

August 16, 2020

Matthew 15:21-28; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

“Salvation for All”

In chapters 9, 10, and 11 of Romans Paul wrestles with why many of his fellow Jews rejected the good news of what God did for the world in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Paul’s problem in this section of the letter is: if the Jewish people reject Jesus as God’s Messiah does that mean God will reject them?

“Of course not!” is his conclusion. Paul is a faithful Jew. More than that, he’s a Pharisee of the tribe of Benjamin. He knows the Scriptures inside and out. And Scripture tells him God is good and God is faithful. When God never breaks a covenant. The Torah, Psalms, Wisdom, and all the Prophets clearly affirm God’s faithfulness. God chose the Jewish people to be a nation to reveal God’s love and justice in and to the world.

The Torah tells the story of how God chose Abraham and Sarah. God promised their offspring would become a great nation God named Israel. The Israelites were enslaved in Egypt. God chose Moses to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt to freedom and a land of their own. God describes the covenant through Moses:

“I will dwell among the Israelites, and I will be their God.”

Trusting that God is faithful and God always keeps God’s covenant promises to the Israelites, Paul answers the question: “has God rejected his people?” By no means!

Paul knew that God expanded the covenant with Israel to include the whole world when God became one of us in Jesus of Nazareth. When Mary gave birth to Jesus in a Bethlehem barn God entered the world in a new way. God and God’s covenant love and justice was for humankind. It was not limited to Israel. In Jesus God opened the doors of God’s kingdom to everyone, no exceptions. That’s why Paul writes,

“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’” (Rom. 10:12-13).

and

“... for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:26-29).

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ opened God’s kingdom to all people, Jew and Gentile, male and female, gay, straight, transgender, and everyone in between. With and in Christ

all binary choices are shattered. God's love opens God's reign of love and justice to all. No exceptions. In Jesus Christ God tells the world no one need be left behind or left out.

The problem confronting Paul, and Jesus, is that when such radically inclusive truth is proclaimed and shared with people, many refuse to believe it. God's truth threatens what many people and communities believe. Particularly when they believe God has given only them God's truth.

I see examples of this every day on the news and social media. Leaders from the National Institutes of Health and the Centers for Disease Control tell us wearing a face mask when in public, avoiding large crowds, and regular hand washing will slow the spread of the coronavirus that is devastating the economy and killing tens of thousands of people. And yet many people refuse to believe the truth that such simple measures will make a difference. The same people believe they are being lied to by public health leaders whose job is to protect public health. Many people prefer to believe complex conspiracy theories about the virus and resulting pandemic.

Such behavior is very human. I say that because sin clouds our judgment and, for some, leads us to believe lies and conspiracy theories. Some refuse to believe simple changes in habits can stop the spread of a virus and protect the public health. Sin convinces them "No one can tell me what to do or how to live." Sin tells me my rights are more important than any responsibility to protect my neighbors from potentially lethal illness.

When Paul entered a community to proclaim God's good news for the world in Jesus Christ, he always started with his own people. His first stop was always the synagogue. He shared with them the good news about what God did for them and for everyone through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The doors to God's kingdom are opened wide. Everyone is welcome and invited to claim their place, freely, without price. It is pure gift, amazing grace. The gift that costs those who receive it nothing, cost God the life of God's own Son.

Some received this as good news and accepted the gift of new life in Christ. They became followers of Jesus and his way of love and justice. But others could not believe. For them the news Paul shared with them was too good to be true. It was too simple and unbelievable. So, they rejected it, and refused to believe the good news.

Paul believed that while many of his fellow Israelites rejected the gospel of Jesus Christ, he believed God has not rejected them. That's what he means when he writes, "For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all." Because God is faithful, God will never give up on the Jewish people, and on us when we doubt and refuse to accept and follow Jesus.

It's part of human nature to put limits around God and God's mission. Even Jesus had to be helped to realize the radically inclusive nature of God's love and justice for the world. The Canaanite woman was a foreigner to Jesus and his disciples. She was a Gentile. And she was a woman. Which, in their culture, made her something less than human.

Her daughter needed healing and she knew this man, Jesus, had the power to make her whole. Nothing was going to stop her from helping her daughter. But Jesus refused to help her because he believed his teaching and healing power were reserved for his fellow Israelites. The Canaanite woman persisted and told Jesus, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table" (Matt. 15:27). When he heard the woman's response to his dismissal of her request for help, Jesus realized that his mission was to all people, Jew and Gentile alike. The healing power of God's love and justice cannot be limited by ethnicity and gender.

As followers of Jesus we live as his representatives in the world. Jesus calls and equips us all to be bearers of God's truth to the world. God's truth has power to forgive and heal. We have the privilege of being bearers of that good news in the world.
Amen.