

The Reckoning
Romans 4: 13-25
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Many readers of Christian scripture consider Paul's letter to the Romans among the densest and most difficult texts in the bible. The longest of Paul's letters not lost to history and the last to be written of those we are able to read in the New Testament, some read Romans as a summation of Paul's mature thoughts after a long and sometimes self-contradictory career. Paul was raised Jewish, schooled in Greek philosophy, and converted as an adult to follow Jesus. I think what makes his letters so challenging to read sometimes is that he's got a bone to pick with just about everybody. He thinks the Hebrew clergy are self-righteous and entitled. He thinks the Greeks are undisciplined and depraved. Even the churches he approves of he thinks need to shape up a bit. So when reading any passage of Paul's letters it's important to stop yourself and ask - who exactly is he talking to right now and what's the problem with them?

In this instance the target of Paul's ire is an exasperating guild of Jewish Christians who want their church to grow but don't want their church to change. The early church was determined to grow. It could only survive under the peril of empire by sharing the good news that all are welcome here. This was a church of extravagant hospitality. There was coffee and cookies. There were potluck dinners and small group meetings in various homes. There was a very gracious class for new members that facilitated introductions, heard prayer petitions and joys and concerns, discussed the values of the congregation and made sure everyone was...circumcised. Any questions?

Yes, you heard that right - circumcision was a requirement for membership. It wasn't such a big deal for many people in the early church. Most of the first Christians were also Jewish. Those Jewish Christians for whom circumcision had been a native right of passage saw it as integral to their faith. It doesn't take a whole lot of empathy - I don't think - to imagine why the Greeks who were uncircumcised saw this as an intolerable barrier to entry. So in the interest of opening the doors to the church wider and welcoming more people who would otherwise be excluded, Paul's argument here is for circumcision to be an elective procedure rather than a requirement. Yes, father Abraham was circumcised, Paul says, and Sarai was given a new name to go with her part in God's covenant. But let us see these personal changes not as tickets needed to pass through the gate but rather as seals and blessings offered to those who already belong. Isn't this an enduring truth of the Christian faith? We do not put conditions on the acceptance of others. We take them as God has created them.

I don't mean to put a triumphalist spin on Paul's victory in this debate - as if to say simplistically that Paul was right and those grouchy old timers were wrong. Rather, I tend to remember this as a potent example of an age old balancing act that any community is always managing. On the one hand there are distinctive shared values that define our life together. And on the other hand our community is made up of individuals and we are enriched by our differences. I can see that blessed tension bearing out in our own church life - not around circumcision, let's lower the stakes, shall we?

Maybe around the environment. We are the church of electric vehicles and home composters. What's your carbon footprint? Is it low enough for membership in our congregation? Or here's another potential test of belonging that comes up from time to time -

dare I go there? - what about how we are inclusive of different identities. Like how our church treats women or people with queer identities or how we talk about racial equity? Should everyone be required to attend a workshop? Or - what if someone goofs up and says something really offensive or just silly? That happens on occasion. Do they really belong here? Or, if what they've said has hurt me, do I really belong here? These are all good examples of values that we hold together as a community and values in which we are all still growing. I guess what I'm saying is, according to Paul's logic, you are not required to get it right before entering into this covenant. These aren't tests of our faith - but they may well become fruitful expressions of our love of God. We trust that our righteousness will grow as a gift and seal of our belonging here.

Bible scholars usually say that translating the New Testament is a fairly straightforward task. But another reason Paul's letter to the Romans is a famously dense and challenging text is that the Greek is relatively harder to interpret than other letters. Especially in this case, where Paul is splitting hairs with a nuanced legal argument. The English translators need a word to convey how God makes us faithful even when we lack faith. The text suggests that when we lack the will or the virtue God enacts it for us. There's not an easy way to say this in English, so the translators wind up deploying some archaic English verbs like the legal term justify, or the mathematical word impute, or - my favorite - because I used to hear my grandmother say it - reckon.

Reckon. Faith was reckoned as righteousness. I love that word because it suggests our salvation is a dramatic conflict - a reckoning - between our shortcomings and the graciousness of God. But it also makes me think about how certain decisions are made. When you hear an old timer say "I reckon" it means "I suppose so" or "I'll count that in." It conveys not a scrupulous accounting but rather a generous, forgiving approximation. That's how I imagine God relates us to us in the community of the church. Looking at us. Listening to the foolish things we have said. Witnessing the reckless things we have done.

I reckon, God says. I reckon you can stay.