

Proper 13, August 6, 2017

Genesis 32:22-31, Psalm 17:1-7, 15, Romans 9:1-5, Matthew 14:13-21

### Paul's Problem (and ours)

(Romans 9-11)

I'd like to open my remarks with a brief review of a movie. It's not a block-buster, and I can't call it a great film; there were holes in the plot, some pretty corny dialogue, and some technical issues. But the movie has captured me and I've seen it four times (so far). The film is called *The Way*. It's about a west-coast ophthalmologist whose estranged son is killed in a freak storm in the Pyrenees Alps on the first day of his hike on the Camino de Santiago in Northern Spain (this is the road to the Cathedral of Saint James, the apostle, who is said to be buried there). The father didn't even know that his son was on this pilgrimage and now has to go to France, (where the pilgrimage usually begins) and to bring his son's body home. But while in France, the father makes a life changing decision. He decides to have his son cremated, and to make the pilgrimage in his son's place while carrying the ashes and leaving tokens of his son's remains along the trail. It's a 500 mile walk to the Compostella de Santiago and usually takes over a month. Along the way the father very reluctantly joins three fellow pilgrims, and they meet various eccentrics along the way, and have wonderfully eccentric adventures.

The Camino de Santiago is a famous pilgrimage in Europe, but in our post-Christian, secularized world, many, perhaps most of the pilgrims go without a specific, spiritual motivation. Some want to lose weight, or quit smoking, some want to find a girl-friend, or forget about a boyfriend. But every pilgrim carry's a wound, and every pilgrim is on a quest for healing. By end of the trek, when they stand beneath the statue of Saint James and participate in what is called the Pilgrim Mass, almost everyone has come to some measure of healing.

After seeing it the first time, I went to bed, woke up early and went straight to my journal. I'll share an edited version of my notes:

*Pilgrimage is, of course a metaphor for the human race. We are the restless, questing beast. If humankind is spirit, then every road is spiritual. I thus venture to say that everyone on every Camino is religiously motivated whether they are aware of it, or not. Which leads me to the thought that perhaps God is in the process of saving everyone; often outside their awareness and against their conscious will. Perhaps the eternal God, with endless patience is walking on pilgrimage with both the willing and the willful. There are problems with this thought, but it IS a beautiful thought.*

And speaking of beautiful and troublesome thoughts, let's Segway right into our text. We are just about half-way through our extended homiletic meditation on Paul's Epistle to the Romans, which is, perhaps, the greatest purely theological treatise ever written. It is a work of great beauty and presents us with all kinds of problems, just like all good theology.

Last week's reading took us to the very pinnacle of the heavenly vision. The last words of chapter 8 read:

*For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Then from that mountain-top of joy and assurance, in this week's reading we are immediately plunged into the valley of despair, the 'valley of the shadow of death', as it were. The first words of chapter 9:

*I am speaking the truth in Christ-I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit-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 own people, my kindred according to the flesh.*

The one who has just said that nothing in heaven or earth can separate us from God's love, in the next breath, says that he could wish to be accursed and separated from that very same love, if only his kinsmen after the flesh would accept it, but they, alas, will not.

Paul was a man of great joy, and great sorrow. His sorrow was not in the beatings, or the shipwrecks, or the imprisonments (that was just business as usual). His sorrow and his problem was that the people on earth that he loved the most would not accept the greatest of all gifts, which was the love of the very God that they worshiped. Chapters 9-11 of Romans is Paul's attempt to explain the problem and heal to his own wounded heart. So I am going to have to address all three of these three chapters for my text to make any sense at all, (while not forgetting, of course, the virtues of brevity).

I know I am stretching the analogy a bit, but I can't help thinking that Paul is leading us on a Pilgrimage through a sort of theological wilderness; one in which we can easily get lost if we don't stay alert, and keep our 'eye on the prize.'

Paul is most anxious to say that God's word, and God's ultimate plan did not fail, and will not fail, in spite of the fact that the people through whom and for whom the Messiah came rejected their own Savior. One might easily think history has jumped the rails, or that God made a mistake. But the Apostle says, "on the contrary, this was all part of the larger plan, the grand scheme".

