



# THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – February 8, 2009

Put a Nail in That Door!  
The Reverend Dr. Allen R. Hilton

Romans 1.1-17 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup>Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God— <sup>2</sup>the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures <sup>3</sup>regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, <sup>4</sup>and who through the Spirit<sup>1</sup> of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God<sup>2</sup> by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. <sup>5</sup>Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith. <sup>6</sup>And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

<sup>7</sup>To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>8</sup>First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. <sup>9</sup>God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you <sup>10</sup>in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you.

<sup>11</sup>I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong— <sup>12</sup>that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. <sup>13</sup>I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles.

<sup>14</sup>I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. <sup>15</sup>That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome.

<sup>16</sup>I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. <sup>17</sup>For in the gospel a righteousness from God is

revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last,<sup>3</sup> just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."<sup>4</sup>

## I

The year was 1517 and the German town of Wittenberg was just beginning another normal German, Wittenberg day, with the sounds and sights and smells of morning. Mothers were walking their children to the greengrocers, blacksmiths were opening their shops, the aroma of freshly-baked bread wafted from bakeries, and the priests in the Castle Church were preparing for another day of serving the sacraments.

Now, amid this bustle and din of the early morning, something historic was about to happen, but no one knew that. In fact, I'll bet no one noticed their peculiar preacher, wearing the cowl of a monk, making his way toward the church's front door...with a hammer in his hand. They didn't notice that his hand was shaking as he lifted the nail and placed the paper, and they certainly didn't notice how hard his heart was pounding in his chest. The parson was just putting up another poster. No big deal.

No one could have known on that normal October day in Wittenberg that Martin Luther was signing his own pink slip when he wrote those 95 Theses, but the Pope himself would ultimately fire Luther a few years later – not only from his job, but from his church. He would be excommunicated.

No one knew that he was risking his own life, but not long afterward supporters would have to sneak him down dark allies from one building to another for safety's sake.

No one knew that in these sentences about church doctrine the Protestant Reformation of the Church was actually beginning that morning – or that because of that hammer and nail and paper, Christianity in the western world would

<sup>1</sup> Or who as to his spirit

<sup>2</sup> Or was appointed to be the Son of God with power

<sup>3</sup> Or is from faith to faith

<sup>4</sup> Hab. 2:4

change, and you and I would be worshiping the way we do on this bright February Sunday morning across an ocean and almost five centuries later.

This was some poster! On it, Brother Martin wrote 95 sentences that challenged the power of the Pope and Church over the fate of human souls. Over the centuries, you see, the Church had allowed itself gradually to paint layer after layer of tradition between itself and God. It was a slow process, with no one person at fault, but given years the layers added up and the varnish became so thick that the God at the center had become vague and distant. And God's love and acceptance came with certain conditions and quid pro quos. But on that October morning of 1517 Martin saw clear through the layers, and with that hammer of his he started the stripping. In a world and church where preachers were selling salvation for money in the form of "indulgences" – Martin Luther made the audacious and radical claim that God was the One who forgave sins.

And, you know, it's worth asking today what gave Brother Martin Luther the clarity of sight to see all the way through the centuries of lacquer to the pure truths of God. The whole western world lived with the lacquer. It was normal. How did Martin see?

Well, it turns out that he had been studying Paul's Letter to the Romans. In 1515 and 1516 Martin Luther spent two years reading and lecturing on Romans. In 1517, he put a nail into that door and changed the world.

And all of this makes our next question obvious. What was it about that first century Christian letter that opened Martin Luther's eyes?

## II

It must have been a pretty a normal afternoon somewhere in the Roman Empire, when a short bald tent-making rabbi from one of the provinces told an associate to grab a pen.

In the streets, Romans were doing what Romans do. Centurions walked their watch to keep the public peace. Rich patrons sauntered through the streets with their sycophantic entourages trailing behind, seeking favors. Over here was a lunch counter

selling bread and olives and fruit. Over there was a merchant selling rugs from the east. Most of the market-goers walked, but the loud click-clack-crackle of the few chariots and the strident voices of salesmen hawking wares made it hard for them to carry on a decent conversation.

And amid all that ancient din, the Apostle Paul did something that was altogether normal for him. He called his friend and co-worker Tertius and started to dictate a letter to a room-full of Christians who lived hundreds of miles away.

I say this looked normal, because this Paul wrote a lot of letters. He was a community organizer of sorts, traveling around the Mediterranean and building start-up groups for worship. He'd arrive in a city – say Corinth or Ephesus – and tell these people about a God who loved them and a Christ who saved them and a life that could be theirs if they loved that God back and followed that Christ. Paul would stay long enough to be sure the group had roots and leaders, then he would move on to do the same thing in the next city. But after a while, when curiosity got the best of him, or if he had heard through the grapevine that something was amiss, he wrote to those fledgling little living-rooms full and gave them advice or reminded them of things they had forgotten, or added what he hadn't had time to tell them when he was there. Follow-up letters these were, and Paul wrote them all the time. It was part of his work.

So when he asked brother Tertius to pick up a pen, it all must have seemed very usual. And as he began to speak, it stayed usual. "Paul a slave of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle..." He always began that way. Tertius kept writing. "Set apart for the Good News of God, which he promised beforehand through his holy prophets in the holy scriptures..." Tertius wrote. It was all very normal until Paul addressed the letter: "to all God's beloved in Rome." At these words Tertius suddenly stopped writing, lifted the pen and looked up in surprise. There was a twinkle in Paul's eye.

