

## “RAINBOWS THRU THE RAIN”

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32 August 20, 2017

In these three chapters from Romans we are covering in this series, Paul reminds us that we are more than believers, people who have a particular set of beliefs about him. Individually and together, we are his. Individually and together we step out, and we speak out, confessing he is Lord, that all our allegiance belongs to him, that we stake our lives on his life as we draw our lives from the Triune God who raised him, and will raise us from the dead.

We step out...in faith. And we also step toward and alongside those God has made our siblings in covenant through the promise God made long ago to Abraham.

For Paul, a Jewish Christian, writing to the church at Rome in the middle of the first century AD, a church that included both Jewish and Gentile members, this was obvious. Yes, Jewish people who were not Christians were often not friends of the gospel, as much as he longed for them to become so. But he was just as adamant, as we read today, that God has still called and elected them, friends of the Christian gospel or not, starting in the calling and covenant with Abraham. And he insists on this: God's calling and the gifts that come with it cannot be recalled or undone.

This was a critical word for Paul to say and for this “Jewish/Gentile” church in Rome to hear. Here and throughout the letter, Paul reminds the Gentiles at Rome they cannot dismiss their Jewish sisters and brothers or the inheritance of Judaism they bring to the life of the church. Actually, just a few verses earlier (17-21), Paul reminds the Gentiles in the church that their status in God depends

upon their connection to God's promises to Abraham. The Gentiles are now grafted into the tree of salvation begun in God's promises to Abraham, and the life of the tree draws not from the branches, whether natural or grafted, but from the roots. Those roots are in the descendents of Abraham.

It would probably be fair to say Paul could not have imagined a Christianity that was not vitally linked with Jewish people. Whether Paul or one of his later disciples wrote what we know as Ephesians, ongoing connection with Jewish people was so critical to the early Christian vision of what God's salvation was up to that the writer could say the mystery of salvation is God's action through Christ on the cross to "make one humanity in place of the two, [Jewish and Gentile]...putting to death the hostility [between them]" (Ephesians 4:15-16, NRSV).

What we know, of course, is that didn't quite happen. Jewish people and Gentiles (all the rest of the world!) were not effectively reconciled, neither in the Church, nor by the church. Instead, by the fourth century, there were hardly any Jewish people left in the church in many places, and we can hear by century's end from a leading Christian bishop (John Chrysostom's eight Homilies Against The Jews, in Antioch, Syria) a series of denunciations of Jews and of Christians who retained any association with Jewish people or their rites. Chrysostom's Denunciations were the seeds of the rhetoric used in later pogroms, exiles, executions, and genocidal actions against Jewish people by Christian nations, leaders, rulers, and other groups that have continued to promote the persecution of the Jewish people to this day.

And still we have this assurance from Paul: [The Jewish people] are beloved...for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Romans 11:28-29).

How should we treat those called "God's beloved?"

In the face of more than a millennium and a half of Christian anti-Judaism and segregation from Jewish people, how do we take a step forward toward fulfilling the early Christian vision of the mystery of God's salvation, "one new humanity in place of the two," a vision in which both forms of humanity and religious practice may continue to exist, and in which the hostility between us, is destroyed? Is it too simplistic, or too hard, to suggest that we treat them as our neighbors with the love Jesus has given to us? God doesn't take back His promises and he doesn't forget them either.

We sang the hymn this morning "O Love that Wilt Not Let Me Go."

O love that wilt not let me go,  
I rest my weary soul in thee;  
I give thee back the life I owe,  
That in thine ocean depth its flow  
May richer, fuller be."

Mary Beth Anton tells the story of her father-in-law Dean who died recently at the age of eighty-nine within twenty miles of the place of his birth. (Thought some of you might relate to that!) At his funeral the congregation sang a nineteenth-century hymn that he and his wife of sixty-three years had chosen for the occasion. And yes, it was "O Love that Wilt Not Let Me Go."

She continues her story about her father-in-law: Dean lived through the Great Depression, taught school in a one-room school house when he was sixteen, briefly played minor league baseball for the Brooklyn Dodgers, flew for the Navy in World War II, and during the war married the love of his life. With her, he buried their firstborn child, worked and raised a family of two children, sang at pie suppers, churches, and community events with his siblings, all of whom he outlived and mourned.

Throughout those eighty-nine years of a life well lived, Dean never forgot the Love that would not let him go. He lived out his Love and shared it with his family and neighbors, only rarely leaving the small Kansas town that was his home. Dean understood the nature and character of God: faithful, gracious, and merciful. He knew true Love in the love of his Savior.

God does not let any of us go. In Romans, Paul struggles to understand why his brother and sister Jews have failed to turn to Christ as he has. In Jesus he has found redemption and reconciliation with his creator. Why not them? If they have not followed Christ, what is to become of the chosen people? Will God reject God's own?

In chapter 11, Paul concludes that it is impossible for God to reject God's own beloved, those whom God has created and called, "for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (v. 29b). God did not let Paul go, God did not let the Gentiles go, and neither will God let God's chosen people go.

It is difficult for Paul to understand fully the love, plans, and purposes of God. Paul's comprehension is limited by his humanity. God's plans and ways are often beyond human understanding. As the prophet Isaiah wrote, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:8-9). Paul himself quotes Isaiah at the end of Chapter 11 when he asserts that God's ways are just even if God does not disclose God's mind to us (vv. 33-34). What Paul knows for sure is that *the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable*. He may not understand why everything is unfolding as it is with his Jewish brothers and sisters, but he trusts God with their present and with their future.