To make his point, the beloved Apostle uses several metaphors, images, and analogies, that, in my ever so humble opinion, are less than satisfactory. He says that from the beginning there were always going to be those who were excluded from the grace of God. Abraham had two sons, God chose Isaac and rejected Ishmael. And then Isaac had two sons, but God “loved Jacob, and hated Esau”. This seems wrong, it seems to offend our innate sense of justice. To these anticipated objections, Paul retorts, “Who are you to question God?. You are just the clay and the hands of a God shapes you as He sees fit, and you have no right to whine and complain and say ‘Why have you made me like this?’”. So the Apostle, who just moments before, declared that nothing in all of creation will be able to separate us from God’s love, now paints picture of a God who’s love we may not want. We can all be excused if we are a little bit confused.

Things don’t get much better as Paul proceeds. He makes use of the Old Testament idea of the Remnant. Most of Israel will reject God, because God has hardened their hearts (just like he hardened the heart of the Egyptian king) but there will be a tiny fraction, a remnant who will remain faithful.

If we were to stop here on our journey through this theological wilderness we’d be in trouble. You understand I don’t pretend to know anything, I’m just a simple country preacher, and I believe in the absolute sovereignty of God as much as any Calvinist, but the notion that a precious few folks are going to make it all the way into the kingdom of endless bliss while most of humanity is hopelessly and endlessly lost, just because God decided to do it that way, is not a satisfactory understanding of the meaning of this strange, and painful, and wonderful Pilgrimage, which is the journey of our lives. Unfortunately, and tragically a considerable portion of our brothers and sisters in Christ get stuck just right here. Heaven, they say, has its limits, containing only the elect. But Hell is huge, and full. And that’s just the way it is.

But Praise the Lord. Paul, unlike some theologians doesn’t leave us stranded in the desert. We are only half way through the journey. The way is hard sometimes but we can make it through. He now presents us with the metaphor of the Olive Tree. No image is perfect, but we can begin to see some light. God is the Olive Tree and Israel the branches. God can and does cut off the branches for dis-obedience, but he has the ability and the desire to graft them on again. After Israel is cut off, God grafts into the tree wild olive shoots, that is gentiles, that is, everybody who isn’t a Jew. The purpose, at least on the surface, is to make Israel jealous, but the movement which was planned from the beginning of time is to re-graft the cut off nation of Israel back into the loving embrace of her God. Quoting from chapter 11, “hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved.”

This is the way Paul addressed the problem of Israel’s rejection of the Gospel, and the way he healed his own inner anguish. God’s call is irrevocable, Israel’s rebellion, tragic as it is, is temporary. And the great Apostle to the Gentiles doesn’t forget about the rest of us either. Again from Chapter 11, and addressing the gentiles:

*Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. (And here we get to the point of this whole journey.) For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.*

In that single sentence is encapsulated Paul's entire Gospel. "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." (Chapter 3). "As in Adam all die. Even so in Christ shall all be made alive" (Chapter 5). And even creation is not left behind, "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the children of God." (Chapter 8)

So, after watching my little low-budget gem of a movie a second time, I got up early and wrote down three questions:

1. Is God in the process of saving us all?
2. Can anyone be finally and fully saved until everyone is saved?
3. Can God be content to leave the smallest, most insignificant part of his great and glorious creation unredeemed?

Would this then mean that every person who ever lived or ever will live will somehow, someday, make it into the kingdom of endless joy; and that hell will finally just be an empty hotel, with nobody home? I don't think we are given permission to know that for sure. I don't think we are supposed to know, I don't think we can know. But we are not only permitted, but commanded to hope that it be so, and work for the day when it is so. Can any follower of Jesus, can anyone who communes with the body and blood of our Lord do anything less?

I'll finish with the final words of Chapter 11 of Paul's Epistle to the Romans:

*O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways!*

*For who has known the mind of the Lord?*

*Or who has been his counselor?*

*Or who has given him a gift, to receive a gift in return"*

*For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen*

Preached by James Fulmer

Grace Episcopal Church, Fairfield, CA

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