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Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, Romans 10:1-21
Letters to and from a Friend

Reading Paul's letters in the Bible is like reading someone else's mail. Paul writes letters to budding churches in Turkey, Greece and Italy of the day and we get to read them. They were so significant to the early compilers of the Bible that they were included in the Bible as God's Word to us.

Letter writing is wonderful and I'm glad that letters have not gone out of style in the computer age. I love the immediacy of email letters. This immediacy is a long shot from the Beatles', "Mister postman look and see/Is there a letter in your bag for me/I been waiting a long long time/Since I heard from that girl of mine/So many days you passed me by..."

Paul writes to churches mainly to encourage them to continue in the faith. The letters have opening and concluding salutations, send greetings to friends and discuss Jesus and what he means. They are written at different times and reflect different moods and changes in the writer. Some are written by Paul, others by people purporting to be Paul. The letters are brilliant and alive.

The extract of Paul's letter we read today is complicated, like much of Romans, but the basic message *is the message* and its power to "save" us or make us whole.

He writes, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.' But, how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'"

It's a beautiful thing to share the good news and to trust the Holy Spirit to change hearts. If we had good news, why wouldn't we share it? This is evangelism. I like the school of "caring evangelism" which encourages listening first. We hear a person's concerns and along the way, we might share ways that we handle similar situations with our relationship to God in Christ. With compassion and care, we share God's grace and love.

There are many ways to share God's good news. Paul shares personally and writes letters, and so do I. You'll get to to "read" my mail since I'm going to share extracts from my email letters to a friend in London, which took place in

the last month. It is one of a million ways of sharing good news. I've known this person from high school and it is important that we have a good relationship and care for each other.

I wish we could read the replies Paul received from his letters, if he received replies. There's aliveness in the back and forth. My friend and I have been writing to each other for years. I value her views. She's bright but religion is not a part of her life. She seems to reject it.

Our religious conversation began last month during my attendance at the California Association of Marriage and Family Therapist (CAMFT) conference in San Francisco, which I attend every year with Suellen, a licensed therapist.

Writing from my laptop at the conference, I told my friend that I was at the conference with Suellen and we had just attended a seminar on spirituality/religion in psychotherapy. Suellen said that 15 years ago one never heard the word "spirituality" at the conference. Now it is more widely expressed and affirmed. I mentioned that it was okay with us because we felt that spirituality permeated all of life.

My friend replied, "I don't understand spirituality...what is it exactly? I know several people who say they are not religious, but spiritual...totally bemused...."

I replied, "Religion and spirituality are huge subjects. I see the two as interrelated. One's spirituality is embodied in one's religion.

I continued, "I have an excellent definition of religion on file which I found in a book by Ring, Nash, MacDonald, Glennon and Glancy called an *Introduction to the Study of Religion*. They write,

"Cicero (106-43 BCE) said 'religion' comes from the verb *relegere*, 'to re-read' or 'to pass on.' Thus, he understood religion as 'tradition.'

"Lactantius (240-320 CE) said that the word 'religion' comes from the verb *religare*, 'to bind fast.' Thus, he understood religion as that which binds people to each other and to the gods or God.

"Both understandings are reflected in the way we use the word 'religion' today. We think of religion as a way of ordering the world which is passed on from generation to generation and also as a process for connecting people to gods or powers and to each other.'

"Anti-'religion' folk see religion as 'organized' religion and bemoan its narrow dogmatic aspects. I bemoan the latter as well *and* affirm that there are tenants of faith that beautifully affirm the divine and our relationship to the divine. I see

one's spirituality within one's religion (faith tradition) as freeing while there are aspects within religion that can be interpreted or used to restrict.

"I have no problem with 'organized.' I'm glad the hospital where I had my surgery was organized and I'm glad there were excellent and organized medical schools that trained my doctor and nurses, *et al.*

"Bottom-line, I believe the spirit permeates all of life. My vocation as pastor names the spirit the best I can and supports others in the naming and living out of it. On a broader level, the CAMFT conference is about healing, making wholeness out of brokenness, therefore it is spiritual.

"You see, it *is* a big subject but thinking about it and living it makes life interesting and fascinating. I appreciate your inquiry."

My friend replied, "And I appreciate you...still a mystery to me although I get it intellectually if you know what I mean... Blissfully empty headed I suppose...speaking of which I recommend a little British TV film called 'Marvellous'...now this I *can* identify with...."

I wrote, "How so?"

She wrote, "Compassion."

I told her that Karen Armstrong affirmed "compassion" as central to her religiosity and that she could look her up online.

She replied, "Karen Armstrong's religious beliefs rather weaken the brew for me...."

I wrote, "How so?"

She replied, "Compassion? Not a sliver of it on display in (the movie) 'Leviathan'...unrelenting bleak...all I can say is pass me the vodka bottle...a brilliant piece of film making though...As for Ms. Armstrong...Cornel! You know where I'm coming from...right?"

I replied, "I wasn't sure what you meant by Armstrong's religious beliefs weakening the brew for you. This implies that your brew is stronger than hers. I'm not sure what that brew is. Thus, my question, "How so?"

She wrote, "Not stronger, just different."

I wrote, "Okay, we'll leave it there."

The brilliant text from Ecclesiastes has the line: "...a time to keep silence, and a time to speak." This was time to be silent. I ended the conversation there because I felt like we had traveled fairly far on this road. I'm trusting my friend has a greater sense of what religion is and its meaning for one's life, and by inference, Christianity for me.

Later, I'd like to explore/revisit her "just different."

Amazingly, in our following conversation on the Oscar-nominated film in the foreign feature category, "Leviathan", the religious theme reemerged and this time a more Christian emphasis since the movie highlighted the Russian Orthodox Church. My friend's husband grew up in the Greek Orthodox Church. The conversation of religion now took place in the context of a movie review. My friend appreciated my explanation of the pastoral role I would play if I were the priest in the movie.

Last Sunday, I opened my sermon with a meditation on surfing found in an amazing book of Christian meditations, classical and contemporary. Since my friend and her husband are surfers, I sent her a copy of the meditation and she replied the next day, "It is the closest I've come to understanding a spiritual experience..." My response, "Cool."

"How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" God bless you as you share God's good news. Amen.