The summer of 1987, my dad and I drove across the country from Arizona to Kentucky. Somewhere west of the Mississippi, we stopped in a little town that boasted a link to the Gold Rush. A tourist trap or maybe a stopover for tired parents, there was an outpost where you could try your hand at mining in the trickling creek nestled between sandy stretches of land. We were given round trays that looked like homemade colanders and made our way to the shallow water. I can remember crouching on the rocks and dipping my tool into the silt, shaking it slowly back and forth until all that was left were rocks. No gold. I did it again and again, squinting in the bright sun and hoping to catch a glimpse of something shining back. I don’t remember if I found gold so I must not have; seems like something one would remember. But that process - the slow and methodical repetition of getting my hands dirty, of sifting through the muddy water, of attuning my eyes to what could be - that remains and shines through.

Paul’s opening lines to the Romans speaks of a relationship with all God’s beloved in Rome, a relationship that gleamed bright in their shared faith. While Paul does not know the people of Rome except perhaps a few he’d met in his travels, he knows them because of their mutual devotion and servanthood to Christ. Theologian Sarah Heaner Lancaster writes in her commentary on Romans that “Paul does not address his audience as ‘Christians’ because that term had not yet gained widespread use...instead, he says of all of them - no matter what their life situation or where they meet - that they are ‘called to be saints.’ Paul frequently uses the terms ‘saints’ to address the followers of Jesus Christ. [...] When Paul addresses Jesus’ followers as holy ones he is reminding them of their status as set apart for God, the Holy One. Karl Barth explains that being called to holiness means Christians no longer belong to themselves or the world that is passing away. They belong to the one who called them, to God.”

And because they belong to God, they belong to one another.  
Because we belong to God, we belong to one another.  
Because Paul loves Jesus, Paul loves Jesus’ followers.  
Because we love Jesus, we love Jesus’ followers.  
Because Paul loves Jesus’ followers, he longs to be mutually encouraged by their shared faith.  
Because we love Jesus’ followers, we long to be mutually encouraged by our shared faith...or rather, that is our invitation here, in this text and on this day when we celebrate our teachers.

---

When I was a fifth grader, my Sunday school teacher Marianne Humphries tenderly held each question I posed with hands that held it secure and let it grow wings. I was difficult - shocking, I know - and demanded to know why do people misuse the Gospel and how are we to be like shouting stones and what does God want me to do. Scripture and thus, Scripture lived out in faith and church - was alive to me and over and over again, my community reinforced that to be a child of God is to come back to the water again and again, trusting that there is still more to seek and find. I know this as a grace particular and unfortunately, I know this as a grace not universally shared by so many others. I have heard and held the hurt of friends who have only known God’s Word to be a weapon or a tool for conforming. People who have been drawn into a black hole rather than taught to stand in awe of the endless galaxy of Holy Word. People who have not been mutually encouraged as Paul aims to do for the Romans.

How does this happen? How do we move from places of mutual encouragement, of calling one another “beloved” and “saints” to pitting ourselves against one another? How do we move from a loose, Spirit-inspired faith to drawing lines in the sand that declare an urgency most anxiety-provoking? How do we forget that since the beginning of all creation and made explicit through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we all belong to God - all, everyone, in all times and places, no matter what, forevermore? How? You can see why I was a bear in Sunday School, can’t you?

Maybe there’s an answer in the words of Romans 1 themselves or rather, in the form of Paul’s words. I often wonder if the church writ large, the church universal, the holy catholic - little “c” as in universal -church does to Jesus’ followers what Paul does to me - confounds me and thus, isolates me. Paul’s letters entangle me rather than lead me on well-trod paths. It took me several readings to find the nugget of gold in this text and that’s not because it isn’t there but it is because I am easily flummoxed by anything that does not readily come to the surface. It feels as if I am back at that creek, dipping my sifting tray into the silt over and over again.

But, even with my shoddy comprehension skills, I am able to find the glittering truth: we belong to a long history of faith that claims all God’s people should have access to God’s Word. The Reformation found its footing because it took what was once reserved for the elite and learned, the ones who held the power, and placed its goodness in the hands of the people. The printing press enabled God’s people to physically and spiritually feast on Scripture and households of faith had two texts - the Bible and the Psalter. Suddenly, God’s Word and thus, the faith, was set free and connected saints of the church of all ilks and acumen. The glistening glory of God’s word wasn’t hidden in the pockets and pulpits of priests anymore. Paul’s hope for the Romans became the hope for the church - all can be mutually encouraged, all are invited to feast on the faith, all are welcomed into this wide and generous grace.
And, Paul’s hope for the Romans becomes the hope for the church then and now, through the saints that tenderly held our questions with security and freedom and the saints who sit next to us today in this sanctuary. Paul knew that God’s word was alive and active. The Gospel could not stay put for him but compelled him to share it and explore it and invite others to sift through it again and again, attuning their whole lives to seeking after the Lord’s glory. The Gospel cannot stay put for us, either, but invites us to stand in awe of its golden truth that is found over and over again.

So, remember this, saints of the church:
Because we belong to God, we belong to one another.
Because we love Jesus, we love Jesus’ followers.
Because we love Jesus’ followers, we long to be mutually encouraged by our shared faith.
May we accept this invitation and may we know it is not just for us but for all, giving thanks to God for our community who help us sift through, who treat our questions with an awe-filled and abiding spirit, who show us how God’s word can be set loose and unbind us to live freely in Christ’s embrace.