

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 14A)

August 10, 2014

Text: Romans 10:1–17

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

A righteousness of the law or a righteousness of faith. Which is the one that leads to the hope of eternal life, the resurrection of the body on the Last Day, a glorious inheritance in God's kingdom, and that divine acclamation of "well done, thou good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of your Master"? One gives all that human hearts have longed for since Adam and Eve. The other not only leads to eternal doom but prevents the reception of everything eternally good and beautiful.

Your Lutheran minds are probably already thinking that a righteousness of faith is the correct answer. And you would be right. Our eternal hopes are established on simple faith and trust that Jesus did everything necessary for our salvation. But the righteousness of the law is so appealing to our human nature. Just tell me what to do. And I'll do the best I can.

This is exactly what went wrong with the people of Israel. The apostle Paul, in Romans 9, declared his unending anguish over Israel's rejection of Jesus, their long anticipated Messiah and Savior. They had everything going for them: the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the law, divinely prescribed worship, the promises given to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the patriarchs. Jesus was born a Jew in the very Jewish town of Bethlehem (9:4–5) to two very Jewish parents.

To this day, however, the Jewish people have said a collective no to the righteousness of faith offered to them (and to all people) from the Lord Jesus Christ.

We aren't a Jewish congregation. So what does all this have to do with this very non-Jewish, Gentile congregation? Everything, as we'll see!!

Paul restates his earnest desire for the people of Israel, "Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them (i.e., the Jewish nation) is that they may be saved" (vs. 1). Let's not make any pretensions here. The Jewish people have rejected Jesus. Consequently, they are not saved. Or to use another phrase from Romans, they are

“vessels of wrath prepared for destruction” (9:22). Without faith in Jesus there is no salvation, no right standing before God the Father.

I’m using very strong language to describe the spiritual condition of the Jewish people; it’s the Biblical language but it’s strident nonetheless. Two dangers must be avoided for us 21st century moderns. First, there has been too much “anti-Semitism”, hatred for the Jewish people simply because they are Jewish, over these past 2,000 years. It’s quite possible that the 20th century was the worst anti-Semitic time in history. Sadly, it still rears its ugly head in today’s world. What I am saying here today is not anti-Semitism for Romans was written by that most-notable Semite, Paul of Tarsus. As Christians, we are not permitted by Holy Scripture to be prejudiced against the Jewish people any more than any other culture or nation.

The second danger is related to the first. Many within various Christian traditions want to afford the modern Jewish nation and all Jewish people a privileged position politically and theologically. There is a lingering “collective guilt” for the atrocities of the Holocaust. Some Christians advocate that the Jews are still God’s chosen people with a special, saving relationship before God that is unique unto them. A related mistake is the idea that Christians must keep some or all of the OT Law: eat kosher food, keep the festivals, worship on Saturday, observe Jewish traditions, etc. All this is a horrific reading of the New Testament. For it denies them, the Jews and the Christians I just mentioned, the very thing necessary for the salvation of every man, woman, and child: a righteousness of faith in the Lord Jesus without the works of the Law. Both dangers, anti-Semitism and the Jews having a unique plan of salvation outside of Jesus, must be avoided.

But some might object, “Well, if they are sincere in their faith and live according to what they believe, won’t God save them anyway?” Sincerity in what one believes becomes the key rather than the right Person, Jesus, who is the object of saving faith. Such is the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, the largest Church in the world! I’d like to quote from Vatican II, “Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or his Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do his will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience” (*Lumen Gentium* 16 p. 367, ed., Austin Flannery). We Lutherans reject this teaching categorically. But it’s found quite easily. You hear it when people say something like “it doesn’t matter what you believe so long as you’re sincere in that belief” or “as long as your faith works for you it’s ok.”

And yet Paul acknowledges the zeal and sincerity of the Jewish people, “I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (vs. 2–4). When it comes to religious devotion, the Jewish people have been one of the most zealous and sincere people ever. But they followed a righteousness of the law rather than a righteousness of faith in Jesus. For that reason they are excluded from salvation and, like all who reject faith and trust in Jesus, have become vessels prepared for destruction and divine wrath.

