you must share with the guy down the hall just to figure out how to make a bowl of Ramen Noodles. You had to share the teapot, and all the other things needed to have some Ramen, but things we were not supposed to have in the dorm.

Paul, in the beginning of Romans, just as in the musical *Wicked*, is wondering if we are the people we are today because of what we know, who we know, and the experiences that have guided us to this very moment. Paul is writing, reaching out to friends and community he has never met. Yet, he is longing to be with them, because they share that especially important part of him. They share that desire to be found, to make the world better, to mutually encourage one another.

Isn't that what you want to find when you come to church on Sundays? That's what we hope when we step foot into Broadway; isn't it? As we step each week into this faith community, it is our busy street where we hope to rub elbows with one another, looking to find others upon whom we can rely, to discover those who we might mutually encourage us through life's challenges.

It is to admit, "You know that; me too! I've been there. I've struggled with that! You've wrestled with mental illness; me too! Alcohol is a problem in your family; in ours. too! Raising kids can drive me to pull my hair out; us too! Having difficulty keeping up with finances, or saving for retirement, or just finding love; me too!

The Christian faith and the church is not a place we want you to come when you have it all figured out. No; church should, and can be, a place where we come to admit to one another, that we don't have it figured out. That we are still striving after good together.

In the church, I want us to embrace both forms and meanings of “For Good.” There is the literal “better,” or for good, better off, more whole, more myself, more ourselves, because I’ve been known and known you.

And there is the “For Good” that means lasting, never ending, and the sacred change that comes through encountering another along the same path. This is like those disciples, who are walking home after Jesus’ crucifixion when they meet this stranger that asks them about Jesus. All the while it was Jesus talking with them. It isn’t until that moment at the table... in the breaking of the bread. In the sharing of life. Then they learn to recognize him.

That is the lasting good I hope for you today. I hope that you, today, in this moment, and in this place, encounter the living God disclosed to us through Jesus Christ in such a profound way that you can leave differently than you came. You can leave here, knowing that you, too, have been changed for good. That you can leave this place encouraged and persuaded to be that agent of change that Paul hoped to be in his city, in his hometown, in his place of origin, and that place to which he longed to return.

What spiritual gift, have you been entrusted with by God? What Holy Whisper do you feel in the wonder of the quiet? How are you working to enhance the power of the gospel? Where in this world of hurt are you speaking good news? Are you sharing moments of hope amid ache? Are you lending your voice to those in our world, who find themselves voiceless? Are you pushing back against the narrative that try to persuade us that we are not indebted to anyone?

No one makes it alone. No one deserves more than another, no matter their country of origin or their family’s status! We all do it together, because we really are in this journey together.

Who has shaped you? Who have you encountered that lifts you up? Who among us can’t say that in those moments of darkness in our lives, it has been another who reached out to lift us up?

Paul, in the rest of this letter, works long and hard to persuade these followers of Jesus, already with a foothold in Rome, that they are all in this together – Jew and Gentile together. It makes no difference of one’s background.

Paul is pushing back on the common Roman fate of everyone, according to the Empire, which is to be hunted and found, conquered, and incorporated into the Roman family through violence and diplomacy, or enslavement, and even death. This is a place where power would have exclusively been seen as “power over.” Power over someone.

And yet, Paul isn't. He is showing gratitude instead. He is creating a counter movement of solidarity across ethnic differences. He is thanking them for their constant struggle and resistance to accept those outside the norms by which Rome would disagree.

Paul is telling us, here, that it is not by strength that you are loved, but it is by your weakness. It is not by what you know exactly how to do, but how you can show others what *not* to do. Paul, a Jewish man, is showing others how to change themselves for good, both the Jews and the non-Jews.

Paul's transformation and subsequent life-in-relation is connected to these ideological city feelings of loneliness in the sea of people. Yet, Paul is saying that it is our connections, not our disconnections, that are what should orient us to our world around us. Remember Paul has personally made the shift from persecutor to persecuted, or more specifically, conqueror to conquered.

Paul uses his own experience to begin to stand for those who do not have a voice in his society. He sees his experience as the opportunity to proclaim that Jews and Gentiles, who oppose to each other, are not helping one another but ultimately only serving a Roman imperial interest to divide and conquer all.

Yet, working together, recognizing that when we encounter one another, we can be changed "For Good," It means that what I learn from you is what helps us to turn together towards a common good. I'm sure you have lots of places racing through your head right now, don't you? Where in our world, in our lives, we see divide and conquer over connect and encourage?

The call, as followers of Jesus, is not to persecute but to reincorporate all of God's children, all people. Paul is acknowledging that even as a Roman citizen, he is still persecuted for using his voice to renunciate his previous affiliation with power over, and to raise his consciousness as now a marginalized person. Paul is still showing his indebtedness to others. He is moving downward and outward, toward a crucified Christ among those conquered, changing for good from dominant to non-dominant in his approach to others.

He is calling on this community to bear one another's burdens, reimagining communities and how they relate to one another. Our fate, our role is to reconnect under the banner of Jesus Christ and to put an end, finally, to the suffering of anyone at the hands of their dominators.

He, like the musical *Wicked*, is proclaiming loudly for all to hear that when two who are different meet... When two unlikely friends, who struggle through opposing personalities and viewpoints, rivalry over the same love-interest, reactions to the

Wizard's corrupt government, and ultimately one's fall from grace meet, then they can truly connect.

We can see connection, true community, mercy, and grace extended, and that helps these two unlikely friends embrace, as they share in their gratitude for being changed for the better, being changed for good through one another.

This is what Paul hopes for himself and the Christ community in Rome, that they will find a way, despite all the distance and hardships they have individually and collectively faced, to recognize each other, not as the ones put down, but as ones who rise up. Not ones defeated by negative news cycles, and troubles in our day, but ones who remember the Lord's deeds, the wondrous acts from times long past, and those joyful moments yet to emerge.

We must together, walk alongside Paul, showing our gratitude for one another, so that we help transform our mistaken belief that we, or others, are non-people. We must recognize that it is us, with all our flaws, that God puts right at the center of the sacred story. By doing this, we become counter-cultural, constantly advocating against the continued dehumanization and impoverishment of others, but relentlessly making sure that we see all as family, as brother and sister, not as object or subject.

Our faith, the one of Christ, calls for us all to be for, with, and among the disenfranchised, and that will change everyone for good; including us.

Amen?

Amen.