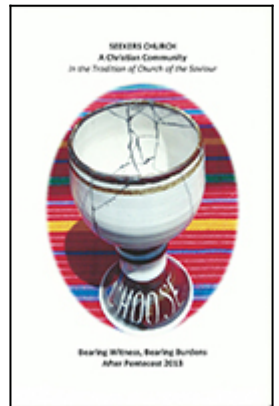


“Therefore – so what? A reflection on Romans 5:1-5” by Margreta Silverstone

May 26, 2013



Trinity

Have any of you walked into a conversation that has already been going on for a while and find yourself at a loss as to what is really being discussed? I particularly feel that way about the passage from Romans. Who starts a conversation with “Therefore”?

Paul, as the seminal writer for the New Testament, is challenging for me. I appreciate many of his writings. I appreciate Paul’s discourse on Love or on the fruits of the spirit, for example. But, I find Paul in Romans difficult to comprehend. Romans is incredibly dense, every word seems to be endowed with multiple layers of meaning. And, while I might like to take on one of the other passages and focus on them instead, my time and energy has been spent on trying to “get” Paul this time around. And, I am grateful that during this time of unemployment, I have been able to choose in to this endeavor.

Walking into a conversation was an apt description of the

research that I did as well on this passage. There has been an extensive discourse between John Piper and Tom (N.T.) Wright about Romans, and particularly about “justification”. And, as a child having been raised in the Calvinistic strain of faith, that word has a whole lot of baggage that rises up in me when I hear it.

I grew up as a child of immigrant parents. As such, we were a bilingual family – Dutch and English. I often spent my summers in Holland with my mom at my grandmother’s and hanging out with my cousins. But, during the late 60’s / early 70’s, I was unusual in having a grasp of the Dutch language at my age in Lynden, WA. Dutch was often used as the language among adults as a way to discuss things in front of the kids and not have to worry about what they overheard. I did understand though and was willing to tell my friends what was being discussed if I understood the conversation. Of course, sometimes the conversation was just boring and I didn’t bother to relay it to others. Yet, I do recall that sometimes a word would just not translate well from Dutch into English or vice versa. Sometimes, more than one meaning of the word exists and the less dominant one is the definition intended. I can still recall a family story regarding the less dominant definition of a word when one of my Dutch relatives was visiting us and asked why we were always trying to be quiet. The word in question? Still.

In my time trying to be open to reading Paul in Romans again, I am grateful that Tom Wright has identified our understanding and dominant definition of “justification” may not capture the definition that was meant in this particular passage.

English and American have two quite different root words, just and righteous, where Greek and Hebrew have one each, “dikaios” and its cognates in Greek, “tsedaqah” and its cognates in Hebrew. The first English/ American root gives us (a) an adjective (“just”); (b) a verb (“justify”); (c) an abstract noun denoting an action (“justification”); (d)

another abstract noun denoting a quality or virtue (“justice”); and (e) some related double-word phrases (“just decrees,” “just requirements” and the like) which can be offered as translations of single words in Paul. The second root gives us (a) a different adjective (“righteous”); (b) an abstract noun (“righteousness”), denoting, variously, (i) a status, (ii) the behavior appropriate to that status and (iii) the moral quality supposed to underlie that behavior; and (c) another abstract noun denoting “that which is appropriate or correct” (“right,” as in “upholding the right”). The last of these can also function as an adjective, as in “right behavior,” and a verb, as in “to right the wrong,” i.e., “to put right” or, in English (but not normally, I discover, in American), “to put to rights.” What the second root does not have is a verb corresponding to “justify.”

[N. T. Wright. *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (p. 88). Kindle Edition.]

Confused yet? It gets worse.

My worst class in college was political theory. It was taught by a visiting professor from Australia. We read Machiavelli and Rousseau and others. Significant parts of the class were given over to understanding “nation-state” and I just didn’t get it. The words looked the same. The initial meaning seemed the same, yet the twists and turns by each author’s logic left me spinning. When the doors would open on the mad ride that I’d just taken – I wasn’t where I expected I was going and had no clue where things had gone wrong. Each theorist led to radically different conclusions on what the ideal nation-state should look like. In the end, in that class, I learned an important lesson that values and beliefs and experiences can shape the understanding of a word or term even beyond that articulated in a definition.

