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

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 15A)

August 17, 2014

Text: Romans 11

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

The nation of Israel has been the center of attention these past couple of weeks. The question about Israel centers on a fundamental truth about God. Does God remain faithful to His promises? For God promised Abraham that through his lineage, a great nation would be born, an elect nation, chosen and precious to the Lord. In the course of time, the Lord saved the children of Abraham from slavery and bondage. He gave them a Promised Land. They entered into a covenant with the Lord through the mediation of Moses. They were to be a light to the world. Through them, God's promises would find fulfillment.

That all sounds great except for the fact that the nation of Israel, the natural children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Israel according to the flesh, have, by and large, rejected the Lord Jesus Christ. And if the salvation of the world is accomplished through Jesus, then has the Lord cast off His chosen people? Wiped His hands clean of them leaving His promises null and void? Maybe you can see the difficulty. To concede that God could be unfaithful would undercut the very foundation of the Gospel. One of the most basic Christian and Biblical convictions is that God is faithful!! He can God be trusted to fulfill everything He says.

Today's reading from Romans 11 brings this discussion to a conclusion but it all began in chapter 9. In that chapter, Paul began answering the question "Is God faithful..." by saying that God will have mercy upon whom He will have mercy without regard to human merit or worthiness. And it's always been that way. Israel wasn't chosen because of their goodness or competence or relative worth but simply because God had mercy upon them. Divine grace has always been and always will be the foundation of man's relationship to God. That's true for Jew and non-Jew alike, no exceptions. To make the concrete connection to us, we too are saved by God's mercy, pure and simple.

Then, in chapter 10, Paul states that Israel's rejection is their own fault. God established that all who would come to Him in salvation would do so through a

righteousness of faith and not a righteousness of the law. Israel, in her religious zeal, rejected the righteousness of faith established in Jesus' death and resurrection and chose to pursue God according to a righteousness of the law based upon their own merit and works. God had determined that for everyone who called on the name of the Lord in faith will be saved, Jew and non-alike, for He is Lord over all. So Israel's rejection is her own choosing, not God's. To make the connection to us, if we pursue a righteousness of own merit and works rather than the righteousness of faith in Jesus, we will be rejected as a matter of our own choosing, not God's.

And that brings us to chapter 11, today's reading, which is the most pivotal in this current discussion. And it reveals the unfathomable nature of God's dealing with Israel and all nations on the earth, including us.

We begin with vs. 1, "I ask, then, has God rejected his people?" That's the central question. Paul provides three answers to this one question. First, he says "By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin." Just look at me! I'm a Jew and I believe in the mercies of God established in the death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus. Vs. 2, "God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew..." because "...at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace" (vs. 5).

In other words, although the majority of Jews have rejected Jesus, there are some who believe and have received the fulfillment of God's promises. Again, that's how it's always been. Even the prophet Elijah, one of Israel's greatest prophets, thought he alone remained faithful to God (I Kings 19). The Lord told Elijah that there was in Israel a remnant of 7,000 who had not given in to unbelief and false worship. At that time, the true Israel of God consisted of those 7,000 faithful men, women, and children. They were faithful because they trusted in the faithfulness of God.

In that regard, nothing has changed with the coming of Jesus. There is a remnant of true Israelites. They are the ones who believe in Jesus and have received a righteousness of faith through the good news that everyone who believes in Jesus will be saved. This congregation consisting of true saints of God, the true Israel according to the spirit, is made up of the faithful remnant who cling in hope to all the promises of God established in the Lord Jesus.

Paul's second answer to the question, "has God rejected his people?" is that God has used Israel's unbelief and rejection to bring about the salvation of the Gentiles, the

non-Jews of the world. And when Israel sees that they are rejected and the Gentiles are accepted by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, it will lead them to jealousy and thus lead some to salvation. Look at vs. 13a–14, “Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them.” It’s a curious conclusion but it basically goes something like this. The *hope of Israel* has come to fulfillment in Christians. It is the *God of Israel* that the Gentile nations have come to believe and trust in (Nygren, p. 395). Israel’s hope and Israel’s God have been received in non-Jewish nations; these non-Jews are claiming to be Israel according to the spirit and inheritors of everything God promised the Jews. Who do they think they are to receive our hope and worship our God? And according to Paul, some of these provoked Jews (!) just might turn to Jesus and be saved.

Isn’t that an amazing thought? That God would use even our less-than-noble emotions (jealousy, down-right irritation, etc) to bring people to the saving gospel of Jesus. Nothing can thwart God’s saving will. He works through it all to save many.

And Paul has the boldness to proclaim in vs. 15, “For if their rejection (i.e., Israel’s) means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance (i.e., Israel’s acceptance) mean but life from the dead?” In other words, God will use Israel’s unfaithfulness, their rejection of Jesus, to bring about not only the reconciliation of the world but to show God’s faithfulness to them in spite of their unfaithfulness. God remains faithful even when His people are not. That’s extraordinary good news for sinners like you and me. God remains faithful to you even when you struggle with your faith, when you sin in thought, word, and deed, when your life is careening in an abyss of confusion and uncertainty. God is faithful and will use all of these things to bring about your salvation.

Paul’s third answer to the question, “has God rejected his people?” is in many ways the most mysterious but the most important. Israel’s rejection of the Lord Jesus is the way God uses to bring about Israel’s salvation. “God’s way of salvation for Israel goes through unbelief to faith, through fall to restoration, through contingent unbelief to final acceptance” (Nygren, p. 405). Look at vs. 29–31, “For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. Just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they too have been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy.” Israel has chosen to follow God according to her own form of righteousness. That form of idolatry must be cast aside before – here that well – before they can be converted to

faith in Jesus, before they can truly be God's chosen people, Israel according to the spirit and not the flesh. The way of salvation is repentance and faith in Jesus. Period.

There can be no salvation outside simple faith and trust in Jesus. It's true for the Jews and it's true for every other nation on the earth. All must look to Jesus in His life, death, resurrection, and ascension for salvation, Jew and Gentile alike. "For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all" (vs. 32).

We conservative, orthodox Lutherans face a similar danger and temptation that the Jews have always struggled with. The Jews thought they were God's chosen people because of their heritage and lineage. They were Jews by birth and therefore God's chosen people by default. They had the inside track to all of God's blessings just because of who they were, or so they thought. How many Lutherans have made similar types of claims because of their Lutheran heritage and lineage. As the 500th anniversary of the Reformation approaches (2017), I fear this temptation will only increase. It goes like this: I'm a 4th generation Lutheran; my ancestors came over from Germany with C.F.W. Walther and the rest of the Saxon immigrants. I've got so many pastors in my family or my family established this church or built this building or dot, dot, dot – you fill in the blank. These things are listed as if they, in themselves, prove the person's fitness to enter into God's kingdom. All such contentions and pretensions must be cast down in repentance as worthless when it comes to our righteous standing before God.

Our salvation rests upon Jesus and Jesus alone. In Him alone we are secure unto salvation for He is faithful to His promise to save everyone who calls upon His name. And so we're back to where we began. Is God faithful to His people? Yes, a resounding yes!! He forgives, redeems, sanctifies, and glorifies His people. God did not abandon the Gentiles nor has He abandoned the Jews. They too will be brought to faith in Jesus according to God's mysterious working even as He brought about the salvation of the Gentile nations. God is faithful dear saints, faithful to you and to all His people, now and forever. That's always the answer. God is faithful!!

✠ 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.