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Sermon: Uncommodified
Text: Romans 10:5-15
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⁵ Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that “the person who does these things will live by them.” ⁶ But the righteousness that comes from faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ ” (that is, to bring Christ down) ⁷ “or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’ ” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). ⁸ But what does it say?

“The word is near you,
in your mouth and in your heart”

(that is, the word of faith that we proclaim), ⁹ because^[a] if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe^[b] in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For one believes^[c] with the heart, leading to righteousness, and one confesses with the mouth, leading to salvation. ¹¹ The scripture says, “No one who believes^[d] in him will be put to shame.” ¹² For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. ¹³ For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

¹⁴ But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed?^[e] And how are they to believe^[f] in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? ¹⁵ And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

When I graduated from high school, I remember receiving as a graduation present a gift of a book that was full of quotations from famous people. There was Winston Churchill’s ‘this is not the end, nor even the beginning of the end, but perhaps the end of the beginning,’ quotation from the Battle of Britain in World War II. In fact, it seemed that my smarter classmates had a book like this as well because in their valedictory speeches at graduation over the period of my high school years, that Churchill quotation was used more than once. And there were famous quotations from Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr., and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and while it was nice to possess and even thumb through some of those quotations, in many ways those words lost their power apart from the whole speech or larger context from which they came. And perhaps separated and gathered together in a book of quotations, the words came to mean something a bit more generic or they became a word salad that lost its meaning all together.

Part of our problem with scripture is that we can often read it wrong. We treat it like a collection of inspirational quotes that we can pull out a verse, put it into fancy cursive, and magically put it on the wall of our kitchen remodel. Or we want to perform surgery on it by extracting one verse out of context and applying it to any situation or problem or presenting emotion. Or we want to turn into life’s little instruction book or a reduce

it to a moral instruction manual that can give us direct and specific advice about this or that topic. Or we can do what Thomas Jefferson did and just get a pair of scissors and cut out all the parts that seem extraneous, inapplicable, and obtuse, and reduce it to the parts that make sense to us or make sense for our times. But what if the Bible is none of those things. The priest and writer Robert Farrar Capon says that if we are going to reduce the Bible and Scripture to just one thing then it is about the mysterious power by which God ‘works to form this world [and us] into the Holy City, the New Jerusalem that comes down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband,’ that we read about in at the end of the Bible in Revelation.¹ The whole narrative, collection, and book, from beginning to end, is about revealing to us that alternative universe and then helping us to see it alive and at work all around us and then inviting us, summoning us, and challenging us to become a part of it as God forms this world and our world into God’s world.

Another way to think of Scripture when we read it, is not so much as a collection of wise sayings or good advice or moral instruction, but as a mirror and as a window. A mirror to our lives, a mirror into who we are at our best, but also particularly who we are at our worst, a mirror into a humanity that is broken and flawed and commodified and turn into a financial transaction and dehumanized like Joseph’s brothers do to him, and at the very same time it is a mirror into our redemption, a mirror into the God who loves that humanity in spite of its broken ways, a mirror that our humanity may experience the pit, may be sold down the river, may be broken and fractured and left for dead, but a mirror that shows us that that is not all there is to humanity, that over and over through the power of God, the lost are found, the dehumanized become human again, the left for dead are brought back from the dead, that in the words of Robert Capon, ‘the Bible is concerned with the perfecting of what God made, not with the trashing of it.’² The redeeming of what God made, not the trashing of it. That is the story the Bible tells.

The Bible is not just a mirror, reflecting back at us the worst of humanity or inspiring us by reminding us about the best of what it means to be human, but the Bible is also a window into the world God is bringing about and forming right in the middle of our world, our lives, and all the other worlds that compete for our allegiance. I mean let’s be honest, if we can we can just treat the Bible is a collection of inspirational religious sayings that we

¹ Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, & Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*, 15.

² Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, & Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*, 16.

control, that we pick and choose, and that we use at our own discretion, then that would make life a lot easier. We could live life like Joseph's brothers and do as we please now that we have taken care of the problem and cast it into the pit.

Now that I have trashed the book of inspirational quotes, I am going to do an about-face and share a quote from former President Lyndon Baines Johnson, who in talking about the art of politics and diplomacy, said, and I quote, 'If you are going to tell someone to go to hell, you better make sure you can make them go there.' Joseph's brothers leave him for dead, commodify him sell him for a few shekels, and they think they have erased him from their existence forever and they'll never have need of him ever again. But this story does not end with Joseph airbrushed out of their lives, nor does it end with them never having need of him again, instead, the story ends with their asking Joseph (who they do not recognize as Pharaoh's deputy) for help in a time of severe drought, and it ends with Joseph's extravagant act of forgiveness and love, extended prior to any penance or restorative justice is agreed upon. Like the father of the prodigal son, Joseph offers them extravagant grace first reminding them that they may have meant what they did for evil, but that God found a way to turn it to good. The Bible is a window into a very different world that is taking root among us, where the world of kill or be killed gives way to a world where the meek are blessed and the wolf and the lamb and the lion all dwell together on God's holy mountain. A world where every human being is seen and treated with dignity and have been endowed with a God-given calling. And the adventure and joy of life is discovering those gifts and putting them to use for the glory of God and for the sake of those in our lives.