Tom Wright has been a companion on the wild ride of

understanding Paul and justification. As he puts it, words can be like three year olds being asked to sit still. They just squirm and dance all over the place.

For the church that was in Rome, the context of the original word used would have been understood as functioning within the overall frame of a legal understanding of “justify” or “to be made right”. And, it would have been within that understanding that Paul was stressing some other points that the early church needed to learn. The early church was comprised of both Christian Jews and those who came from a non-Jewish background.

The “therefore” that has occurred in Romans prior to our walking in to this conversation is Paul has been laying out an argument for God’s plan – from the initial creation and love for the whole universe (aka, the creator and what was read in Proverbs this morning), and God’s promise – made to Abraham before any of his children were born. Paul’s argument presents Jesus as the means in which God has fulfilled that promise, a promise that was made before being Jewish or Gentile mattered. Paul has presented reminders of how this basic promise operates for all people (and the world), no matter what their background or actions. God, with infinite care, keeps finding ways to “make things right”. God continues to function to love and care for the universe.

Tom Wright points out that our tendency to view things from the individual perspective and not from perspective of the church in Rome at the time has led many to miss the point.

We aren’t the center of the story. God’s saving plan is for the universe, not just us. God’s view includes us, whether Jew or Greek or Roman or Dutch or American or Indian or Mexican, but isn’t about us. God’s act, through Jesus, was to set things right – right for all, from this transcendent moment in time and forward.

Therefore – so what?

Unpacking the rest of these verses in Romans with the same level of thoughtfulness is going to take more time that you are willing to provide me on this Sunday morning and more than I want to take. What I have also appreciated about Tom Wright is his combination of biblical exegesis and everyday theology. I again commend Tom Wright's materials, in this case, he has a "Paul for Everyone" series and divided Romans into two books and also has available companion materials for reflection on the text and application to your own experience.

I'd like to think that I am the center of the story. Sometimes. At other times, I am grateful I am not. My actions (or lack of them) will not save the world. My actions (or lack) won't fully destroy the world either. This realization, that my actions or lack thereof, my being is not ultimate center of the universe, gives me "peace with God".

In March, Richard Lawrence approached me and said that he hadn't heard me talk about my life and my work recently and wondered if I would share my call. At that point, I had just been told that I didn't need to fly back to Vermont anymore. While I had been putting in the hours and the effort and the challenge, I didn't expect my role on that to end so abruptly and did not know what to expect next. In that pivotal moment, no, I couldn't share my call. I was no longer certain that working on implementing the health benefits exchange was my call. And, if it wasn't, I didn't know what my call needed to be now. Richard's question was valid and has taken me on a path that has been full of reflection and pushed me to put my voice into the mix today.

I have a tendency, a nearly addictive tendency, to want to "save the world" through my work. I left the federal government in 2008 at the luring of the private sector to support projects that were IT systems to support social service programs at the state and local level. It has been a strange and strained balancing act of understanding the profit margin and the definitions of words on the page and in the

meanings behind the words. It has included family trips to Alaska (and I thought it would to Vermont too). The end of March was a radical stop. In April, I got off that wild ride to a world that I didn't know or understand.

It has been a reminder that I am not in control, God is.

These months have been good as a time to heal from the travel, to spend time with my family, to create items made with fabric (quilts, bags), to cook, to reconnect with the other parts of my life that got out of balance. It has given me time to study, passing an exam for a project management professional credential. I am glad for the time to "be at peace".

In all of that, I do not take freedom to do whatever I want from the Romans passage.

Therefore – now what?

Tom Wright and John Piper have been having a debate about justification both from an individualistic view and from a definitional one.

But part of the point of Paul's own language, rightly stressed by those who have analyzed the verb *dikaioo*, "to justify," is that it does not denote an action which transforms someone so much as a declaration which grants them a status. It is the status of the person which is transformed by the action of "justification," not the character.

