

Sermon: “Evangelism and the Children of Abraham: A Perspective”

Date: September 12, 2021

Scriptures: Romans 11:1-29

Preacher: Rev. Robert Dean

We are here spending one last sermon with the work of Bishop Scott Jones and “The Evangelistic Love of God & Neighbor.” As I pointed out last week, there’s a lot of good material in Bishop Jones’ book. This week’s readings revolve around the idea of how we share the Good News with the people around us in the world, especially when they are members of other religions.

The question of how we relate to people from other religions as a whole can be rather touchy. A lot of very public figures over the years have said some rather aggressive Christocentric statements that have made the Good News often seem more like a cudgel than an invitation. The hellfire and brimstone message of Christianity was alive and well long before Jonathan Edwards preached his famous sermon “Sinners in the hands of an Angry God” in 1741. Speaking on the people he labeled the wicked children of Israel in 1741, Edwards said:¹

“God won’t hold them up in these slippery Places any longer, but will let them go; and then, at that very Instant, they shall fall into Destruction; as he that stands in such slippery declining Ground on the Edge of a Pit that he can’t stand alone,”

To be clear, it would be distasteful to reference too much of Jonathan Edwards’ words in this place, but he is clear that all people who have not converted are going to suffer miserably. His theology equally states that all are damned outside of a saving relationship with Christ

¹ <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1053&context=etas>

regardless of their race, religion, gender, or anything else. In Jonathan Edwards' view (and I quote):

“God has laid himself under no Obligation by any Promises to keep any natural Man out of Hell one Moment. God certainly has made no Promises either of eternal Life, or of any Deliverance or Preservation from eternal Death, but what are contained in the Covenant of Grace, the Promises that are given in Christ...”²

Words like Jonathan Edwards' words have been repeated by others throughout the centuries of church history and are still repeated today. As people of God, we may not pay attention to them often as we see ourselves as children of heaven by God's grace, but they are still repeated. Not only are they repeated, they are most often shared with people outside the church. These kinds of words are most often directed at the very people we might share the Good News with out of a place of love and relationship.

As Christians, we believe that God's good news brings light and life into the world, but it can be difficult to maintain faith in the goodness of that message when we consider how often that Good News has been offered to people in aggressive and painful ways. The legacy of powerful statements made about the nature of heaven and hell by often well intentioned believers is vast and even if we do not ascribe to such methods, the people we often want to share the lifegiving gospel with have had experiences with Christians of all different types.

In one place, Bishop Jones draws a great deal of attention to the complex relationship of Christianity to other world religions. There's a long history between Christians and Jews, and our evangelism should take clear note of what has happened before in order to avoid pain in

² Ibid.

the future. We have already noted how people like Jonathan Edwards have fed into this complicated relationship, even if unintentionally. Bishop Jones says the following on page 176:

“Seen in this light, any Christian church’s organized campaign to convert Jews is highly problematic. By failing to understand the theological complexities of Romans 9-11, by failing to account for the centuries of Christian oppression—oppression that reached a climax in the Holocaust—and by failing to deal with the problem of anti-Semitism in American culture today, such a campaign would be both inappropriate and ineffective. It would be inappropriate because of its failure to love adequately the people it addresses. It would not seek to understand them or their deepest concerns and then to connect the gospel to their lives in an authentic way. It would be ineffective because the blunt instrument of a major campaign aimed at a group of people often marginalized in Western culture simply drives most of those persons farther from Christ by reinforcing the historic stereotypes of Christians as aggressive proselytizers and oppressors.”

Perhaps as I read these words, you are wondering why we are talking about such things in church on a Sunday morning. Have we set out to create a major campaign to convert the Jewish people? No. No we have not done that. Do we have the goal of converting every Jewish citizen within a 10 mile radius? No, we have no such goal. So, why are we discussing this at all?

The primary reason we are discussing this matter in church is because we are a part of an American church (that stretches beyond the bounds of the United Methodist Church) and that American church has had a legacy of poor treatment of our Jewish neighbors. The American church itself is a subset of a global church (that again goes beyond the

bounds of the United Methodist Church) that has had a legacy of poor treatment of our Jewish neighbors for millennia.

We have inherited a number of beautiful gifts in our Christian heritage, but there are also places where our global heritage has had some real negative consequences in the lives of others. It is not a stretch to say that our Jewish neighbors have good reason to be skeptical not only of us but of the good news we share.

One of the ways we deal with the untenable situation of having good news and having this huge stumbling block between this good news and other people is to actually deal with the stumbling block.

Acknowledging the difficulties, apologizing, and seeking to do better is not enough to erase the problems of centuries past, but it is a starting point on a journey of healing. Listening to the experience of others, understanding what they have been through, and acknowledging that they may not be able to hear the Good News until a respectful, loving relationship is established can be a starting point on a long journey that is overdue culturally.

