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

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 13A)

August 3, 2014

Text: Romans 9:1–5 (6–13)

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

The apostle Paul has spent 8 chapters in his letter to the Romans describing the glorious power of God's mercy in the Gospel of the Lord Jesus. It really all began in Romans 1:16, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." The Gospel is the good news of God's gracious will to save sinners, Jew and non-Jew alike.

Paul continues by teaching that all righteous requirements leading to salvation are fulfilled not in man's willing and striving after holiness but in the righteousness obtained "through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe" according to Romans 3:22. Divine peace and righteous standing with God the Father are received by faith alone. For Paul declares in Romans 5:1, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Through baptism, we are united mysteriously, mystically, and permanently with Jesus in His life, death, and resurrection. Romans 6:5 says, "For if we have been united with him in a death like his (via baptism according to Rom. 6:3), we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." Baptism, a watery application of the Gospel, unites you to Jesus!!

Romans 7 teaches that we struggle mightily every day with sin. But by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Gospel we are no longer held captive. Vs. 6, "But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit."

On top of all that, Paul declares in 8:1–2, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death." Not even death has power over Christians. It's all abolished, set a naught, negated through powerful Gospel of the living Lord Jesus Christ. The Gospel gives complete, absolute, and total victory over every evil.

Eight chapters have declared the beauty and grandeur and glory of the good news that sinful men, women, and children are saved from a hellish eternity through simple faith in Jesus; a salvation received by grace as declared in God's holy Word.

But there's a problem. If the Christian Gospel is so good and God is so faithful, then what about the Jews? They, by and large, have rejected this Gospel established by their Messiah. Aren't they God's chosen people? How can they be the "chosen ones" and yet have rejected the fulfillment of God's promises?

Chapters 9–11 address the thorny problem of the Jews who have, generally speaking, rejected the teaching of Jesus. Keep in mind the apostle Paul was himself a Jew. He knows and feels this dilemma keenly and painfully. The Jews' rejection of Jesus is an easy target for critics of Christianity. You Christians claim Jesus is the fulfillment of God's OT promises. You claim He's the Messiah, the very Son of God sent to save His people and make good on saving promises going back to Adam and Eve, Abraham and the patriarchs, through kings and prophets, etc. And yet the very people to whom those promises were given, the elect, chosen people of God, have collectively said "no thanks." This is no insignificant critique. That's some Savior, not even His own people received Him. And you expect non-Jews to believe in Jesus? Good luck with that!!

Listen to Paul's deep-seating agony over the situation. Today's reading, Romans 9:1–3, "I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh." Paul begins by placing himself under oath: speaking the truth in Christ...witnessed by the Holy Spirit. His sorrow is "unceasing", night and day, day by day, because God's people have rejected their Savior, the Lord Jesus. The anguish is so deep that He even considers the unthinkable, eternal separation from the Lord Jesus if it meant the salvation of his Jewish people.

That's a difficult standard to follow, such a deep mixture of patriotic love for one's own culture and nation with an evangelistic desire that as many as possible might be saved. I have always struggled with Paul's statement. I don't doubt his sincerity but the propriety of the request. Is this how fervent our evangelistic desire should be? To love one's people so much, to hurt so deeply because of their rejection of the Gospel, that you would even give up you own gracious salvation if that would bring about their salvation.

I struggle with Paul's sentiment for a couple of reasons; one personal, the other theological. First, I must confess that I'm not so noble. I don't think I would be willing to suffer the eternal judgment of hell for the sake of even millions of Americans. I do believe I am willing to die physically for my country, in battle or in some other situation. But to die eternally for the citizens of the United States, not once but an everlasting death, I just don't think I have it in me. Second, and more importantly, I have a theological question. Are we not to fear, love, and trust in God above all things? To love Him with our heart, soul, mind, strength, and body? How could I love my people more than God? And did not Jesus already suffer hell for them on Good Friday?

Alas, it's hard for me to sort out. Except to say that when you have been justified in Christ and are united to Him, you become more and more like Him. His love becomes your love, His desires your desires. And Jesus did love this world in such consuming totality that He willingly suffered the torments of hell in order to save the world. Paul's anguish may, in fact, be one of the greatest confessions of being conformed to Jesus in all of Holy Scripture.

But I must also say that nowhere in the Bible are we called upon to give up our salvation for another. Nonetheless, our prayer should be that the Lord would kindle within each of us a consuming passion for reaching the lost of our nation. You've heard me say this numerous times but it bears repeating. All evangelistic activity begins at home: husbands and wives evangelizing each other, parents evangelizing kids, kids evangelizing parents and grandparents. Aunts, uncles, cousins, in-laws, each sharing the saving Gospel with immediate and extended family. We mustn't think that our baptized family members don't need to hear the Gospel. Remember Romans 7. The good I would do I don't do; the evil I would avoid I do anyway. Christians daily need to be evangelized with the Gospel!!

And then reach out to close friends and not-so-close friends, acquaintances at work, folks in the neighborhood, people in the grocery store, strangers walking on the sidewalk. I remember one pastor asking a question of a large group of church workers, "Do you have any non-Christian friends? Do you invite non-Christians to dinner?" His point was how can you reach out to unbelievers if you don't interact meaningfully with non-Christians.

And we mustn't kid ourselves into thinking that most of America is Christian. Or that most of the people in Burns/Kimball are Christian. They are not. The majority of our

fellow-citizens are not in church on any kind of regular basis and do not live out any kind of consistent Christian life. Regarding the spiritual condition of our country... we can no longer agree on some of the most basic Biblical teachings, teaching that were taken for granted even before our founding as a nation. For example: marriage is between one man and one woman; that all human life from conception to natural death is intrinsically precious and worthy of protection; that virtue is better than vice; that good ought to be celebrated and evil deplored. Such a basic Christian ethic is lost in our country. It needs to be re-evangelized. It must begin at home and move out from there.

Dear saints of God, this is our time as God's remnant people to reach out to our community in prayer, witnessing, and works of Christian love.

Paul answers the question about Jesus, the Savior, being rejected in vs. 6 and vs. 15, "But it is not as though the word of God has failed" and "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." In other words, in the midst of rejection, God's Word continues to do its work. Through that Word so clearly and beautifully proclaimed in the first 8 chapters, God's compassion and mercy are received.

From the very beginning, Christianity has experienced rejection and persecution. In just such a context, the Church has grown. Though we feel anguish over the spiritual condition of our community, our nation, and the world, we confess, nonetheless, that the Church cannot be destroyed. People will hear and believe. Many will not. The failures of God's people and of nations cannot thwart God's Word. There is no "golden age" of Christianity, except today. Today is the day of salvation. God's Word will not fail and our God who gave of Himself completely and without reservation unto death and resurrection will have compassion and mercy.

So we're really back to where it all began in the first place. Jesus will build His Church. He uses us to be sure. But He builds His Church certainly, surely, and victoriously all the same. His steadfast love endures forever (Psalmody of the day).

✠ 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.