

August 18, 2019
Who Do You Think You Are?
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Romans 9:8-21

⁷⁻⁸ In fact, when God made the promise to Abraham, he meant only Abraham's descendants by his son Isaac. God was talking only about Isaac when he promised ⁹ Sarah, "At this time next year I will return, and you will already have a son."

¹⁰ Don't forget what happened to the twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah. ¹¹⁻¹² Even before they were born or had done anything good or bad, the Lord told Rebekah that her older son would serve the younger one. The Lord said this to show that he makes his own choices and that it wasn't because of anything either of them had done. ¹³ That's why the Scriptures say that the Lord liked Jacob more than Esau.

¹⁴ Are we saying that God is unfair? Certainly not! ¹⁵ The Lord told Moses that he has pity and mercy on anyone he wants to. ¹⁶ Everything then depends on God's mercy and not on what people want or do. ¹⁷ In the Scriptures the Lord says to Pharaoh of Egypt, "I let you become Pharaoh, so that I could show you my power and be praised by all people on earth." ¹⁸ Everything depends on what God decides to do, and he can either have pity on people or make them stubborn.

¹⁹ Someone may ask, "How can God blame us, if he makes us behave in the way he wants us to?" ²⁰ But, my friend, I ask, "Who do you think you are to question God? Does the clay have the right to ask the potter why he shaped it the way he did?" ²¹ Doesn't a potter have the right to make a fancy bowl and a plain bowl out of the same lump of clay?" (Contemporary English Version)

I am a follower of Christ, and the Holy Spirit is a witness to my conscience. So I tell the truth and I am not lying when I say ² my heart is broken and I am in great sorrow. ³ I would gladly be placed under God's curse and be separated from Christ for the good of my own people. ⁴ They are the descendants of Israel, and they are also God's chosen people. God showed them his glory. He made agreements with them and gave them his Law. The temple is theirs and so are the promises that God made to them. ⁵ They have those famous ancestors, who were also the ancestors of Jesus Christ. I pray that God, who rules over all, will be praised forever! Amen. [Romans 9:1-5, CEV]

You know, anytime someone says, *I promise I'm not lying*, folks are going to assume, *Yeah, he's probably lying*. Here we have the Apostle Paul swearing by Jesus and the Holy Spirit that he ISN'T lying, when he says he'd rather be cut off from Christ than offend his Jewish kinfolks.

A couple of hints that he might be lying or, as my mama used to call it, *storying* ("Now Annie, I think you're storying to me) – for one, in this very text he uses "*they*" instead of

“we,” when speaking of Jewish history. We know from the fifteenth chapter of Acts and the book of Galatians, along with other texts, Paul was perfectly willing to offend his Jewish brothers ALL the time. So why would he say it here? Hyperbole. Exaggeration. The Bible is stuffed with it – storytelling liberty. It’s what storytellers, Jesus included, did, using over-the-top language to make a point.

No doubt Paul knows they know he’s *storying* in that self-deprecating way in order to deprecate them too – which is exactly what he does, starting about verse six and carrying on for most of three chapters, much of which is a line-by-line recitation of Jewish religious failure: failure to be faithful; failure to understand their own religious history; failure to understand the Christ event in light of that religious history.

Summed up, in my own words, like this: ***Either everything Judaism has taught us so far brings us to the conclusion that the Christ event applies to every person equally OR the point of our own religion is to paint some divine, spiritual justification over our own pride and prejudice.*** We are either one in Christ or none in Christ. As he says it in I Corinthians, chapter 1: *either the cross is for everyone or the cross itself is powerless.*

Paul has many ways to say it, but he has nothing else to say – at least, nothing else that matters until the church has nailed this down. Because until we have this nailed down – that the salvation we claim belongs to everyone equally, you and me and you and you, and every human being on the planet – we’ve nothing else to do that can truly be called church. Anything else makes us a service organization, nothing new, nothing different from what far-better-organized service organizations in this world are doing. Underserved and unconditional kindness is all we have that humanity can get nowhere else.

And if we don’t have it, friends, we can’t give it. Everything else we do with the name *Christian church* on it is a cover for our own self-delusion, our own attempts at being good rather than our acceptance of God’s goodness toward all of humanity – and us therein. Anything we try will be contaminated by that human pride and prejudice we learn in the world, and the world cultivates in us. God does not love us because we are good. God loves us because God is good. And while we benefit from that enormously, don’t we also push back against it?

