

WHAT ABOUT THE JEWS?

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
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Isaiah 55:1-5

Romans 9:1-5

Today I am continuing my series of sermons on Paul's Letter to the Romans. I am drawing on the book, *Not Ashamed of the Gospels*, by Fleming Rutledge.

Throughout much of our history, Christian preachers have demonized the Jews. As you may have noticed, we preachers tend, most of the time, to base our sermons on the four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. We preach much less often from the Old Testament and the Letters of the New Testament, like Romans. This is a great mistake. One of many key reasons for focusing on the Bible *as a whole* is the question of the Jews. There is nothing in any of the four gospels like this section of Romans that we are looking at today. Reading only the Gospels—especially John's—and the book of Acts has given many Christians the idea that Jews are bad and bound for hell. Christians have taught that the Jews killed Jesus, that the Jews persecuted the early Christians, and that the Jews were rigid and legalistic and rejected the grace God offered in Jesus.

When you read the whole Bible, those negative stereotypes don't hold up, but many continue to preach and teach that way even today.

Even Paul—a faithful Jew himself—has been misused to slander the Jews. It is easy to get into trouble with Paul. His writing is complex and often emotional. It is in the form of letters, written to particular people at a particular time in history; his message is often ambiguous, particularly when we attempt to take it out of its context and extrapolate it to other times and places. It has been commonplace, for example, to portray Paul as antagonistic towards Judaism. From this perspective, Judaism is a rigid religion that is void of grace and one that, instead, teaches works-righteousness and legalism; it is a way of life in which you are constantly preoccupied with whether or not you've done enough to merit God's love and salvation. According to this point of view, people need to reject Judaism and instead accept the grace of God through Jesus Christ and thereby join the church, the community of the saved. In this view, Christianity has superseded Judaism.

That is not fair to Paul, or to Judaism, a faith practiced by our friends and neighbors with whom we who gather here Sunday mornings rub shoulders during the week. Paul did not regard the Jesus movement as a new religion (later called Christianity) whose purpose was to supersede Judaism. Paul believed that the God of *Israel* was about to end the present evil age with a massive apocalypse and replace the present age with a new world in which all things conform in every way to God's purposes. In this regard, Paul's thinking was consistent with that of many Jews of that era. Paul regarded the death and resurrection of Jesus as revealing that this great cosmic transformation was underway. The apostle believed that the apocalypse would be centered in the return of Jesus in glory to complete the transformation. He maintained

that in order to be faithful to the promises that God made to Sarah and Abraham, God made provision through Jesus Christ for the Gentiles—the non-Jews—to come into the community of the new age. The event of Jesus Christ demonstrated God’s faithfulness by showing how and when God would renew the world, a process that included a means whereby Gentiles could be saved.

Paul expected the apocalypse soon. Because the time was short, Paul preached Gentile believers needed to repent from idol worship and from qualities of Gentile life that were self-serving and unjust, adopting instead some essential aspects of Judaism, such as honoring the God of Israel and living in love in community. Gentile converts became a part of the church. Paul argued they did not have to manifest all qualities of Jewish life because believers expected the time to be very short between conversion and the second coming. For their part, Jewish members in the church did not turn away from Judaism and toward Christ but instead looked on Christ as God’s means of fulfilling the divine promises to renew the cosmos—promises that were now freely available to Gentiles.

One of the biggest issues Paul faced was resistance among certain of the other Jewish leaders of the early church—like Peter and James in Jerusalem—to the notion that Gentiles could become believers without also becoming Jews. Recall, for example, that in the Letter to the Romans, Paul devotes most of the first eight chapters to describing the world’s need of redemption, God’s saving act in Christ, and the new life that it has made available to *all* who have faith, both Jew *and* Gentile. Paul insists that God’s plans for salvation include Jews *and* non-Jews. He argues that God’s promises to Israel—the biological descendants of Abraham and Sarah—have been extended to Gentiles on the basis of their sharing in the *faith* of Abraham and Sarah. In other words, faith substitutes for blood relationship in creating sons and daughters of God.