While we, with Paul, are unable to comprehend God's ways and plans, we may trust that God is faithful and good. God never lets us go. Who understands the way in which God has chosen to redeem the world? What kind of vehicles for divinity are a manger in Bethlehem, a cross, and an empty tomb on the outskirts of Jerusalem? A hymn text, perhaps by Thomas a Kempis, expresses not only the profound love of God, but God's mysterious way of offering salvation In Christ for all humankind.

O love, how deep, how broad, how high,  
How passing thought and fantasy,  
That God, the Son of God, should take  
Our Mortal form for mortal's sake.

The image of the father in the story of the prodigal in Luke 15 is another helpful way of looking at our text this morning. The father waits on the front porch, eyeing the road for a sign of his lost son. We are not told how long he waits. We know only that he faithfully watches for as long as it takes. When the prodigal returns, the father embraces the one who comes home, rejoices, and celebrates. The older brother is angry and refuses to attend the extravagant party underway for the prodigal. The older brother is not able to understand the Love that will not let the younger son go, or that the same Love embraces him. This Love is unconditional, not based upon our obedience, faith, or love. God offers this love freely, now and always.

In this spirit of love and reconciliation I want to share with you a statement we received from Bishop Ough, the president of the United Methodist Church Council of Bishops on Charlottesville. He writes:

My shock, dismay and grief over the clashes between white supremacy advocates

and counter-protesters in Charlottesville, Virginia, continue to grow. I grieve for the lives lost, and pray for the family of Heather Heyer, the families of the two state troopers killed while monitoring the Charlottesville demonstration from the air, and for the healing of all the injured. I am shocked by the blatant resurgence of white nationalism, neo-Nazism and racially motivated domestic terrorism in the United States. I am dismayed (and frightened) by the animosity, division, extremism and evil that is spiraling out of control in the U.S.

Let there be no excuses or political justification for the evil that was on full display in Charlottesville last Saturday. Nor, let us forget that many such displays of white supremacy, racism, and hatred go unreported or under-reported in many places. White supremacist and neo-Nazi ideologies are abhorrent and entirely inconsistent with the Christian faith.

Jesus called his followers to “love your neighbor.” It is clear this key spiritual imperative means all neighbors without regard to race, color, religion or national origin. And, Paul taught that “enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions and factions” are among many works of the flesh that are antithetical to the kingdom of God. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” (Galatians 5:19-23) These works of the Spirit lead to peace-making and the kingdom of God.

The Social Principles of our United Methodist Church are a clarion call and powerful witness in times such as these. “We affirm that no identity or culture has more legitimacy than any other. We call the Church to challenge any hierarchy of cultures or identities.” (Para. 161A, The Nurturing Community, page 110, 2016 Book of Discipline). And, from Para 162A The Social Community, page 120 “Racism, manifested as sin, plagues and hinders our relationship with Christ, inas-

much as it is antithetical to the gospel itself. Therefore, we recognize racism as sin and affirm the ultimate and temporal worth of all persons... We commit as the Church to move beyond symbolic expressions and representative models that do not challenge unjust systems of power and access.”

Martin Luther King, Jr. echoed a similar sentiment when he challenged the United States to transform the thin paper of the Declaration of Independence that affirms the self-evident truth “that all men are created equal, are endowed with certain inalienable rights” into thick action.

I pray that the shock, dismay and grief of Charlottesville will be a turning point for the U.S. and even our global United Methodist Church. We share collective responsibility to break our silence. We share collective responsibility to restore health to the communities and relationship out of which extremism, hatred, and racism grow. We share collective responsibility, as followers of the Prince of Peace, to create non-violent communities where people with different political and religious views respect each other. We share responsibility to articulate the vision of the Beloved Community where no person feels endangered on account of their social or cultural identity.

This collective responsibility begins by each of us examining our own hearts for the prejudice that contributes to attitudes of supremacy or hatred, or to violence, or silence or fear. Peacemaking and reconciliation always begins within.

This is the moment for the United Methodist Church and all peoples of faith to be bold in our witness against racism and white supremacy. The vision of the Beloved Community lies not behind us, but before us. I urge us to pray for the Holy Spirit to break through and work through The United Methodist Church to heal

our broken world and make tangible, visible the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Bishop Bruce R. Ough, President

Council of Bishops

The United Methodist Church

In closing I would like to return to Mary Beth Anton's story of her father-in-law who was suffering with cancer: Three and a half month before his death, my father-in-law's doctor told him that the cancer had spread throughout his body and nothing else could be done. He and my mother-in-law listened to the news, spoke with the doctor for a while longer, and then drove home. Tired from the outing, Dean went into his room to rest. The pastor of their church arrived for one of his regular visits and went in to speak with him. Dean did not choose to say anything. Instead he sang all four stanzas of a hymn he had learned as a child that expressed his faith and trust in Christ. He followed this with the refrain of "God Will Take Care of You."

God will take care of you,  
Through every day, o'er all the way;  
He will take care of you,  
God will take care of you.

This man clearly understood, and wished to share with his pastor and family, that God is lovingly in charge of this world and all who are in it. "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen." (v.36)