Paul is pushing back against that – pushing back in Romans, chapter 9. They are having trouble with the “F” word again. What’s the “F” word of church? *FAIR*, of course. His Jewish congregants apparently think it unfair that gentiles get to join the church without having to follow all the Jewish laws they themselves must follow, particularly circumcision (understandable) and food laws. *If we can’t have cheeseburgers, neither should they.*

Isn’t it funny how things change and how they don’t? And how Paul’s argument holds. It’s the gospel that holds, of course. We can only guess what his congregants have said,

but it sounds like they've attempted to make the case that "the promises of God belong to us because we belong to Abraham." Paul's retort is that plenty of people belonged to Abraham that weren't included in the promise. He's already made the argument in Romans that far more people than they were ever willing to even acknowledge were included in the original promises to Abraham. Here he points out that plenty of people belonged to Abraham that were NOT included in the promise. Ishmael and Esau are his examples. AND, occasionally God would go out of God's way to use someone totally beyond the pale – the Pharaoh for example – to accomplish the promise. The point being: *your argument is lame.*

And then, Paul asks the superlative question of the text. *Who do you think you are to ask that question? Who do you think you are to even use the word "fair" in reference to God? Don't you think that the God who excludes whomever God wants can also INCLUDE whomever that God wants? God can do what God wants, and it is none of your business. Consider for a moment that God has included you? What have you done lately to deserve inclusion, my friend? What have you done, ever, to include such undeserved kindness? Would you call it fair that you have the gift of God in Christ Jesus? And yet you propose to tell God **who** is or is not equally deserving, to add conditions for others, when God has put no such conditions on you?*

Paul will go on and on this way for a bit, calling his church folks "lumps of clay," which is truly awesome. You know that moment when you realize you've lost an argument and you are no longer trying to win – you are just trying to save face? How icky it is to me depends on how invested I am in my reputation, versus my desire to live in the truth – because losing can be life-changing, when it brings us into conversion, when some sliver of truth opens itself up to us. And there comes this wave of nausea and grief at how wrong we were in some idea or belief or way of being. But it isn't embarrassing, because swirling in that same wave is a new kind of joy and energy that is released upon the realization of truth we did not see before.

Friends, I did not always believe as I do now about the full inclusion of all people, unconditionally, in church life and leadership. I didn't *not* believe in it either. I was just sometimes itchy and uncomfortable around some people, and so I let other people's stridency speak for me. But then I had friendships with people from groups around whom I'd been previously uncomfortable. Then I got uncomfortable with the stridency. It felt mean to me. I decided I couldn't be part of Mean Church.

So I studied the Bible. A lot. And while it's not a preacher-y, Bible-y way to say it, I decided the whole exclusion theology of my church experience was built on the dominant group's anxiety and fear. (Remember my discomfort?) And while Jesus doesn't talk specifically about gay people or trans people, Jesus constantly talks to fearful people, saying over and over and over again, *Do not be afraid.* And even though he drives me crazy sometimes, Paul really is the most fearless disciple in the entire New

Testament. He is the living epitome of Jesus's suggestion that we do what he did and expect him to deal with the fallout.

I don't do that. I'm a total coward. But I am convinced of God's faithfulness despite my chicken-hearted ways. Paul has won the argument long before he ever quits writing. He makes and proves his theological case. The problem, of course, is that theological proof wasn't Paul's project. In spite of many thousands of dissertations since, Paul's purpose was not systematic theology – because he wasn't a theologian; he was a pastor. His purpose was *ekklesia* – community; church; life together. A life together in which followers of Jesus reflect the gospel of Jesus: that in Christ the undeserved, unconditional, salvific love of God has been woven into the make-up of human be-ing. It is part of us, part of creation.

What chlorophyll is to leaves, the love of God is to human be-ing. What warmth is to sunlight, the love of God is to human be-ing. What sweetness is to a summer peach, the love of God is to human be-ing. *Who do you think you are to question that?* Paul asks the church. We shall question it until we know, friends – until we know that love, the way we know our own breath. And only then, *only then*, will we detect it and celebrate it in the faces and the being of all seven billion of our seven billion brothers, sisters, and gender fluid siblings on this planet.

Would you pray with me? *To know your love for us, O God, to recognize ourselves as your darling, darling ones, without need of improvement or change – for this we pray, that we might discover it in one another too. Amen.*