Allow me to summarize what I am trying to express: If we are to lovingly share the gospel with people from a place of respect, relationship, and love, then we must connect with them on a personal level. We must love them enough to understand they may carry a pain that we may not have caused, but which may have been caused by people who claim our faith, share our scriptures, and use similar words to us. We sometimes have to dig through muck that we ourselves did not cause or muck that we ourselves unintentionally added to over the years. If we love them enough, we will work through such moments despite how painful it can be as a people.

In our scripture, there is good reason to dive deeper into our own history with the Jewish people. Romans 9-11 is acknowledged by Bishop Jones as a difficult and complicated portion of scripture. Bishop Jones is not alone in saying that these chapters can really muddy the waters. Starting in chapter nine, there is deep conversation about the nature of salvation and calling. There are challenging statements that can really muddy the waters for us theologically.

Romans 9:6-8 states in the New Revised Standard Version:

⁶It is not as though the word of God had failed. For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel, ⁷ and not all of Abraham's children are his true descendants; but "It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you." ⁸ This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants.

Verses 16-18 of chapter nine muddy things further:

¹⁶ So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy. ¹⁷ For the scripture says to Pharaoh, "I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth." ¹⁸ So then he has mercy on whomever he chooses, and he hardens the heart of whomever he chooses.

Consider for a moment how challenging it is that Paul puts the Israelites on the level of Pharaoh. For most Israelites, Pharaoh was the pinnacle of abusive power. The Pharaoh had enslaved their people, forced them to work in really abusive situations, and the scriptures justified the destruction of Pharaoh and his army through the

explanation that his heart had been hardened in order to set an example.

For Paul to compare the Israelites to Pharaoh is very weighted language which is surrounded by other statements that proclaim the faithfulness of God. The first verse of our reading tells us that Paul claims his ancestry as a child of Abraham. The majority of the tenth chapter speaks about how all of this has occurred and made a way for God's promise to be open for everyone including the Jewish people who came into God's favor as children of Abraham. The scriptures between the claims of Romans 9 and the words of our reading are full of promises for all people, but that does not diminish the challenging nature of these passages.

Verses 7-8 of our reading in Romans 11 stated:

⁷ What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, ⁸ as it is written,

“God gave them a sluggish spirit,
eyes that would not see
and ears that would not hear,
down to this very day.”

Friends, verse 8 has been used to diminish and denigrate the children of Israel for a long time. Is it any wonder that the Good News is not seen as a good word by people our scriptures proclaim have a “sluggish spirit,” blind eyes, or deaf ears? Would you listen to someone who has proclaimed generation after generation that you and your ancestors had their hearts hardened by God? Would you listen if you connected that with the words of people like Jonathan Edwards who believed that God did not feel obligated in the slightest to save you.

These are difficult words for several reasons. One, it is hard to note that our scriptures can occasionally create resentment in the eyes and ears of people of other religions. Never mentioning the truth that our scriptures are indeed sharper than any two-edged sword from a pulpit does not help us to acknowledge and begin to work towards a healthier relationship with our neighbors. Never mentioning that words like these cut deeply into our Jewish neighbors on a more personal level than followers of other world religions is also not helpful.

It is also difficult because of a simple but beautiful truth found in these words. When Paul speaks of the Gentiles being grafted onto the tree of promise like wild olive branches being grafted onto a healthy tree trunk, Paul is speaking about the deep debt of gratitude we should have towards those we are now connected with in our spiritual lives. The roots that nourish us were grown through the children of Abraham. The faithful witness of generation after generation of prophets, judges, priests, and ordinary people are the very root and trunk to which we have been connected.

Paul addresses Gentiles directly and tells them that they should never boast about their place in God's promise. The people are connected by the grace of God to the promise of God. God tells the Gentiles to notice how they have been connected to promise and reminded that God will happily reconnect those who were grown and meant to be a part of that promise.

In truth, for millennia our church and the Jewish people have had really difficult relations. Both the Jewish people and the Christian church have been taught repeatedly about things like kindness, mercy, and love through both our scriptures and God's example. We should be

neighbors who believe that our lives should be marked by godliness, but we have rarely gotten along perfectly.

We should share the Good News of Jesus Christ with people with whom we have a relationship and a sincere desire to share in love. We should also respect our neighbors, hear their experiences, and own up to the part our church has played both in the past and in the present. It is not always easy, but it is good.

I believe in the Good News of Jesus Christ with all of my heart. I also believe that people who claim that same good news have done harm. I believe that God wants to be in a loving relationship with all people. I also believe that it is hard to share an invitation to that loving relationship with someone that I do not know, do not care about, and treat like an outsider. I believe that we should share the Good News and I believe that Good News must first find a way deep inside of me before I insist on finding a way to share that same Good News with my neighbor. When that Good News is deep inside me, I can truly find enough peace to not only hear my neighbor but to love my neighbor: when that happens, I believe that the Gospel can change lives.

We are going to enter into prayer, but first I would like to invite us to take a few moments of silence as we consider what we have heard and what God has given us in these moments. Please, enter into silence with me.