It’s a sad truth, one that should cause us to drop to our knees in prayer for the Jewish people. May the Lord give us a sincere and earnest desire that the Jewish people might be saved and that He would use us to accomplish such a glorious task.

Ok pastor. You’re 2/3 through this sermon and you promised that all this would relate to us Gentiles in the 21st century. Here we go. The righteousness of faith is obtained only through the Gospel, the power of God unto salvation for all who believe. This saving Gospel leads to confession and steadfast faith in the heart. Look at vs. 9–10, “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.”

Now we’re back on more comfortable territory. Jesus is Lord. He’s risen from the dead. We’re saved through faith in Him. And that saving message comes to the people of the world, Jews and Gentiles alike, by means of preaching. If salvation comes through hearing a saving message, then somebody has to be a preacher. Vs. 14–15 established the divine necessity of the Church’s preaching office:

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!”

Feet are used for motion, to get you from one place to another. The Gospel is busy and active, moving from place to another. The beauty is found in the message being proclaimed. Sinners who deserve eternal judgment are forgiven, cleansed, redeemed, sanctified, and glorified with an eternal destiny that causes God’s angels to marvel in sheer astonishment. That’s the Good News of the righteousness of faith given in Jesus.

Herein lies a very cautionary warning dear saints of God. The Jewish people had everything going for them. They had God's Word and promises; they had preacher upon preacher proclaiming the grace and love of Jesus. But they reject Him to this day. We need to see this rejection, repent for our own indifference to God's Word, and seek the Lord all the more confidently in faith and trust. We have no promise, saints of God, that God's Word will always be so readily available in our country.

I'd like to share a cautionary analogy of the "passing rain shower" given by Martin Luther at the height of the Reformation:

"Germany, I am sure, has never before heard so much of God's word as it is hearing today; certainly we read nothing of it in history. If we let it just slip by without thanks and honor, I fear we shall suffer a still more dreadful darkness and plague. O my beloved Germans, buy while the market is at your door; gather in the harvest while there is sunshine and fair weather; make use of God's grace and word while it is there! For you should know that God's word and grace is like a passing shower of rain which does not return where it has once been. It has been with the Jews, but when it's gone it's gone, and now they have nothing. Paul brought it to the Greeks; but again when it's gone it's gone, and now they have the Turk... And you Germans need not think that you will have it forever, for ingratitude and contempt will not make it stay...." (*LW 45:352*).

We Americans need to heed Luther's warning and be so presumptuous as to think that God's Word will always be so freely available. Theologians, sociologists, and politicians of all sorts are already noticing the declining influence of Christianity in what has been called Christendom: Europe and North America.

One Lutheran scholar recently published an article discussing the global shift of Christianity from the global north and west, Europe and America, to the global south and east, Africa, South America, and Asia. Listen to this startling statistic, "In the year 1900, 82% of the world's Christians lived in Europe and North America. By the year 2014, over 65% of the world's Christians live outside of North America and Europe" (Douglas Rutt in *Concordia Journal* v. 40, no 3, p. 229). The greatest concentrations of Christians are found in Africa, Central and South America, and Asia NOT the United States or any European country. The election of Pope Francis I last year reflects this change in Christianity. He is the first Latin American pope ever and the first non-European to hold the papacy since Gregory III, a Syrian held it in 741 A.D, well over 1,200 years ago.

Today's sermon is probably the most unusual you've ever heard from me. Lots of quotes from various sources, references to global Christianity, the Papacy, and so forth. But there are two things I want you to leave with today. First, an absolute, joyful, steadfast confidence in the righteousness of faith given to you by the Lord Jesus. If nothing else stick today: let that be it. You are righteous in Jesus, an eternal child of the Father.

Second, learn from the Jews' rejection of Jesus. Today is the day of salvation. Hear and believe the preaching of the Gospel. We're in the "rain shower", to use Luther's analogy. But the signs indicate the shower is moving on. Our task is to hear, believe, and trust in love and grace of Jesus. In that righteousness of faith we will stand, now and forever. "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (vs. 13).

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.