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Sermon

Paul's Alls, Luther, and the Discovery of America¹

Observation of the Reformation Chapel Service Sermon by Ben Haupt

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MO
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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Do you look at strangers when they walk past you? There are a lot of people in our world today, and sometimes it's just easier not to look people in the eye when they walk past you on the chapel plaza. It's even worse when I'm getting on a subway in New York City or London. When there's just a sea of people, it's sometimes easiest just to put my earbuds in, keep my head down, and shuffle along. Obviously I'm not going to get to know every person I walk past or stand next to in a subway or wait in line with at an airport. It's impossible to have personal relationships with seven billion people, and so I admit that sometimes I just shut them out.

As Christians, I wonder if we don't do the same thing when we begin to think about all the people out there who do not believe in Jesus. It's easier to keep our heads down, huddle in the sanctuary, and not think too much about the billions of people who don't trust in Christ's death and resurrection. It's easier not to think about the salvation of all those people I meet in the subway or at the airport than to actually look them in the eye and wonder whether they know Jesus. When the neighborhood begins to change around the church, it's easier just to drive into the



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sanctuary parking lot, past the changing neighborhood, and pretend that we're back in the 1950s when the neighborhood was as white as Andy Griffith and Beaver Cleaver.

Or maybe in a shrinking church body, we don't even like to think about those other believers in Jesus—you know the ones who worship so differently than we do—those Christians who wear skinny jeans and tight T-shirts and use instruments like guitars and drums or those other Christians who bow during the Gloria Patri, love to chant, and who wear nothing but the fanciest clerical collars, and who pride themselves in the vast variety of their vestments. It's easiest to put our fingers in our ears and keep our heads down and forget about all the different believers in Christ and the billions of unbelievers in Christ. The world's just too complex and so we close our eyes to all the people out there.

This morning, though, the Apostle Paul and—as we observe the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation today—Martin Luther, of course, hold up before our eyes something quite different. They hold up for us to see a little three-letter word. It's such a common word that it's easy to gloss over when listening to Scriptures, easy to miss it and its significance for understanding the profound depths of the Gospel and its implications. One scholar has even called this little three-letter word the war cry of Paul's epistle to the Romans. What's that little word? A-L-L. All. All. Today, Paul and Luther hold before our eyes the word *ALL*, even in surprising ways. You might even learn something you didn't know about Luther today. So, let's open our eyes for a few minutes to all the people.

The year is 56 or 57 AD. Paul is in Corinth. What a couple years it has been. For the last two, he has preached to all kinds of people in the coastal town of Ephesus. For a good while he was welcome in the Jewish synagogue and a good handful of Jews were baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Acts 19:1–8), but eventually a number of Jews became upset by his message. Paul just went across town to hang out with a whole different crowd—Greek philosophers in the lecture hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9–10). For two years, Paul had preached to any and every and ALL kinds of people who would give him a hearing. And then things got crazy. A local artisan who crafted silver statues of Artemis, the hero of Ephesus, realized why his profits had taken such a hit. Paul! That guy had been telling people to abandon the gods and worship only one. Like so many other Greeks and Romans of the time, this silversmith hated such Jewish ideas—one god . . . how ridiculous! So, he got a big crowd riled up and dragged some of Paul's friends into the local theater. Imagine that—a protest staged about some man-made statues! A lot has changed in our world since then, but a lot has remained the same. Paul was ready to rush in to defend his friends and gladly would have seen it as yet another opportunity to preach the good news of Jesus, but his fellow Christians would not let him. Thankfully, a local official calmed things down, and Paul and his missionary band escaped

unscathed (Acts 19:21–41). Just a few weeks later, he woke up in the bustling city of Corinth (Acts 20:1–3).

And so on this particular morning, Paul sits with his writing partner.² They look over the letter they've written thus far to the brothers and sisters in Rome. Yes, Paul's emphasis that the Gospel is for all people had come through quite clearly. He had gotten this across quite clearly in his address. "To ALL in Rome," that is, to ALL Jews and Gentiles who had been called to faith. Yes, "to ALL in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace" (Rom 1:7 ESV). And that little word *all* had come through so crystal clear in his summary statement. "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of ALL who believe: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" (Rom 1:16).

Paul must have known how hard it would be for the Jewish Christians and those Gentiles who had begun attending synagogue and had fully committed themselves to the Jewish lifestyle, how hard it would have been for them to hear those words . . . "the power of God for the salvation of ALL who believe." Paul knew full well what the Jews of Rome had been through in the last few years. Just fifteen years ago or so, the emperor at that time, Claudius, had prohibited Jews from gathering together. This had weakened the Jewish synagogues considerably. They were already in the minority among the vulgar Roman culture. And then a few years later, that rotten scoundrel had sent all the Jews in Rome packing. He had sent the immigrants back to where they'd come from. Just in the last year or so with the prospect of a new emperor and a whole new set of laws, Jews had begun moving back into town trying to reestablish themselves in the face of hostility of all kinds. How easy it would have been for the Christians in Rome to turn their eyes away from all their neighbors who didn't believe in Jesus. How easy to seethe in hatred when they thought of the Artemis-worshippers of Ephesus or the filthy centurions of Rome—evil people who did evil things.

