

I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another. ¹⁵ I have written you quite boldly on some points, as if to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me ¹⁶ to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

¹⁷ Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. ¹⁸ I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done—¹⁹ by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ. ²⁰ It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation (Romans 15:14-20)

All the Way to Livonia!

When I was a child, I lived for several years in a suburb of Indianapolis. But my grandparents lived in Western Michigan. Every year – sometimes two or three times a year – my parents would load us all up in the car and make a pilgrimage to visit the grandparents. This was before cars had built-in DVD players and kids had ipods and gameboys and all the other things that absorb their attention. And it didn't take very long for us to get restless on the road. I remember my father banning two questions, "Where are we?" and "How much longer?" The funny thing is, the trip really wasn't that long – maybe four or five hours at the most. I've taken my kids on much longer trips than that. One year, we drove all the way to Wyoming and Montana. And some day, we'd like to drive all the way out to California to visit my parents there. But it's all a matter of perspective.

This morning St. Paul talks about the enormous territory that he had covered while preaching the gospel. Not only didn't he have ipods and gameboys to keep him occupied on the road, he didn't have a car. He traveled either on foot or by sailing ship. Still, Paul saw the gospel go farther than any other missionary of his day. Yet, it would have been difficult for him to imagine how much farther the gospel would actually travel. Paul lived on the other side of the world and the world we know was totally unknown to him. Yet, God built on the work he sent Paul to do and the gospel has circled the globe. It's come here. **All the way to Livonia**

- I. God has preached the gospel, and**
- II. God has given gifts to serve.**

I.

Now, the words Paul wrote to us this morning actually come very near to the end of the book of Romans – the longest of all of Paul's letters. After writing fourteen chapters about a whole host of issues, Paul suddenly stopped to explain why he was writing to this congregation. Why did he do that? Because he had never been their pastor. Paul knew a number of people in the congregation at Rome, but at this point, he had not yet visited them. But Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles, the people who weren't Jewish. God had given him general oversight over the work of reaching out to people who didn't grow up in the Jewish faith. Rome fell under that responsibility.

Paul had been very successful in doing that kind of work. He was perhaps the most successful missionary in the history of the Christian Church. In fact many people who don't accept what the Bible teaches consider him to be the co-founder of Christianity alongside of Jesus. Now, we would never say that. But we would agree that God used his work to extend the Christian church throughout the entire Western world. Not surprisingly, the man God used to do all that was very gifted. When you read his letters, his brilliance as a writer and a student of the Scripture comes through in every verse. His concern for the people that he served and his commitment to the message are the model that every Christian pastor and teacher tries to follow today.

Paul knew all that was true. So he said, **"Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done."** We live in a culture in which you have to sell yourself. If you want a job, if you want to get backing for your leadership in a company or in almost any endeavor of life, you tell people how much you have done. You maybe even get people to write letters of recommendation

praising your accomplishments. But Paul didn't do that. Instead, he gloried in serving God. His greatest source of joy was the fact that he was sent to work for the purpose God had chosen. Lest we misunderstand what he meant by that, Paul refused to take any credit for any of the great things that had happened through his ministry. He didn't want to talk about anything except what Christ accomplished through him. Paul understood that his job was simple: speak the word. God's job was to plant churches and make them grow.

That is a very important point for the Christian Church of every age. Don't we all want an Apostle Paul to be our pastor or our principal? Wouldn't it be wonderful to have him here preaching and teaching us instead of the people we actually have? Sure it would be. You certainly could do much better than what you've got. I have no doubt that if you look at any area of ministry, at preaching, at teaching, at counseling, at reaching out to the lost, you could find many men who are more gifted than I am to serve as your pastor. Even though I think that our teachers are very gifted people, I'm sure there are other teachers out there who are even more gifted.

All those gifts come from God. It's natural for us to want someone like that to serve us. But there is a danger here that we have to be careful of: who does the work? Where does success come from? What makes congregations grow? It's not really the man in front. God established the ministry and he works through it. And if I am unfaithful in preaching the word, that can do real damage to the church here. But I cannot take any credit for success. If this church explodes with growth while I'm pastor here, the most I can do is say that I preached the gospel faithfully and rejoice in what God did through that gospel.

But our sinful hearts rarely see it that way. We want to give credit to the man in the pulpit or to the man or woman in the classroom. More times than I can count, I've heard people say things like, "Well, when this guy was principal, that school had twice as many kids as it does today." Or "When that guy was pastor, that congregation grew and grew." And the implication is that if we had a guy like that here now, we'd have the same experience. But is that true? Even if it isn't, what's wrong with thinking like that? What's wrong is that it's trusting in people instead of trusting in God. Certainly, we want our pastors and teachers to be faithful. But real spiritual growth only comes from God working through the word and we must trust in God to grant us success and growth. Even St. Paul was not successful in every place where he preached. He never took credit for the success he had. We worship Christ and what he is doing here.