If the Bible were just a book of moral advice or an almanac of good religious sayings or a step by step procedures that one needs to follow to pass go and advance to the afterlife, then Paul's letter to the Romans would make no sense either. He's writing to a congregation full of people well versed in self-help religion and the right-handed logic of personal righteousness advancement. They have all been trained in the art of self-differentiation, how to win friends and influence people, how to acquire power, keep power, and keep others from obtaining power. They have all been well-versed in righteousness and how to attain it and what it takes to arrive at it. For the culturally Jewish members of the Roman community it means keeping oneself from defilement or refraining from exposure to those who are unclean or who don't practice religious custom or ritual. And for the Gentile members of the Roman community, righteousness means pursuing, practicing, and

experiencing a freedom without constraint or limitations, doing whatever whenever without responsibility or consequences.

And Paul challenges both versions of righteousness and instead presents an alternative form of righteousness, not something we choose or attain, but rather one through Jesus Christ that has already been bestowed on every human life. To quote Paul who then quotes the Old Testament: 'For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him...and then Paul quotes from the narrow-minded, self-righteous, wrath-filled Old Testament and Hebrew Scriptures (I'm being sarcastic by the way the Old Testament is as full of grace as the New Testament) these words from the prophet Joel, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

The righteousness that saves both Jew and Gentile, Paul tells us is the righteousness of Jesus Christ and living with faith is less about advancing in righteousness or always getting it right morally or climbing the stairway to heaven but more about trusting in Jesus and his righteousness and trying to follow suit out of gratitude. And doing so does not make us neutral or passive participants, but opens up our own lives to the world Christ's righteousness opens up. In Robert Capon's words: trusting Jesus and the righteousness of his life 'does not necessarily involve any particular [word] formulation, it does not entail any particular degree of emotional fervor; and above all, it does not depend on any specific repertoire of good works—physical, mental, or mortal.'³ It's about letting the power of his resurrection, through the Holy Spirit, do, in our broken, suspect, and dead lives what it has already done in Jesus's, forming this world into Christ's kingdom where the lost, the least, the left for dead, the unclean and the wrong kind are welcomed home, treated with dignity, and made whole.

Well that sounds all well and good but kinda abstract and hard to make sense in our technologically advanced and down to earth real world with bills to pay, homework to get started on, frayed relationships, open hostility and anxiety all around us. Does this Holy City, this New Jerusalem, this kingdom of justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit ever touch down anywhere around us? Does the power of God to create a new world right in the middle of our old one ever make much of an appearance? On a hot day this summer (sorry that doesn't really narrow it down), I found myself alongside some dedicated adults and youth from this congregation setting

³ Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, & Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*, 25.

up a splash pad, filling water balloons, and helping assemble a mini water park on the front lawn of the Land building. As the sun got higher in the sky, a single file line of small Carrollton campers made their way over to play, splash, make merry, and cool off as part of a water day at Carrollton camp. In addition to standing in the heat, I also had moments of wondering if I might be of better use elsewhere. Answering emails, preparing for a strategic planning committee meeting, teaching a class. All of these scenarios involved air conditioning by the way. In the midst of the organized chaos and my attempts to ride herd on the melee of campers splashing, running, creating a few small mud pits, I noticed a couple of kids who happily if wildly ran from station to station, barely listened to any admonitions to slow down or keep calm, and who never stopped playing full throttle. They were not discipline problems, but just a little bit hard to corral or guide away from the water fun toward the next activity.

Later I learned that they live in a neighborhood where playing outside at any time is too dangerous. They were never allowed to ever leave the confines of their apartment for fear of being caught up in collateral violence. Suddenly their frantic play and desire not to leave the SCAPC water park made sense. They were able to play freely in the confines of this church without fear or worry. Thanks to Carrollton Camp they were able to experience what my, what our children often take for granted. A safe place to play surrounded by a community of love. A kingdom where Christ is King, where all who call on the Lord find justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. I wish I could say that world God is bringing about in that moment lasted forever. But I suspect God is not done bringing it about and we are not done waiting and working for it, until it breaks open all around us in an ever fuller expression. Until then, may we look for it, work for it, and give thanks for it. Wherever it shows up among us. Thanks be to God.