

Mercy on All

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: “The Lord works in mysterious ways.” So the Scriptures assert, and so we just sang. And what it means is that the Lord gets done the things he wants done by using methods and means that don’t, on the surface at least, make a lot of sense to us.

A good example of this is what St. Paul is discussing in this morning’s Epistle lesson. It’s what we might call the Jewish question, and the idea is essentially this: from the beginning the Lord chose one nation above all others, the nation of Israel, to be his special people. To them alone gave his Word and his promises. He gave them his priests and prophets to keep his Word before the people. He gave them the Holy Land as a place for them to dwell. He gave them his abiding presence in the Temple. And through this chosen nation he brought his Son into the world – exactly as he’d promised – in order to fulfill his Word to their father, Abraham, to bless all nations on earth through his Seed. So it’s easy to see that from the time the Lord called Abraham, say around 2200 BC, to the time of Christ, there was a tremendous spiritual advantage to being born an Israelite (a nation which by the time of Christ had been reduced pretty much to just one tribe, namely the tribe of Judah, from which we get the word Jew; and so please understand that for the purposes of this sermon, I’ll be using the terms Israelite and Jew interchangeably). Got all that?

Okay. So we’ve got all these especially blessed and privileged people: the Jews. But along comes the latter part of the first century. Jesus has come. He’s performed his ministry. He’s died on the cross for the sins of the world. He’s been raised from the dead. He’s ascended into heaven. And now the Gospel is going forth, the good news that in Jesus God has reconciled the world to himself and that sinners are declared righteous and granted eternal life through faith in him. It’s wonderful. The church of Christ is experiencing phenomenal growth. People everywhere from every race, tribe, and tongue are coming into the kingdom of God. Whereas before the saving grace of God fell almost exclusively on one fairly small group of people, now his grace was overflowing to all nations. And while this is true, for the most part, the Jewish people themselves were being left behind. Though they had this tremendous history of God’s care and were favored above all nations with his gracious gifts, they, more than any other group of people, were rejecting the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Not all of them rejected Jesus, of course. I mean the earliest Christians were Jews. All of the disciples were. And so were the 120 believers upon whom the Holy Spirit came on the first Christian Pentecost, and also the 3000 new converts who were baptized that day – all of them were Jews. But the vast majority of God’s chosen people rejected Christ and his saving message. As the Word went forth, it was predominantly among the Gentiles (the non-Jews) that the Gospel found its most fertile soil. We even see this during the ministry of Jesus. Among his own people, Jesus was frequently amazed by their lack of faith. On the other hand, there were only two people Jesus ever commended for having great faith. One we heard about in today’s Gospel. She was a Canaanite, a Gentile. The other was a Roman centurion; also a Gentile.

And in today’s Epistle, Paul is writing to the mainly Gentile congregation at Rome. And they’re sitting there thinking, “This is weird. How is it that God’s chosen nation – the folks who had all the advantages – don’t believe; but we who are the formerly neglected, pagan, jonnycome-latelies do? What’s up with that? And more to point, how should we look at these

unbelieving Jews? Since now we're in and they're out of God's kingdom, should we think of them as having been rejected by God? Has the Lord finally given up on that stiff-necked and stubborn race? And does this mean that we are somehow better than they are that we're so faithful to the Word of truth and they're not?"

Regarding this last question, it needs to be said that the biggest error of the Israelites was to think of themselves as being something extraordinary. The prevalent thought among them was "God chose us *because* ... because we're better, more noble, more obedient, more faithful, more spiritual, more *something*." But exactly the opposite was true. They were chosen by God and given all his benefits by his grace alone. As a matter of fact, that was the point in his choosing such a relatively small, insignificant, and (there's no other way to say this) *rebellious* group of people. The point is they were utterly *undeserving* of the honors and privileges the Lord heaped upon them. That's what God's grace is all about. It's favor and blessing granted by the Lord to those *who do not in any way merit* such treatment. The Lord chose Israel to *showcase* his grace – to make it shine that much more brightly – by picking such obviously *undeserving* people. It helped communicate to everyone the comforting idea that "If the Lord could choose, forgive, bless, and love those obstinate Jews despite all their faults, then he surely will do those things for me too, no matter how weak, wretched, and sinful I am. So no, going back to the question, the last thing Gentile believers should conclude is the reason they're in and most of the Jews are out is because they, the Gentiles, are somehow better than the Jews. No. *No one deserves God's grace*. No one can lay claim to any credit before him. *Everyone* who comes to saving faith in Christ does so by God's grace alone.

Hopefully that's clear; but what about the first question? Should Gentile Christians conclude that the Lord has rejected the Jews and cast them aside – that he's withdrawn his favor from them? This is the question Paul answers at the beginning of the section we heard. And he answers it with what is in Greek a most emphatic negative statement. "By no means!" It's like "Forget it. It's not possible. Don't even think such a thing." He proves it by pointing to himself. "I'm a Jew – and I wasn't one of the people who followed Jesus during his ministry. I came to saving faith in Christ much later." He goes on to explain that "the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable." The Lord didn't slam the door shut on the Jews so that he could open it for Gentiles. Instead the door has been widened to accommodate all. And that's true even though most of the Jews – like the prodigal son's older brother – are refusing the Father's gracious invitation to come inside and join the celebration.

