

September 13, 2026

Messy, Glorious Us

By Pr. Beate Chun

Across the Bay

Grace to you and peace
from the one who is
and the one who was
and the one who is to come.
Amen.

I live in Oakland,
and yet I serve here,
in this beautiful city of San Francisco,
which means that every time
I lead worship,
or do office work,
or visit people in this city,
I have to cross the Bay.

And that never fails to astonish me.
You never know what you will find
crossing the Bay Bridge.
In the summer I often start
in the sunny East Bay,
and then find San Francisco shrouded
in deep fog.
Other times I see parts of the skyline
poking out here and there—
bits of the Golden Gate Bridge,
or Twin Peaks,
or the Salesforce Tower.

And sometimes
the city is glittering brightly
in the morning light,
shimmering almost like a mirage.

And suddenly I am in it—
in the midst of the humming,
the energy,
the innovation,
the impatience,
billboards everywhere
advertising the latest technology:
cloud storage,
artificial intelligence,
high-speed internet.

And in those moments
the times and life of the apostle Paul
seem very far away.
And ancient Rome,
and the first Christians
who gathered there for worship,
seem to belong to a different universe.

All summer long
we have been making our way
through Paul's letter to the Romans.
And I have been catching glimpses,
here and there,
of what their life might have been like.
And some days
it feels like I didn't get much closer
than when we first began.

But then at night
I watch the moon rise,
and Jupiter and Venus make their appearance,

and all the stars come out,
and I think to myself:
Paul looked at this same moon.
And the Christians in Rome
to whom he wrote—
Prisca and Aquila,
in whose house the church was meeting,
Epaenetus,
the first believer in Asia,
Andronicus and Junia,
who were in prison with Paul,
and all the others—
they looked at this same moon, too.

And then I go to bed at night
and think over my day.
The things that went well.
The things that could have been better.
The things that were a disaster.
The blessings of the day.
The joys.
The heartbreaks.
The sorrows.
The comforts.
My worries.
My hopes.

And I imagine
that these ancient Christians
had many of the same things.
The joy at the birth of a grandchild.
The grief at the death of a beloved friend.
The fear of what the future might bring.
The puzzlement of living in a glittering city
where extreme wealth
and abject poverty
exist so closely side by side.

They were human.
Just like me.
Their congregation
was made up of human beings,
just like our congregation
is made up of human beings.

Sometimes we do amazing things together.
And sometimes we struggle.
Sometimes we have conflicts.
Sometimes we have to face a crisis
that we never anticipated.
Who would have thought
COVID would break out?

Who knows what the next thing will be?
We are human.
Sometimes very much so.
And after a summer
of reading and studying
and puzzling over Romans,
I have come to think
that perhaps this is one of the things
that Paul has been trying to tell us all along.

God is doing something
with human beings.
Not perfect human beings.
Not finished human beings.
Human beings.Us.

The Things I Want to Keep

And there were so many things
in this letter
that I wanted to carry with me.

So many sentences
that stopped me
and made me want to underline them.
“Be joyful in hope,
patient in suffering,
persistent in prayer.”
Wonderful words.
And then that extraordinary assurance:
nothing—
nothing in all creation—
can separate us
from the love of God
in Christ Jesus.
And the assurance
that all things
will work together for good.
So many beautiful,
comforting,
hopeful words,
written such a long time ago,
and yet still speaking to me
so powerfully
across time and space.
But there was one thing
I could not quite get over.
One sentence
that stopped me in my tracks
and took my breath away.
It comes in the eighth chapter.
Paul is speaking about
the glory that is to come,
and he says that this glory
is to be revealed among us.
Not simply:
someday
God's glory will be shown to us.

But:
God's glory is moving toward us.
Into us.
Among us.
And somehow
we are part of its arrival.
And that thought
took my breath away.

The Glory Coming Toward Us

Because Paul goes on to say
that creation itself is waiting.
Waiting for the revealing
of the children of God.
And suddenly
I began to wonder:

What if the Bible's story
is not primarily about human beings
trying to get away from this world
and get to heaven?
What if the story is about
God coming into this world?
God wanting to be present here.
God's love taking flesh here.
God's glory becoming visible here.

God Says: You

And what if God has chosen
human beings
to be part of that?
That is the part
I cannot get over.

And it makes me think
of Mary.
The angel comes to Mary
and says:

You.

You are the one
who will bear the Messiah.

Not because Mary
has become perfect.
Not because she has
figured everything out.
Not because she has earned
the right to be God's instrument.
But:

You.

God will come into the world
through you.

And I think of Isaiah in the temple.
A person with unclean lips,
living among people
with unclean lips.
And the voice says:

You.

