

Sermon – 9th Pentecost
Romans 9:1-13
August 6, 2017

“The Problem with Foundations is they Can Crack”

Words on a page can express or belie the feelings of a writer. Paul wrote chapters 9-11 of Romans with emotion, not just a historian’s scrutiny or a theologian’s methodology. A Jew, he asks “*has God rejected the Jews?*” Bear in mind this question was not asked in 1945, when the full horrors of the Holocaust were becoming known or in the 15th century when Jews were hounded throughout Europe by Christian governments and Popes, fed by anti-Semitic tomes of the sort uttered even by Martin Luther. Paul even wrote prior to the year 70 AD, when Roman generals Vespasian and Titus destroyed Jerusalem with such ferocity that even today excavators see evidence of blood in the soil around the city. No, this question was asked by Paul a mere 25 years after the resurrection of Jesus.

Has God rejected the Jews? A far better question particularly in light of the conclusion of Romans 8 where Paul says “*nothing can separate us from the love of God*” might be; “*can God reject at all?*” Paul’s answer is yes...and no. Of one thing Paul is certain, important to hear particularly through the noise of the politics of today - God did choose the Jews and equip them to be his rescue mission to the world. But also that Jesus of Nazareth really was and is Israel’s Messiah. What we today as Christians cannot afford to miss is the uniqueness of Israel – the Jews. Unless we accept and respect God’s unique call to Israel, we miss the point of believing in Messiah in the first place. Jesus is the culmination of God’s work begun in Israel. Israel is not some historic sideshow – Israel is the cradle from which our Lord emerges. Jesus really belongs to them - in a “fleshy” sense. Paul’s aim now in Romans is to identify children of Israel in the spiritual sense – persons descended from Abraham all right - but by faith, not birth.

The Jews are a perplexing case since they’d received such a unique and magnificent revelation of God in their history. But we err if we view this lesson as simply a wringing of the hands about or a scolding of the Jews. What “special” status the Jews may have enjoyed by God’s election they lost, like any believer in God can lose by becoming inattentive to our origins, which explain not just how we exist, but why. The story of creation – a Jewish story by the way, tells us we exist because God elected not to spend eternity doused in the praise of angels, but with foreknowledge created humans with a will to disown him.

We exist as a Church because God elected to give creation the capacity to praise again by means of the very human race that once opted not to. Adam and Eve were the first to so opt. Israel - despite periods of faith – was the next to so opt. So God chose the church and gave it a descendant of Abraham, Jesus, because God rejected death as the final word for creation. So yes, God can reject – but not those to whom God made a promise of life. If God could reject a people, then in fact there would be “*something that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” Being elected by God never results in easy and automatic superiority over anything, for, as the old saying goes, much is expected of those to whom much is given. Much has been given you.

In the year 1519, Martin Luther wrote a book called "*A Meditation on Christ's Passion*" inspired by Luther's own reading of Romans 9 through 11. Like Paul, Luther was adamant that God could not break a promise. If God could go back on his word, Luther said, he was no god at all, what he said would be no more reliable than things you and I say. Nevertheless, Luther said, Christians can fall into traps with regard to the faith. One such trap is to simply vent at Jews and people of other religions, warning or whining that their beliefs are so evil yet giving little consideration to how shallow our own beliefs often run.

Another trap is to use the passion of Christ and our faith as a sort of immunization against sin and judgement. With faith practices in good order and crosses around our necks or over our beds we think we need no repentance when to be Christian is by definition to know we continuously need it. Luther saved his harshest words for those who assume the rituals of the church, baptism and the supper in particular, but other things like confirmation were ends in themselves - forgetting they were instituted by God to remind us of his grace yes, but quite pointedly also to make us afraid of what necessitated that grace and put Jesus on the cross in the first place. As to these rituals, Luther said "*of what help is it to you that god is God, if he be not God to you.*"

What is the purpose of Christ's passion - is it not as Paul wrote in Romans 8:29 that we be "*conformed to the image of God's son?*" So comes the shocking yet beneficial warning of Romans 9-11. Israel, the apple of God's eye, possessor of the Covenants with Abraham and Moses, the prophets, and the Temple lost what they preserved for them - to right to bear the image of God to the world. So now we the church - we have the disciples, the covenants of baptism and the supper, the gospel, 2000 years of tradition, evangelists, martyrs, we have our congregations and our cathedrals, our Sunday Schools and VBS. What are they, if they do not make God...God to us, God with us, God through us? The Jews, our lesson says, had a foundation, and they didn't build upon it. That foundation was beautiful, but it did not approach the beauty of Jesus - the foundation of the church.

Every summer when I was growing up, my mom and dad prepared for our annual vacation to Clark Lake, Minnesota. Curiously one of my most distinct memories was how the night before we departed we would sit in the living room and speculate - even giggle a bit about this house in the woods about a mile from the lakeside resort we went to, that was not really a house, just a basement. Someone lived there, we never knew who though. Whoever they were they dug a foundation, put up basement walls and covered it with a ceiling, put in a cellar type door, but in so far as could tell no windows to let light in on a summer day or emit in the evening from say a family room - a sign of life within and a welcome to visitors. But someone lived down there. I suppose it kept them warm and dry. But it sure was odd. And obviously we kids remembered it. Why have a foundation, we wondered if you don't intend to build a house? Why indeed?
AMEN