

The apostles' new identity: Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35-10:8 (9-23)

## **I wonder if Paul has Euripides in mind.**

by [A. Katherine Grieb](#) in the [June 3, 2008](#) issue

In Robert Bolt's play *A Man for All Seasons*, Thomas More, lord chancellor of England under Henry VIII, attempts to reassure his wife and daughter (who are rightly concerned for his safety) by pointing to himself with the words, "This is not the stuff of which martyrs are made."

His martyrdom and that of many others throughout church history have prompted thoughtful Christians to ask themselves: For what cause would I give my life? For whom would I be willing to die?

Paul's words in Romans 5 remind us of the amazing upset at the root of Christian theology: Christ died for the ungodly! As Paul reminds us, rarely will anyone offer to die on behalf of another person, even for a righteous person, although, he concedes, for a very good person, someone might actually dare to die. Paul may have remembered the heroine of Euripides' play *Alcestis*, whose husband Admetus is told he must die unless he can persuade someone to die on his behalf. Admetus asks both his parents and his children to die for him, but they all understandably refuse to do so. Finally his wife, Alcestis, offers to die in his place. She is the exception that proves the rule. Paul states: only very rarely will one person die for another, and the other person would have to be incredibly good.

"But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us." The godly died for the ungodly. God's extravagant act of mercy toward sinners in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ should inspire hope and confidence in us sinners in all our dealings with God. This gift above all others shows what God is really like. The cross of Christ reveals that grace toward sinners lies at the very heart of God. The resurrection shows that God's love is stronger than the powers of sin and death that would otherwise overwhelm us.

If the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ tell us something profound about the mystery of who God is, they also reveal the depths of our own identity as sinners set

free. The story of our salvation shapes our identity in Christ: soteriology constrains theological anthropology. We are those who have been baptized into the death of Christ so that we might walk in the newness of life defined by his resurrection.

Today's lectionary readings contrast Paul's focus on the death of Christ for the ungodly in Romans with the mission of the 12 disciples in the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew rightly sees a relationship between the authority of Jesus Christ and the mission of the church. Nowhere is that relationship clearer than at the very end of the Gospel, where the risen Christ declares, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." We are given a foretaste of that resurrection authority in this reading, a preview of the newness of life that awaits the church of the risen Lord.

With Paul, Matthew links God's mission to humanity in Jesus Christ with God's compassion and mercy. As Jesus goes about his work of teaching, proclaiming the good news and curing the sick, we are told, he has compassion on the crowds, because they are harassed and helpless, "like sheep without a shepherd." The mission of the disciples follows immediately.

Anticipating the Great Commission at the Gospel's end, Jesus summons the 12 disciples and gives them his authority to cast out unclean spirits and to cure diseases. The 12 disciples are individually named and redescribed as apostles (those sent out). Their redescription occurs right before they are named, while the statement that Jesus "sent them out" immediately follows their names—a clear sign that their identity is defined by their mission.

They are to go to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel," those same "sheep without a shepherd" upon whom Jesus has compassion. His authority funds their authority; his compassion defines their compassion. The disciples, now apostles, are to do what Jesus himself has done: proclaim the nearness of the reign of heaven, cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. There is no suggestion that they will be unable to do any of these amazing things; nor do the disciples themselves raise any such objection. That the mission Jesus sends them on is a reflection of God's own gracious mission to humanity in himself is made clear by the saying, "You have received without payment; give without payment."

What are we to make of God's gracious mercy to us, the proof of God's love for us, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for the ungodly? Here Paul and Matthew are in close agreement: in addition to doing on our behalf what no one else would

ever do or could ever do, God pays us the greatest compliment by including us in God's own ongoing mission.