

Streetsville United Church
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"NOT ASHAMED"

Romans 1:16

The apostle Paul writes in Romans 1:16, "For I am not ashamed of the Gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." Paul was writing to the small Christian church at Rome, telling them about his desire and his plan to preach the Gospel there.

Now Paul had seen much of the world, but there was something intimidating about Rome. "All roads lead to Rome," they said. Rome was a bustling, cosmopolitan city, the centre of political and military power, the seat of Caesar, who demanded worship as god. And that's where Paul was taking the gospel - this message of an itinerant Jewish carpenter killed on a Cross in a far-off corner of the Empire. So perhaps Paul was momentarily ashamed of the Gospel as he thought about preaching in Rome. Paul knew that the message of Christ crucified could be a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles. But suddenly he caught hold of himself and said, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel..." Paul knew that the Gospel is the very power of God to save people's souls and change their lives, indeed their eternal destiny, from an eternity separated from God to an eternity with God and his people. Paul had seen it happen to many. Indeed, the Gospel had done that for him. Paul knew that he could not and should not be ashamed of it.

Now dear Christians, we may sometimes be ashamed of ourselves, or of the church, but we need not be ashamed of the Gospel. Sometimes we are, though. We discover that the Gospel is a stumbling block to some and folly to others. And so we try to change it or water it down. One Canadian Christian clergy recently wrote, "there is no God but the one you make, no sin to hamper your self-actualization, no sacred texts to impede your enlightenment... God does not answer prayers. Jesus is not the saviour who saved the world by dying for our sins. Modern people, enlightened beyond all others...cannot accept brutal myths like Jesus' crucifixion and will soon reject them wholesale." The best you can say is that this person is ashamed of the Gospel.

Now compare that with the statements of Barak Obama, candidate for U.S. President. In a campaign flyer entitled, "Faith, Hope, Change" Obama stands before a cross in a church and tells how he accepted Jesus Christ into his life.

Obama says, "My faith tells me I can sit in church and pray all I want, but I won't be fulfilling God's will unless I go out and do the Lord's work." On ABC's *Good Morning America* he was asked about rumours that he was once a Muslim. He said, "I am a Christian and have never been a Muslim; I believe Jesus Christ died for my sins." Now no matter who you think should be the next President, Obama is not ashamed of the Christian Gospel. I wish we could all have his clarity and courage.

Yes, I am sometimes ashamed of my own actions and my lack of conformity to Christ. But I say with Paul, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel..." Friends, we do not need to be ashamed of the Christian Gospel. There are three good reasons why we can say, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel."

First, because the Gospel is inclusive.

The concept of "inclusiveness" is very important these days. Politicians, church leaders and others often talk about it. Is the church, the community, the school, the nation "inclusive?" "Exclusive" seems like such a negative term. There are limits, of course, to inclusion. If I apply to Harvard I'm not going to make it. If I try to buy a house in Rosedale, I'm going to be excluded. I'm excluded from many things, because I lack the credentials or the money, or simply because I don't want to be included.

But the Christian Gospel is inclusive. John 3:16 tells us that "God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." And the "world" means the "whole created cosmos." God loves us all, regardless of race, gender, age, status, religion, skill, no matter what you have or haven't done. We would draw the line somewhere, but God does not. God puts his hands around the world and says, "I love you." Now let's not get confused on this. God loves everyone, but that does not mean that everyone is automatically saved or close to what God desires them to be. God's love is inclusive in that he has made provision to save all people and desires to save all whom he has made.

The Gospel is also inclusive because it puts us all on the same basis. Paul writes, "there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Now that's inclusive. - "all have sinned." Before God boasting is excluded. Before the sinless, Crucified One we are all on level ground. We all come to this table with empty hands. And the Gospel is inclusive because we are all justified on the same basis - through God's redeeming grace in Jesus Christ received by our faith. "God justifies the one who has faith in Jesus." God is not arbitrary. "God justifies both the circumcised and the uncircumcised on

the ground of faith." "I am not ashamed of the Gospel," because it is inclusive. It is for everyone.

Secondly, we say, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel" because it is powerful.

Paul says, "The Gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith." The word "power" comes from the Greek word "dynamis" from which comes our word "dynamite." We do not have the power to save ourselves, but the One who is preached in the Gospel, Jesus Christ, has the power to turn us towards God, to set us free from the power of sin and death, to change our eternal destiny, to change our character from the inside out. One Old Testament meaning of the word salvation means moving from a cramped, dangerous space into a large place of freedom and safety. And that's what the Gospel does for us. The proclamation of the One crucified in weakness is God's power to set us free.

The other day I saw a woman being interviewed on the Christian television program 100 Huntly Street. She was telling of her former life of prostitution and drug addiction. But she was befriended by a Christian. It is good for Christians to befriend the kind of people Jesus befriended in his earthly ministry. Anyway, this friend asked the woman to come to church. At first, she said she would rather eat ground glass than go to church. But the friend persisted. Finally the woman went and then went again and yet again. And one day in response to the invitation she went forward and gave her life to Christ. And God's power came upon her. She left the old ways behind and has become a new creation in Christ, living in God's love and grace. She said emphatically, "Jesus Christ is the man." The Gospel has power to change lives.

Whether or not we have that kind of dramatic experience, we all need the power of the Gospel. For the truth is that we don't have the power within us to save ourselves. Now if I try to jump across the Grand Canyon I'm not going to make it. You wouldn't, either. We would wind up, quite frankly, dead. Even the most skilled broad jumpers in the world aren't going to make it. We don't have the power to bridge the gap between God and ourselves which has been opened up by human sin. Religion says, "Jump farther, run faster, do more good works, pray harder, read your Bible more, and you will make yourself right with God." All of these things are good but will leave us short.

But the Gospel is different. It's not just another religion. The Gospel says that God in his love and grace has built a bridge across the gap to meet us. God built that bridge through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We no longer must strive to save ourselves; instead we turn in faith to the Saviour, take a step in his direction and we are justified by God's grace as a gift. The

Gospel has power to save us because it's not about what we must do to save ourselves, it's about what God has done in grace to save us from our sins and bring us to new and eternal life. "I am not ashamed of the Gospel because it is the power of God unto salvation."

Finally, we don't need to be ashamed of the Gospel because the Gospel respects human freedom.

Freedom is important to us - personal freedom, political freedom, the freedom to choose, freedom of expression. Now we're sometimes not quite as free as we think we are. But freedom is something we desire and treasure. And the Gospel respects our freedom. "I am not ashamed of the Gospel because it is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who has faith." God offers salvation to all through preaching but never forces salvation on anyone. Now the preaching of the Gospel helps create faith in us and helps us to recognize our spiritual need, but we are free to accept Christ or reject Christ. Certainly the way of wisdom is to put your trust in Christ and live in the freedom of the Gospel. But you can choose to have faith in Christ or you can reject him if you so choose. Where you spend eternity is finally up to you, and God will honour the decision you make.

When Japan surrendered at the end of World War 2, it was rumoured that the Japanese Emperor offered to make Japan a Christian nation. But American General Douglas MacArthur reportedly told the Emperor, "You can't force people to become Christians. People must come to Christ willingly." Who knows what would have happened if Japan had become Christian, but MacArthur was right. The Gospel respects our human freedom, our freedom to choose.

The Gospel not only meets our deepest human needs it is inclusive, it is powerful, and it respects our human freedom. O the wisdom of our God! There is nothing in the Christian Gospel to make us ashamed. Therefore Paul's words are my words and I hope they are yours too. I hope they always be the words of the church. "I am not ashamed of the Gospel..."