The first section of the letter that Paul and his scribe had written yesterday cut through all that. It wasn't just on Gentile sinners with their worship of all kinds of false gods and their unnatural lifestyles that the wrath of God was being poured out on. It was also being poured out on the nationalistic hatred of Jews. No nation under heaven would escape condemnation. Instead with that little word *all* Paul was again making his point so forcefully. All people are sinners and stand under God's judgment and coming wrath. Paul repeats over and over and counters a number of arguments all with the point that all people, that all Jews and all Greeks and all Romans, indeed all people, yes, really all people . . . like *all*, every single last one of them, are sinners.

Today is a good day. With a glimmer in his eye, Paul is reminded of all the Jews and Gentiles, Greeks and Romans who had recently come to faith in Jesus. With those people in mind, with the vast diversity of all kinds of people across the lands

and seas he'd traversed, he dictates these words, "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for ALL who believe. For there is no distinction: for ALL have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom 3:21–24 ESV). The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ is for ALL who believe.

Maybe Paul already had in mind that day some of the profound things he would later write in his letter. "He (that is, Abraham) is the father of all who believe" (Rom 4:11 NIV). And "Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for all who believe" (Rom. 10:4 NIV). And "For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom 10:12–13 NIV). Yes, that little word *all*, all who believe in Christ—Paul was holding up all kinds of people before the eyes of the Romans. Bad news on the one hand because it would convict them of their judgmentally averted eyes, and yet great news because they themselves were included in the Gospel's *all*. They, too, had been justified by Christ's gift, through the redemption in Christ.

With all these people in mind, Paul would a few days later toward the end of his letter write to the Romans, "I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another" (Rom 15:14 NIV). And he would end the main body of his letter a few lines later with the words, "The God of peace be with you all" (Rom 15:33 NIV). Yes, the Gospel is for all people, and that had profound implications for how they got on with all people.

Much had changed in the fifteen hundred years that passed after the Apostle Paul wrote those words in Romans, and yet much remained the same. It's 1522, and Luther is preaching on the "alls" in Paul's Epistles.³ Paul doesn't just use this word in Romans that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and are justified by his grace as a gift." Luther points that Paul goes on to use these "alls" in several places. Colossians 1:23 (ESV)—"The gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven." Titus 2:11 (ESV)—"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people." But how are we to understand these verses? In the medieval church, some were saying that Gospel had indeed gone out to all ends of the earth.⁴ The command of Christ to make disciples of all nations? Check; we've done that already. The apostles took the Gospel to all nations. Don't you know about the stories of the apostles visiting every continent and land with this Gospel? Luther says, "Wait. No apostle was sent to Germany. It took eight hundred years for the gospel to arrive and convert us. And what about these recently discovered islands and this recently discovered land?"⁵

In 1522, Luther knew about the discovery of America.

Is that possible? Yes, Christopher Columbus had announced his discovery in 1497, and his little letter circulated even in Germany. A few years later, the letter of Amerigo Vespucci announcing his discovery had also made its rounds when Luther was a teen or young adult. And so Luther holds up the discovery of America and says, “What about all those heathens in those recently discovered islands and land? What about them?” Paul wasn’t talking about a single event as if Christ’s command to take the Gospel to all lands was already accomplished, and now we can just sit back and keep Christians in the church. No, he was talking about the very nature of the Gospel itself! “It is like a pebble dropped in a lake in which the ripples begin to go out and accomplish Christ’s command to preach the gospel to all nations.”⁶

These ripples are still moving across the pond. It’s been five hundred years since Luther’s 95 Theses. Much has changed, and yet much remains the same. This morning, Luther holds up before our eyes all people, and that includes you too! It may be bad news when you begin to think that the Gospel isn’t just for you. It’s not just you and Jesus. It’s Jesus and all the people who believe in Him. If you’re judging those people or averting your eyes from people you should be sharing the Gospel with, this is bad news for you. The wrath of God is being poured out on all people. “For you in passing judgment on another condemn yourself” Paul says (Rom 2:1 ESV). And yet, hear once again Romans 3:23–24, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” This is good news for you. It’s good news because your sins are forgiven, and Christ calls you to look on Him in faith. As a justified, baptized, forgiven child of God, He calls you to look at all the people of the world. Maybe every once in a while, take your earbuds out. Look at that person across the way and say hello. Strike up a conversation. Say a prayer asking that they would know the same Jesus that you know. See, the Gospel is for all people, even for you!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

¹ An earlier form of this sermon was preached in chapel at Concordia Seminary for the Observation of the Reformation on October 25, 2017. It has been edited for publication.

² I am dependent on James Dunn for the background material, the date and circumstances of Paul’s writing the letter to the Romans. Dunn, *Romans* (Dallas: Word Books, 1988).

³ Martin Luther, WA 10/1:21; 10/3:139.

⁴ Particularly Gabriel Biel. Cf. Reinhard Schwarz, “Martin Luther on the European Discovery of America,” *Word & World* XIV (1994): 82–86.

⁵ Cf. Karl Holl, “Luther und die Mission” in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, vol. 3 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1928–1932), 234–243.

⁶ WA 10/3:140.