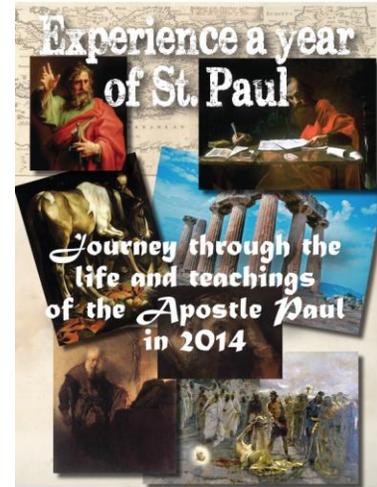


Sermon, Pastor Mike Button
Occasion: 10 Pentecost
Date: August 17, 2012
Theme: "Mighty and Merciful"
Text: Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

St. Paul Lutheran Church has been pursuing a year of St. Paul.

We've been digging into the life, times, and letters of Paul as our way of claiming our biblical identity. Following our Sunday lectionary, I started off the year with a series of sermons on First Corinthians. During Lent we explored chapters 4, 5, and 6 from Romans, and earlier this summer I preached on Romans 6, 7, and 8. Today I want to speak to the lessons we've been hearing over these last three weeks from Romans 9, 10, and 11.



NRS Romans 11

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. ²God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. ²⁹for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. ³⁰Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. ³²For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, may the Lord keep all your days and deeds in abounding love and abiding peace; for the sake of Jesus the Messiah. Amen.

Some of life's most difficult situations involve divided loyalties.



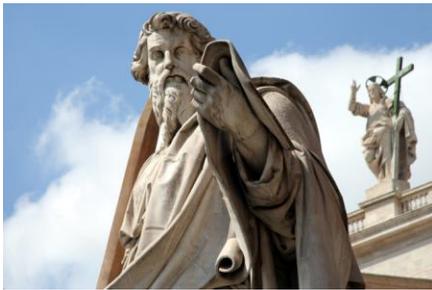
Of course, we always want to be true to our homes and communities, our neighbors and friends, but when we're forced to choose between people, places, or even institutions, the pain can be excruciating. Whether we're caught between competing factions at work, or colleagues who can't get along, or friends who have fallen out with each other, we often find ourselves in these painfully awkward situations that are hurtful to everyone. But of all the many conflicts, fights, and feuds that stress, strain, and divide our loyalties, the worst-case scenarios almost always involve our families.

When there's a divorce, or a contested estate, or a custody battle, families can be torn right down the middle, parents at odds with children, sisters and brothers at one another's throats, the very bonds of blood and affection stretched up to and beyond the breaking point.



Today's Second Lesson is St. Paul's culminating word on a deep divide in the Body of Christ that has broken his heart and, in a way, shaken his faith.

In Romans 9-11 Paul addresses the widening gap between Gentile and Jewish believers, not only in the church at Rome but in the whole Christian world as Paul knew it. Now historically, many interpreters of Romans, particularly Luther, considered the first eight chapters as the real meat of Paul's letter, while the remaining chapters were more secondary. But today the scholarly opinion is shifting to the conclusion that Romans 1-8 is really the prelude to what's actually on Paul's heart and mind in Romans 9-



11.

In the first eight chapters of Romans, Paul forcefully argues that Jesus Christ is God's fulfillment of the promise first committed to Israel.

In Christ, "who was," says Paul, "descended from David according to the flesh" (Romans 1:3), God has acted to overcome sin, death, and the power of the law in a new creation for all who will believe. By God's grace realized through faith in Christ, without works of the Law, Jew and Gentile have alike been called into the Spirit-led community of true freedom and all-conquering love. But to Paul's utter emotional and spiritual devastation, not all Israelites have answered the invitation to life in Christ's Body.



Paul's heaviness of heart becomes immediately apparent in the first verses of chapter 9: "I am speaking the truth in Christ-- I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit-- I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart" (vv. 1,2).



Paul's own family, his kith and kin, have divided over Christ, and the Apostle finds himself increasingly shut out and rejected by the very people to whom the hope and promise of the Gospel was first entrusted.

At the time when Paul composed Romans, Jew and Christian had not yet become mutually exclusive terms.

