

Sermon, August 20, 2023

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32
"But What About the Jews?"

I preface this sermon by stating the obvious. Jesus was a Jew, as were all of his disciples. For the first couple of decades of the church's history it was considered a Jewish sect. But, rather quickly, more and more Gentiles began joining, which led to some tensions, as we can see in letters such as 1st and 2nd Corinthians. For example, Jewish members of the sect were insisting that Gentile converts be circumcised - a sign of God's covenant, but which the Gentiles resisted.

Following the Roman's destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, Judaism and Christianity began to go their separate ways. But we can see evidence of the coming split in today's reading where Paul writes, "I ask, has God rejected his people? By no means!" "God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew". Paul asks this question because there were those in the early church who believed that to be the case. Notice that Paul twice refers to the Jews as "his people" - that is - God's people.

Jumping down to verse 25 it says that "a hardening has come upon a part of Israel". A "hardening" in biblical terms refers to a sort of stubbornness, refusing to believe or accept something. An example of that would be the hardening of Pharaoh's heart when God told him to let his people go. In this case the hardening would refer to a portion of the Israelites refusal to accept Jesus as the Messiah. But is that fair?

They did not accept Jesus as Messiah because he did not fit their expectations of what the Messiah would do or be. In the words of Barbara Brown Taylor, "He simply did not do what Jewish scripture said a messiah would do. He did not rebuild the Jerusalem Temple. He did not usher in the age of peace on earth, so that wolves and lambs lay down together and no one learned war anymore. Most Christians expect these things to happen when the Son of God comes *again*, but that is where Jews and Christians part ways".

But to my mind, that is where the tragedy comes in. Why should Jews and Christians part ways? Do we not worship the same God?

In today's reading Paul states, "As regards the gospel they are enemies of God for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved; for the sake of their ancestors; for

the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable". In other words, God had made a covenant with the Israelites, and God is not a breaker of covenants! Paul's comment about them being "enemies of God" in regard to the gospel, is unfortunate, and it is comments like that within the New Testament that helped bring about the world's oldest form of bigotry- antisemitism!

Down through the centuries antisemitism has persisted with some Christians referring to them as such things as 'Christ-killers' - but it was a very small portion of the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem who conspired with the Romans, and the Romans executed Jesus not for religious reasons, but for political reasons. They saw him as an insurrectionist against the empire.

Of course, the ultimate sin against the Jews took place in the 1930s and 40s with the Holocaust- the murder of six million Jews, and, today, antisemitism is once more on the rise both here and abroad. Such meaningless hatred has got to stop - not just between Christians and Jews, but between all the world's great religions. In the words of Hans Kung 'There can be no peace in the world without peace between the religions. Religious fundamentalism and exclusivism is one of the greatest threats to world peace. I pray for the day when we realize that there is but one God. There are many pathways to the sacred and divine, and we choose the one that we feel called to, but that does not mean that we must denigrate those who choose a different way. I consider myself to be committed to the Christian faith, and try to follow the ways of Jesus, but that does not mean I cannot benefit from the wisdom teachings of other faiths, and it certainly doesn't mean I have to discriminate against others, be they Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, or Hindus. This does not mean we have to accept all their beliefs, but we do have to respect their right to think and worship differently. We also must recognize that there is such a thing as bad religion. As a former professor of mine used to say, "Correctly understood religion is one of the most constructive forces on earth. Wrongly understand, the most destructive. We only need to look to the twin towers in New York to understand that.

My church in Queens was surrounded by a Quaker meeting house, a Jewish synagogue, a Roman Catholic Church, Sufi, Hindu, and Buddhist temples, and an Islamic Mosque, and it was a reminder that as our country becomes more religiously

diverse, we have to become more understanding, and much less judgmental, if we are to maintain peace and harmony within.

As Barbara Taylor said, “most Christians expect these things to happen when the Son of God comes again”, and in some ways he has already come again. He comes whenever the Church acts as the Body of Christ, and as such seeks peace in the world - peace based on love of the whole Creation and all its people. We may not reach a time when people learn of war no more, but we have an obligation to work in that direction. Amen.

Let us pray: Gracious God, Lord of the Universe, we praise your Holy Name, and rejoice at the presence of your Spirit here among us. We are grateful that you gave to us your Son Jesus to lead us in the ways of Justice, peace, and love. Forgive us when we fail to do so. Help us to do away with the hatefulness that plagues this country and this world. Today we especially pray for our brothers and sisters of Jewish faith, a people who have long felt the sting of prejudice and intolerance. We share the same scriptures and the same God and recognize that we are all children of Abraham. Let us never forget the evils of the Holocaust and strive for a world where such a thing should never happen again. We pray as well for greater understanding between all the great religions of the world, recognizing that religious illiteracy places world peace in jeopardy. May peace reign in our hearts, in our communities, in our nation and the world. Amen.