When we worship people – we when hold up a preacher or a teacher as the thing that would make our congregation grow – that is a form of idolatry. It's sin. We need to recognize that sin in our own hearts. We need to admit that that kind of thinking places our hopes and our confidence in the people who serve and not in God who does the real work. And we need to repent of that sin – to trust in Jesus who died on the cross even for this kind of false hope.

All sin is a form of idolatry. All sin is putting our thoughts and feelings ahead of what God says. Jesus alone of all the billions of people who have ever lived was perfect in always putting God first. He did that for us. His perfect faith stands in our place. Jesus died on the cross to pay for all of our false hopes and false trusts, for all the subtle idol worship in our hearts. He rose to say that even that sin is forgiven. He rose to say that he has covered even our insistence on trusting in preachers and teachers rather than the message they speak. He rose to take away our guilt when we blame the men God sends if our church doesn't grow or prosper the way we think it should.

God has forgiven all our sin. And the amazing thing is that he continues to work in spite of our sin. God worked through St. Paul, who was a sinner in spite of the fact that we call him *Saint* Paul today. God worked in the many troubled congregations he served – and if you think his congregations were all models of joy and getting along, you haven't read his epistles. If you think he never said anything harsh or difficult or unpopular, you haven't read his criticisms of his opponents, many of whom were members of churches he served. God worked through him and he did amazing things. Paul preached the gospel from Jerusalem all the way to Illyricum – modern day Serbia. That's over 1000 miles as the crow flies and over 1500 miles on foot. And he wasn't done. Rome was another 500 miles away and we know he got at least that far and probably much farther after that.

God sent the message forward. And it didn't always follow the path Paul thought it would. In our lesson from Acts today, we heard how Paul wanted to go one way, but the Holy Spirit sent him in a different direction. But God has kept that gospel going forward. It covered the distance from Jerusalem to Rome. It covered the distance from Rome to Germany and England. It covered the distance between Europe and the United States.

God has caused that message to reach all the way here. **All the way to Livonia, God has preached the gospel.** That message is still doing the work God sent it to do here. Trust his working in that gospel!

II.

Wherever that gospel is preached, the Holy Spirit is working. Paul began our reading this morning talking about how the Holy Spirit had worked in the congregation in Rome. He said, **“I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another.”** Now what does it mean that they were full of goodness? I think this is an unfortunate translation because it could be so easily misunderstood as if they were believers because they were such good people. The reality is just the opposite. The “goodness” that they were full of was a result of the gospel changing their hearts. The word translated as “goodness” doesn’t mean a quality, it means an attitude. The word refers to being interested in the welfare of others. Paul’s words could be better translated as, “I know that you are full of concern.” In Christian love, they cared about one another.

And Paul said they were complete in knowledge and competent to instruct each other. It was never God’s plan that only guys like me would teach. God intends that Christians help each other to understand the word. Every father should be teaching his own children to know the Lord. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t have Sunday schools or Lutheran elementary schools, but it does mean that we shouldn’t depend on them to do all the spiritual heavy lifting and ignore the issue ourselves. In the same way, alongside of church services and Bible class, God does expect members to be able to help each other understand what his word says. Churches should have members who can teach Sunday school and even lead Bible studies.

Now, that doesn’t mean that every Christian has the gifts to lead a Bible study. But God does give those gifts. God gives every Christian gifts and we all should strive to grow and mature in our faith and knowledge so that we can use the gifts God has given us. Paul wrote to this congregation to remind them of that fact, because, he says, he has the “priestly duty” of proclaiming the gospel to the Gentiles. Through that gospel, the Gentiles become “an offering acceptable to God.” When the gospel gives us faith, it changes us in God’s sight. God now looks at us Gentiles as if Jesus were sitting where we are sitting, and he calls us holy and righteous.

Because he calls us holy and righteous, because he comes to us in the gospel day after day, he gives us the gifts we need to serve him. We’re all in this together. This congregation is God’s congregation. Just as every pastor has his own gifts and things he does better and worse, every member has his own gifts, gifts God has given him, so that we can all grow together in Christ. That’s true for us today for the exact same reason that it was true when St. Paul wrote this letter: the gospel has reached us. **All the way to Livonia, God has given gifts to serve.**

Use those gifts. Use them, not to pat yourself on the back or to feed your ego. Use them as Paul used his gifts: glorying in what Christ has done. Rejoice that God has made you a father or a mother, or a son or a daughter in a Christian family and use your gifts to build each other up. Rejoice that God has given you faith in Christ and whatever abilities you have, so that you can help our church grow in faith. The gospel has come all the way to Livonia. May we always proclaim faithfully. Amen.