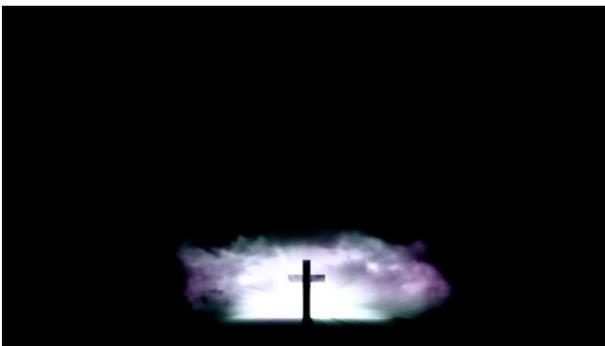


Even as he preached and proclaimed Jesus the Christ, Paul never denied his own Jewishness, and like Jesus, the first generation of believers were themselves Jews who confessed their crucified and risen savior the realization of Israel's hope. But well before the close of the New Testament, the wall of division between Christian and Jew was already well under construction. Across the Mediterranean world Paul saw Jewish communities closing ranks to

exclude Christ-believers, and more and more the Church was becoming an exclusively Gentile entity. Two weeks ago we heard Paul admit to the pain these developments were causing him, in Romans 9:3 conceding, "For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh."



To wish himself cursed and cut off from Christ clearly indicates how extreme is Paul's agony over his divided loyalties, but more is at stake here than just Paul's own anguish. The Jewish refusal to confess Jesus the Messiah raises questions not only about their salvation, but also raises questions about God's faithfulness.



For Paul there is no question but that salvation comes from the Jews, and further, that the promise of the Gospel is first to the Jew and only then to the Greek, that is, the Gentile (Romans 1:16). But if Jews will not accept Jesus as the Christ, has God's Word somehow failed? Have all the words and works of the patriarchs and prophets been for naught? Has God now dropped the Jews in favor of the Gentiles, abandoning his

former people to take up with another? Can we now just forget about the Old Testament? Did the history of salvation that began with Abraham just fizzle out, leaving God no choice but to start over again?

These are enormous questions that go directly to the heart of how we are to worship and praise God. Without a doubt we worship a sovereign God who answers to no one and who has the power and might to do whatever God will do. Paul is, however, swift to assert that God is not capricious or whimsical in the exercise of that divine will. God has not arbitrarily rejected the Jew in favor of the Gentile, but rather Paul insists that all who turn to God in faith, whether Jew or Gentile, will enjoy salvation. In last week's Second Lesson we heard Paul arguing from Scripture to stress the all-inclusive grace of God who wills to save all:

The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Romans 10:11-13)



Paul is, however, acutely aware that many of his kinsmen are rejecting the invitation of God's grace.

Seeking the righteousness of works rather than the righteousness of faith, Israel according to the flesh has, according to Paul, not submitted to the righteousness of God, and therefore stands under judgment. Paul insists, "Faith comes from what is heard" (10:17), but even after hearing the word of Christ, Israel will not obey. Which leads Paul to ask in today's Second Lesson, "Has God rejected this people?" (11:1)

Paul answers his own question with a resounding, "By no means!" The promises of God are eternal.



My old New Testament professor Roy Harrisville would rail at us, "God doesn't hand out wooden nickels." What God purposes God will accomplish, which includes the salvation of all of Israel. "For the gifts and the calling of God," says Paul, "are irrevocable" (11:29). Paul argues that Israel's rejection of the Gospel is really for our sake.

In the wisdom and knowledge of God, Israel has stumbled so that the Word of God may go forth to all nations. And once, in Paul's words, "the full number of Gentiles has come in," then shall Israel turn to accept the word of life in Christ Jesus, and "what will their acceptance be but life from the dead" (11:15).

God's will be done, and that will is mercy.

The divisions that tear us apart God will heal in a love that transcends all human reckoning. Through us, in us, with us, and sometimes even in spite of us, God is working to bring all humanity to the fullness of the knowledge of God in Christ Jesus. The divisions that to us seem insurmountable God will bridge, and once God's mercy has done what we never can, then shall the world be brought together in Paul's song of wonder:



*O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!
(Romans 11:34,35)*