You are the one
who will speak for me.

And I think of Paul himself.
The risen Christ meets him
on the road to Damascus
and says, in effect:

You.

You who have been persecuting
my followers.
You will carry my gospel
to the ends of the earth.

There is something about
that moment in Scripture
when God turns toward
an ordinary human being
and says:

You.

That is the moment
that takes my breath away.

This Is the Place

So often
we Christians are preoccupied
with getting to heaven.
What must we do?
How must we live?
How can we become
good enough?
How can we become
holy enough?

And meanwhile,
the Bible keeps telling us
about this God
who wants to come to earth.

This God who wants
to be on the earth.
This God who seems
to have an astonishing amount
of faith in human beings.
Human beings like Mary.
Human beings like Isaiah.
Human beings like Paul.
Human beings like those Christians
who gathered in Rome.

And also human beings like us!

To me, this idea is almost overwhelming.

I look around at the church—
at churches everywhere,
and at this congregation—
and I know that we are human.
We have our gifts.
We have our limitations.
We have our generosity.
We have our stubbornness.
We have our moments
when we are capable
of extraordinary things.
And we have our moments
when we are a complete mess.

And yet Paul seems to be telling us:

This is the place.

This is where God works.
This is where God's glory
is meant to be revealed.
Not someday,
when we have finally
grown up in faith.
Not when we have learned
to love everyone
and judge no one.
Not when we have
solved all our problems.
Already.
Here.
With us,
as we are.

Small Potatoes

And that is why
really appreciate
this strange final reading
we have today.

Because after all these
huge things in Romans—
grace,
faith,
Christ,
the Spirit,
creation,
the love of God—
Paul gets down
to something very ordinary.
People are arguing
about food.
Meat.
Vegetables.
Meat.

After everything
we have been talking about,
now we're talking about meat.
Really, Paul?

But Paul doesn't laugh at them.
Because he understands
something about human beings.
The things we fight about
are rarely just the things
we say we're fighting about.
It's never just the meat.
It's what the meat means.
It's who eats it.

Who belongs.
Who gets to decide.

And Paul
does he go ahead
and try to settle this argument
or help the find a compromise?

No!
He doesn't tell them
Instead he says:
We do not live to ourselves,
and we do not die to ourselves.
If we live,
we live to the Lord.
And if we die,
we die to the Lord.
So then,
whether we live
or whether we die,
we are the Lord's.

That is the thing.
Not the meat.
Not the vegetables.
Not our preferences.
Not our judgments.
Not our successes.
Not our failures.
None of that.

Only this: **We are the Lord's.**
And suddenly
so many things
that seem so important
become—
well— small potatoes.

God says: I Can Work with That

We spend so much time
worrying about things
that are, in the end,
small potatoes.
Our successes.
Our failures.
Our preferences.
Our disagreements.
Our need to be right.
Our need for other people
to understand us.

Even our ideas
about what a successful
congregation looks like.
Yes, these things matter.
Paul doesn't say
nothing matters.

But they are not
the ultimate thing.
Christ is the ultimate thing.
And whether we live
or whether we die,
we are the Lord's.
So Paul says:
Don't make the small thing
into the big thing.
Don't let the meat
become more important
than the person sitting
across the table from you.
Don't let your judgment
of another person
become more important

than the fact
that Christ has claimed
that person, too.

And so,
after a summer
of reading Romans,
this is where I have landed:

I believe God has
far more faith in us
than we sometimes
have in ourselves.

I believe God is not waiting
for the finished product.

God does not wait
for us to become perfect
before God begins
to work through us.

We were created
to participate
in God's life in the world.

To become places
where God's love
can take flesh.

To become places
where God's glory
can be seen.
And that means
our lives matter.
Not because we are
so impressive.

But because
we belong to the Lord.
And it means
this congregation matters.
Not because we are perfect.
But because God looks at us
and says:
You.
Yes.
You.
These people.
This place.
This imperfect,
beautiful,
sometimes frustrating,
sometimes astonishing
human community.

God says: I can work with that.
God looks at this
beautiful, difficult,
astonishing mess
that we call human life—
and says:
I can work with that.

The God who came
into the world
through Mary,
the God who called Isaiah,
the God who transformed Paul,
the God who gathered
those messy Christians
in Rome—
looks at us and says:
You.

And somehow,
through people like us,
God keeps coming
into the world.
For the glory of God.
Amen.

Sermon for Sunday, September 13, 2026

Presented at St. Matthew's Lutheran Church San Francisco

The final in a series of Sermons on the Letter to the Romans.

Text: Romans 14:7–13, 15:1–7