

Listening with my heart

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This Sunday's passage from Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome seems to be an example of Year C's theological focus on those who are living in a state of alienation from Jesus Christ and the church. Yet when I think about rebuilding the bridges of love, trust, and belonging in contemporary Christian community, Paul isn't the first person who comes to mind. Callista Isabelle notes that if you want to create division, one tried and true approach is to "just start talking about who is saved and who is not. Set up the criteria, then point out who is in and who is out."

Paul's soteriological declaration that "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" is a restatement of Joel 2:32, which announces God's intention to save the faithful after a day of reckoning and judgment. To be sure, Paul's tone is, compared to Joel's, quite pastoral. After all, the apostle is offering his testimony and theological perspective to his readers, hoping to gain their trust and offer them inspiration.

No doubt like some of you, I don't consider myself to be a very big fan of Paul. It's not that I dislike him; I just find Jesus more compelling. We are, of course, not Paulines but Christians. Actually, I should be more nuanced on this point. Somewhere along the way, like all good seminarians I was clued in to the longstanding debate among scholars about the distinctions between "the Jesus movement" and "Pauline Christianity."

The theology and politics around Peter's approach to proclaiming the gospel compared to Paul's are well known and are summed up in Acts 15. The Jerusalem Council brings out the essential tension. The community in Jerusalem believes Jesus to be the completion of Mosaic law and essentially Jewish. Paul, on the other hand, generally teaches that the message of Jesus is for everyone; those outside the Jewish community do not have to undergo rituals like circumcision and mikveh to have a share in the gospel.

Romans, however, is one among Paul's letters where the apostle strikes a more balanced tone, in part because the community in Rome is a blend of Jews and Hellenes who all claim Jesus as the Messiah. Take verse 12 for instance: "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."

Both Paul and Jesus (in this week's Gospel lection) invoke moral instruction from Deuteronomy, a book that inspires a love and reverence for Torah. Jesus reproves Satan with words and themes from three passages (Deuteronomy 6:16, 8:3, and 10:13), one of which overlaps with Paul allusion to Deuteronomy 30:12-14. Our lives are made possible both by bread and "by every word that comes from the mouth of God." And, as The Message puts it, "The word is right here and now--as near as the tongue in your mouth, as near as the heart in your chest" (30:14b).

So in the end, I'm reminded that while nuance matters, what is most worth my notice is the way the season of Lent calls to me to find unity with Jesus and to listen with my heart to the testimony of others.