Always before, Paul had written to the Christian groups he had started. To Corinth about lawsuits and the resurrection; to the Thessalonians about Christian basics; to the Philippians reminding them to be joyful. These were all follow-up calls. But Paul didn't start the

famous church in Rome. Peter did or one of the others.

There was something very different going on here. And as soon as Tertius heard the word “Rome” he had an inkling what it might be. Paul was about to make a statement.

In the three short decades since Jesus was crucified, these early Christians had started little living-room-sized meetings all around the Mediterranean, in Egypt and Palestine and Syria and Turkey and Greece and Italy. They were all over the place, almost all begun by Jewish men and women who knew somebody who knew somebody who knew Jesus.

But in this army of itinerant church-planters, Paul was the renegade. He scandalously welcomed non-Jews as full members of God’s new community – without demanding that they become Jewish. For centuries the synagogues had been accepting Gentile callers, but there was a crucial condition: they had to be circumcised and embrace the full Law of Moses. God’s love and acceptance came with certain conditions and *quid pro quos*.

To this, Paul spoke a resounding, “No!” “God’s love doesn’t cost! We receive it as a free gift by faith!” And those kinds of words got him into all kinds of trouble. He lived in some physical danger of persecution. But more than that, his work was pilloried by his opponents. “Paul hates God’s Torah, the blessed Law of Moses,” they said. “Paul is teaching Christians to sin at will!” they said. Paul preaches lies!” they said. And some of his strongest detractors had reached Rome.

“Tertius,” Paul said with excitement. “Keep writing!” And in a moment flowed the words that would change the world. “For I am not ashamed of the Good News that I preach, for it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who has faith – for the Jew first, but also for the Greek.” That was the opening salvo of Romans. Sixteen chapters later, a revolution had begun.

It swept up the great Augustine of Hippo. He had dabbled in Christianity, but famously said, “Lord grant me chastity...but not yet!” Augustine was in a friend’s garden when he heard a small voice

beckoning him, “Take up and read!” and found a Bible open to Romans 13. “Let us walk properly, not in drunkenness and carousing, not in sexual immorality or sensuality...But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh... (13.13).” Augustine realized then and there that the God of the universe had a brand new life to offer him.

The revolution continued. It swept up Martin Luther, of course, who read that God’s love and forgiveness and acceptance had been offered to all humanity directly “apart from human Law”. And it didn’t stop there.

Two centuries later, it swept up John Wesley, who was a disciplined, dutiful, tireless laborer at devotional practices, but had never yet felt free. One evening Wesley happened on a little chapel on Aldersgate Street in London. When he stepped in, he heard Martin Luther’s Preface to Romans being read out. Later, in typical British understatement, he would recall that in that moment he found his heart “strangely warmed” by God. Soon Methodism exploded in England and the New World. And the revolution didn’t stop there.

I could quote hundreds of people in your generation, after Darwin and Freud, after the invention of the microwave and the microchip, whose real Christian lives began with the letter to the Romans. But I don’t have to do that. Just take your senior minister and my friend here out for coffee or a beer. Ask him to tell you about his faith experience. You won’t make it twenty minutes before you hear about Romans. And you can index the central themes that come out of this pulpit in Paul’s Romans, too.

- The dire consequences of human sin in human lives and communities – the way it hurts and fragments us? He got that from Romans (chapter one).
- Amazing grace that drives God to love you and me even before we ever lift a finger to serve? That’s Romans, too (chapter three).
- The mystery of God’s deep spiritual presence in our praying? Romans (chapter eight).
- Our desperate hope that God might transform our lives? Say it with me: Romans (chapter twelve).

Yep, the Romans revolution has even swept up your Senior Pastor.

### III

This Wednesday morning at 9:30 and Wednesday evening at 7:30 and Thursday morning at 6:30, something very normal-looking will happen. A bunch of New Canaanites will pull up in front of their church with a Bible under their arm and find a cup of coffee and a seat in a circle and start the usual polite chit-chat that comes before meetings.

And as this happens, cars will drive their normal way along Park Street, and stores downtown will keep selling their wares, and someone will be checking e-mail at Starbucks and the televisions in the neighborhood will play their reality shows. And kids will practice basketball at school and hockey in the rink and drama on the stage. And amid all the din of standard operating procedure in New Canaan, nobody will notice these cars and these people and these Bibles. It will all be very normal.

But then a leader will say, "Open to Romans 1," and normal will suddenly end. Bodies will lean forward. Minds will lean forward. Hearts will lean forward. And the revolution will continue.

And you know, I have no idea what the revolution is going to look like this time. Will it be a new burst of love for one another in this New Canaan church? Will you look more closely and listen better? Or will it be new outreach project, sparked by a God whose love for the world moves through the church? Or will it be your own very first true blue experience that the God of the universe really loves you as you are?

I don't know what the revolution is going to look like this time. Nobody knows that yet. But believe me, friend, the revolution will continue and you're going to want to get swept up.

Join us for lunch after worship. Join one of the groups this week.

I'll be back in New Canaan in April...to check for nail holes in the front door.

God bless you! **Amen.**