Paul further explains that the Lord very much wants Jews to be united with Jesus in the Christian Church. For the sake of their forefathers, they have a special place in the heart of God. He loves them and aches for their return to him. At the same time, however, Paul explains how their rejection of Christ and his Gospel has served and is continuing to serve God's purposes. He writes "their rejection is the reconciliation of the world." What he means is that it was Jewish opposition to Jesus that caused his death on the cross. The atonement Jesus offered to his heavenly Father for our sins when he gave up his life came about precisely because the Jews rejected Jesus. The Lord used their sin and unbelief for the good of everyone. Their chief priests and religious leaders, though they didn't know it, were actually fulfilling their function by offering up the Son of God as the sacrifice for the sins of the world.

Likewise, at the time Paul wrote this, ongoing Jewish persecution of Christians was helping the Church by causing the Gospel to be spread. Remember that initially all the Christians were in Jerusalem. And they more or less would have stayed there all comfortable and happy, keeping the Gospel largely to themselves had it not been for the persecutions launched against them by unbelieving Jews. Their attacks invariably backfired. Whenever

Jews started making life miserable for Christians, some of them would flee to safer places. And there they'd meet the neighbors and introduce Christ to them. Next thing you knew, a new Christian congregation sprang up. So what the Jews were doing was like trying to stop a dandelion infestation in their lawn with a fan. All they ended up doing was blowing seeds all over the yard. But there were other Christians who didn't flee. These stood their ground boldly confessing the truth of Christ in the face of great suffering. And doing so they gave powerful witness to what they believed. It made people ask, "What is it they've got that they're so willing to suffer and die for? How can they be so calm, fearless, and even forgiving of their persecutors under such trials?" Seeking the answers to such questions led more people to Christ.

And this is why Paul says of the unbelieving Jews "they are enemies of God for your sake." He's telling the Gentile Christians at Rome that the event that saved the world, the death of Jesus on the cross, wouldn't have happened were it not for his rejection by the Jews. And even if the atonement had taken place, you folks in far away Rome would never have heard about it had it not been for their persecution of Christians. And Paul knew something about the persecuting Christians, for that's what he had done at one time. *He* had been the enemy of God. He had imprisoned, tortured, and helped condemn to death the followers of Jesus. But despite all this, the Lord showed him his grace and favor, converted him to the true faith, forgave all his offenses, and – most astonishingly of all – even appointed him an apostle—a messenger of the very Gospel he had tried so hard to destroy.

And this, says Paul, is why he was now working so hard to spread the Gospel among the Gentiles. He wanted to make his fellow Jews jealous. He wanted them to see what a mighty work the Lord was doing in building his Church, and how all their efforts to stop or destroy it were doomed to fail. He wanted to drive them to frustration and despair precisely so that some of them at least would be forced to see and admit that they too were the enemies of God and were fighting against him. Then they too, like Paul, by seeing their sins, could be the recipients of God's grace and mercy in Christ. It's a mysterious thing, but it often happens that those who are most opposed to Christ are far closer to coming to trust and love him than those who are merely indifferent.

But what should we make of all this? First and foremost, we should conclude that there is no one beyond the reach of God's mercy in Christ. All are sinners and Christ died for all sin. Therefore there is no person or group of people that the Lord does not want to welcome into his kingdom. It's a terrible thing – a grievous sin – that in times past Christian people have looked upon Jews with disdain. No doubt you are aware that western history is full of cases in which Jews were labeled "the killers of Christ" and they were mistreated, persecuted, sometimes even killed all supposedly in the name of Jesus. My friends, Jesus had nothing to do with any of that; not then, nor does he today. Jesus doesn't operate that way; and neither do his true followers.

But then, we're not likely to run into any Jewish people here in southwest Iowa. I'm not aware that there are any; and if there are, you could probably count them with the fingers of one hand. Still, we can apply the general principle that Paul expounds here to other individuals and groups as well. It is part of our sinful nature that we tend to think in terms of us, the good guys, the friends of Christ and them, the bad guys, the enemies of Jesus. Just for example, like so many of you I grew up in the middle of the Cold War. Then the Soviet Union was the big boogie-man. They were the "evil empire". We lived under the constant threat of a nuclear war which might break out at any moment. And for over seventy years that atheist regime tried to stamp out the Church of Christ within their borders and beyond. But who would have guessed back then in the decades of the sixties, seventies, and eighties that today our own church body would be supporting seminaries and helping to plant churches in Russia, Siberia, and many of

the former eastern block nations? Who would have guessed that so many of those who were then our enemies would now be counted among our brothers and sisters in Christ? I never thought I'd live to see it; but it's happening now. The Lord works in mysterious ways indeed. And that's why I'm cautiously optimistic about the future of the Christian Church in places where today its members are being suppressed and persecuted as they are, for instance, in many predominantly Muslim nations.

One thing's for sure: The Lord will go on doing his mysterious work of changing those who are his enemies into his children through faith in Christ. He did it for each one of us. We were all born in sin and unbelief and his powerful Word changed us – indeed, it's continuing to change us. And this work will go on both for us and for others. The question is whether we will be helping or hindering this work.

We don't want to be like the disciples in today's Gospel, who tried to block a Gentile woman's access to Christ and send her away empty-handed. Nor do we want to be like so much of the medieval church that treated Jews with hatred and contempt thus making it more difficult for them to see the grace and forgiveness of God in the face of Jesus. Instead, we want to be like St. Paul, who, knowing what all surpassing mercy he'd freely received, worked diligently with every means at his disposal to help others – all others – to receive it too.

So may the Lord grant us his grace that we may proclaim the love of Jesus with our mouths and model it in our lives – showing love even for our enemies – in order that they may come to know him as their Savior and King and live also forever in his mercy. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!