This argument, however, raises the question: what about those who have the blood relationship but no faith? Quite aside from Paul’s rhetoric within the letter, it was already obvious that most Jews did not accept Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. They did not share in the faith of the Jesus followers. Paul himself within the letter asks the obvious question, “What if some [Jews] were unfaithful? Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?”¹ Paul’s answer to his own question is typically emphatic: “By no means!” The portion of letter we began to read this morning—chapters 9-11—unpacks Paul’s reasoning in greater detail.

It is obvious that the division with the Jewish community causes Paul great personal anguish. He says that for the sake of his own people, he could wish himself to be “accursed and cut off from Christ.” In order to bring about the salvation of Israel, Paul would take on himself the anathema of Christ. What follows, however, is driven not so much by Paul’s personal grief as by a profound theological question. Has God’s word failed? Does the fact that most of Israel rejects the messiah-ship of Jesus mean that God has failed? Does it mean that God has rejected God’s own people? Throughout this section of the letter, Paul will struggle to hold together two seemingly contradictory assertions. He will insist *both* that Israel’s calling is irrevocable *and also* that God’s word has not failed. Israel’s calling remains intact, he says, because God is faithful and

¹ Romans 3:3.

has permanently elected God's own chosen from within Israel. God has not failed, because the temporary exclusion of Israel takes place within God's larger plan for the salvation of all human beings.

Here Paul itemizes those things which belong to Israel: "the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever."² Notice that Paul says these characteristics of Israel are *gifts* of God. The phrase, "God blessed forever," at the culmination of the list confirms that God has freely granted Israel these privileges. Among them, notice, is the law, which Paul explicitly terms a gift. Contrary to much in Christian interpretation, the law is not a burden, but first of all a gift. And Paul doesn't say these gifts *belonged* to Israel (past tense); he says they *belong* to Israel. They are ongoing. So the church cannot presume to take away Israel's gifts. The predominantly Gentile church does not replace Israel or strip Israel of its favor with God.³

Paul will go on to argue in this portion of his letter that the continuing unbelief of most Jews (their rejection of the gospel) is part of God's plan to enfold and enrich the Gentiles, who had previously been excluded and impoverished. This, he says, will in God's time make Israel "jealous," and will lead to their full inclusion and acceptance. Indeed, the last will outdo the first, Paul says in one of his typical "how much more" passages. If the exclusion of the Jews means spiritual riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean when eventually they are brought back in again!⁴

Will that great day come because all Jews will eventually turn to Christ? Or will their salvation be assured on the Day of the Lord on the basis of their ancestor Abraham's covenant with God? Paul's language, frankly, is vague enough to allow either interpretation.⁵ I, for one, believe the gospel as whole compels us trust God's graciousness and God's promises. To cling to a teaching of contempt for our Jewish neighbors—contempt because we believe they will be outside God's grace until they profess faith in Jesus Christ—both reflects and reinforces age-old prejudices and sews the seeds of prejudice among our children.

The continuing presence of the Jews in the world is the sign that God is faithful, that God is true, that God is actively at work to redeem the world. It means that God has reached out to grasp the whole human race. It means that the story of ancient Israel, "the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises," all these great and wonderful things, belong to the Jews still, "for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable."⁶ The miracle is that they have been given also to us, the Gentiles, the heathen, the ungodly.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: this is not the story of some people way back in Bible days. This is *our* story. The good news today is that we stand fast, not by

² Romans 9:4-5.

³ Walter Brueggemann et al, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV—Year A* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 430-431.

⁴ Romans 11:11-12, 15.

⁵ Jouette M. Bassler, *Navigating Paul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 84.

⁶ Romans 11:29.

superiority to anyone else, Jew or Gentile, black or white, high or low, godly or ungodly, but by grace alone (*sola gratia*). We are held, not by our own efforts, but by God's own mercy. We are not "onto something"; *some One is onto us*. That's the gospel.

And so let us come, from east and west, from north and south, and let our souls be nourished at the table our Lord has prepared for us.

To the Lord our God, Alpha and Omega, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.