

Reflection on the Scripture: Romans 10:5-15

[[The video of the reflection.](#)]

We all get seduced by something. Another round of solitaire on our computers. An extra beer after mowing the lawn on a summer's afternoon. Pretty stationery on sale (as if I wasn't already awash in note cards!). But we're not always aware of how seductive rules are. That's part of what's breaking Paul's heart in today's reading from Romans.

Rules give us a framework, a geography, a geometry to live inside of. There's a rule that says we drive on the right. Clearly a good idea to keep everyone going in the same direction on the same side of the road. But up here in Maine, the roads are very narrow and pretty twisty. And where my folks live is pretty scenic. So there are walkers and cyclists and no sidewalks and people swerving all over the place, and missing the signs when the speed limit drops from 45 to 25, and surging up on folks who have slowed to a crawl because they're fascinated with the view out to sea, especially after the remains of a tropical storm roll through and the surf is up. The rule "drive on the right" is such a good one, but it's barely applicable with so many obstacles. Yet we're so committed to living inside it that we get angry, we get livid, when people aren't following the rule.

Part of what gets us angry is that something we thought was under control is plainly, pointedly, obviously out of our control.

Paul is struggling to explain to himself, to the church in Rome, why more Jews haven't accepted Jesus as a Messiah. One of the ways he knows they haven't is that they are still convinced that staying inside the rules laid down by the laws of Moses is the way to salvation. Paul understands that, because he had the same conviction. When he talked about ascending into heaven (Romans 10:6) or descending into the abyss (Romans 10:7) he was actually paraphrasing Deuteronomy, where Moses was speaking about the reach of the Law.² Paul wants folks to understand that the world has changed with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Before, if you wanted to know who was in your circle of believers, you trooped around the edge of the circle, and you determined who was in and who was out. With Jesus, there's a whole new geometry. Jesus is the center, the point we all orient ourselves toward. Jesus is the focus, not paying attention to who is in and

² Kyle D. Fedler, "Proper 14, Theological Perspective, Romans 10:5-15" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 328.

who is out. When we focus on the center we can live as though the circle is infinite. Which it is.³

Because all along, from the giving of the laws on Mt. Sinai, to the giving of Jesus Christ as fully human and fully divine, living among us, to the rebellion of the Reformation, when Martin Luther parted ways with the Holy Roman church, God has been perfectly clear. God decides who is saved and who is not. Not us. We don't get to make that decision for others. We don't get to make that decision for ourselves. There is nothing we can do, no careful navigation, no set of rules we can follow that will guarantee our salvation. And thank God for that.

We need to orient our hearts and our words so that how we live our lives and what we say show that we understand that. Because when we turn our lives so they are centered on Jesus' love and justice, we act that way, we talk that way. When we turn our lives toward the One God raised from the dead (Romans 10:9), then death can't paralyze us. We can comfort the elderly in the nursing home down the street and act for the families in Lebanon reeling under the dual hammer blows of the pandemic and the explosion. We can speak up for the families in Syria and Yemen and on our own border where children need to be fed and the pandemic addressed.

Today's passage from Romans reminds us that God is in charge of salvation. This is good news for those who cannot do enough for God, and for those who claim that others are not doing enough; for those who berate themselves for not being good enough, and for those who disdain others for not measuring up; for those who wonder about the salvation of those whom they love, and for those who would withhold salvation from those whom they are unable to love; for those who come to the end of their lives and worry about their future, and for those who go through their lives never giving a thought for the morrow.⁴ God is in charge of salvation, not us. We are in charge of getting ourselves focused in the right direction. By staying focused on Jesus, we're not going to be seduced by the rules that let us pretend that we're in control. By staying focused on Jesus, on his love and justice, we'll help others to see what we see. That the circle is growing and there are way more of us in it than we could ever imagine.