[N. T. Wright. *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (p. 91). Kindle Edition.]

Just because I am not in charge, just because God has a plan and keeps working it to save the universe, does not mean that I can sit back and do nothing. Paul, in Romans, fully expected us (me) to struggle and work – to become people of character with stamina and endurance and deep hope. The result of

knowing that I am not the center of universe and that God remains in charge and in putting this right is a deep sense of gratitude. I have an invitation to be a participant WITH God in actions that show love for the universe. And I have a reminder that it is OK if I fail. I am not in charge. God can and does keep things "right".

Today is Trinity Sunday. In the liturgical year, it marks the time that begins the "Season after Pentecost" which lasts until Advent. Trinity Sunday is meant to mark three significant ways that God has been made known to us – as the Creator, as Jesus, and as the Holy Spirit. The Romans passage provides Paul's understanding of how God – in all of the mysterious and wondrous components that comprise God's identity – has fixed / made right the universe (through Jesus) and established our place in it, from now and into the time ahead (through the Spirit).

I love the imagery in the Proverbs text. I find myself connecting to that text and imagery when I am in the middle of the chaos that is all the raw materials of fabric and fiber and mess. I love the image of spirit as the master worker with God at creation, rejoicing and delighting in the human race. I find myself connecting to those emotions when I am playing with fabric and creating something – a quilt, a composition book cover, a bag, a garment. I felt it also when one of my team members made a connection or progress on the project that gives an "a-ha" moment. Those moments happen when Oslin is learning new things – I see the light bulb of knowledge go off.

Every day, I get a few emails that comprise my daily disciplines. I get The Upper Room, from the United Methodists, with a short reflection piece and links to the scripture readings for the week. I get Inward/Outward that provides a reflection piece that more often connects me to the Church of the Saviour traditions. And I get the Center for Action and Contemplation's daily meditation, some reflection from Richard

Rohr. As part of the Franciscan tradition, Rohr “gets” the spirit within. When I got the following piece, some weeks ago, I could recall the same basic message given by Alan Dragoo, a scientist and poet, a number of years ago.

One reason so many theologians are interested in the Trinity now is that we’re finding both physics (especially quantum physics) and cosmology are at a level of development where the sciences in general, our understanding of the atom and our understanding of galaxies, is affirming and confirming our use of the old Trinitarian language—but with a whole new level of appreciation. *Reality is radically relational, and all the power is in the relationships themselves! Not in the particles or the planets, but in the space in between the particles and planets. It sounds a lot like what we called Holy Spirit.*

No good Christians would have denied the Trinitarian Mystery, but until our generation none were prepared to see that the shape of God is the shape of the whole universe!

Great science, which we once considered an “enemy” of religion, is now helping us see that we’re standing in the middle of awesome Mystery, and the only response before that Mystery is immense humility. Astrophysicists are much more comfortable with darkness, emptiness, non-explainability (dark matter, black holes), and living with hypotheses than most Christians I know. Who could have imagined this?

[Daily Meditation: The In-Between of Things – Frame – May 8, 2013

Richard Rohr, adapted from *The Shape of God: Deepening the Mystery of the Trinity*]

Therefore – the future?

I still do not know how my call is supposed to specifically “show up” in life today. I do not know if the dominant part of my life is as a mom to Oslin, a spouse to Jeffrey, a community member in Takoma Park, a participant in the faith community of

Seekers church or with the community on Rolling Ridge / Still Point, a fiber artist and creator, or a project manager somewhere. On Tuesday, I have a second interview for a position on the Maryland Health Benefits Exchange project and I do not know what will happen next. Frankly, I am not sure God cares how "my call" shows up either. Since God is in charge, the specifics matter less, what seems to matter most is the way that I provide a means for the Holy Spirit to work and bring hope and love to all.

We are all called to live our lives with hope and love and faithfulness. We are all called to have peace in God's larger plan for the world. We are called to be grateful for how Jesus made things right. And we are all called to trust the pieces of God within us, the Holy Spirit, that help us to recall our place in the larger story.