

God of Promise

sermon digest

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Romans 11:1-2, 11-12, 17-21, 25-29

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Do you remember sibling rivalry in the family of your childhood? I suspect all of us do—if we had siblings, that is. Although I was younger than my brother and sister and probably did not experience it as strongly as other children, I recall times when it seemed like my sister and I could not go on living under one roof. I recall the perverse pleasure my best friend and I took when upon learning about the meaning of adoption, Mary Beth came to the conclusion that Harriet, her older sister did not look like the rest of the family and must surely be adopted; and I concluded the same concerning Martha. Larry remembers coming to an age of rebelling against his older sisters. No longer the cute little plaything they could dress up like a doll, he dug his heels in and became a determined little terror.

Our own children, only two years apart in age, were quite good at it, so much so that they often drove us to wits end. Larry recalls Michelle coming in crying and holding her arm only moments after Keith came home from the hospital. Rushing her back to the doctor who had just dismissed her baby brother, he laughs to recall the wise doctor winking to him and then holding out a lollipop to Michelle. She promptly obliged, reaching out her poor little broken arm to grab it. Shortly upon returning home, she came into the apartment with rocks stuffed up her nose. After trying everything they knew to do and trying to avoid another trip to the doctor's office, mom and dad made an offer she could not refuse: "Blow the rocks out of your nose and we'll go to the zoo." Out they came, and the family was off for a hot afternoon at the zoo with brand new baby brother. As the years rolled on, Saturdays when Larry would retreat to sermon preparation and the back seat of the car during long trips to Texas were particularly intense. Loud charges, "She's on my side of the car" and "He touched me" were bitter and frequent. I recall one day in particular when the battle of words soared to new heights. In the pitch of battle our son found the perfect comeback: "Well, duh!" And we knew that with such insight and perfect self-expression, our children's future could only be bright.

Although it sometimes seems to test parents beyond endurance, sibling rivalry among children is to be expected and in retrospect, even funny. Sibling rivalry in adults, however, is less so. It can tear a family apart. It can raise its ugly head at the most inopportune times, spoiling family celebrations and turning siblings into warring camps in the midst of a family crisis, just at the moment they most need to find one another's support and work together.

The story of Jacob and Esau in Genesis is just such a story. Twins, embattled in conflict even in their mother's womb, the brothers came out fighting and kept on fighting. You remember the tragic unraveling of their relationship when on reaching adulthood, Jacob, the younger of the two, stole Esau's rightful birthright and blessing by tricking their blind father. Esau's plaintive cry has resounded through the ages: "Have you only one blessing? Bless me, me also, father!" And the narrator goes on, "And Esau lifted up his voice and wept" (27:38).

Family betrayal inflicts the deepest pain imaginable; and some have interpreted the friction between Christians and Jews in that light. The escalating tensions revealed in the successive appearance of the Gospels speaks to us of a family relationship going terribly awry. If Mark, the earliest of the four Gospels, seems to minimize the conflict between Jesus and his Jewish forebears, Matthew and particularly John hold a magnifying glass over it. The words Matthew puts on the lips of the crowd at Jesus' trial before Pilate echo across the centuries with devastating consequences, "His blood be on us and on our children" (27:25). And John, going even further to indict "the Jews" rather than the select Jewish leaders at the heart of the problem, has not helped.

Rivalries best understood as *inner* Jewish conflicts or *family* rivalries became elevated across the centuries to the level of bitter enmity; and church fathers, who noted Christian participation in Jewish festivals and the synagogue well into the fourth century and even in the eighth century, increasingly gave way to those who insisted upon stark division and bitter enmity. Church law, probably originating in Syria around 380, called upon Christians to avoid the "house of demons or the synagogue of 'Christ Killers,'" [Mary Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing*, 346]. With the Middle Ages, verbal attacks gave way to physical onslaughts and the wholesale massacre of Jewish communities. Mobs of "Christians" rampaged through the streets following Good Friday services seeking out and slaughtering their Jewish neighbors. In the "modern" era, Hitler's catastrophic campaign wiped out two-thirds of Europe's Jewish population and one-third of all the Jews in the world [Boys, *Seeing Judaism Anew*, 265]. As recently as last month, a sick,

hate-filled White Supremacist, who had been identified for some time as dangerous by the Southern Poverty's Hatewatch list, pulled up alongside a Jewish Community Center near Kansas City and opened fire, killing, interestingly enough, three Christians.

I have absolutely no doubt that all of us here today would agree that violence in the name of Christ and teachings that denigrate people simply because they are Jewish or of any other faith is repugnant to everything we hold dear. The question is how did things come to this point? And how do we get beyond it? More than simple political correctness, how do we look to scriptures and the teaching of our faith to dissociate ourselves personally, our church and the Christian faith from the ideological captivity that has done so much harm? How do we work toward and guarantee a different kind of future?

In reading the book of Romans, it's almost as if the Apostle Paul has pulled back the curtains and is peering into the future and the gruesome events yet to come. Haunted by memories of the excesses of his own religious zeal when he had dutifully persecuted Christians, he speaks a word of caution to Gentile Christians in Rome. Be sure that you do not read his words through the lens of the Gospels, written 12 to 30 or 40 years later when tensions were mounting. Nor should we read him through the lens of Galatians and Philippians where his frustration with Jewish Christians demanding that Gentiles come to Christ through conversion to the full Jewish law, led him to rail out in expletive deleted terminology (Philippians 3:2).

Paul writes his letter to the Romans at a particular moment in time. Only a few years earlier (49 C.E.) Emperor Claudius had evicted Jews or at least their leaders from the city. Now—maybe 54 to 58 C.E.—they are returning; and Paul asks the Gentile churches, “Now what?” How will they respond to the returning Jews and in particular to the Jewish *Christians* who may be returning as well. Will they be welcomed on equal footing? Or will they be relegated to second class status? Will bickering between the churches break out, calling the attention of the emperor not just to bothersome Jews, but this time to haughty and contentious Christian Gentiles as well. If for no other reason, perhaps Paul is saying, “Get along, lest the emperor issue another edict and rid Rome of all of you.”

Even more, however, Paul, a Jew called to be Apostle to the Gentiles, must have been struggling with an issue even more troubling. Contrary to what he had learned in synagogue as a young boy, his own people had not responded to the in-gathering of Gentiles as an indication that the eschaton, the new age had arrived. While his mission among the Gentiles had flourished, Peter and others had met with near failure in trying to evangelize the Jews. What did this say about his own people? Would they be left outside of God's grace? And even more troubling, if that were the case, what did it say about God?

“Has God rejected his people?” Paul asks (11:1). And he immediately moves to answer in no uncertain terms: “By no means!” Drawing then upon images of branches, grafting, roots, and first fruits, he calls Gentile Christians to respect for Israel and awe before the God of Israel. For a time, almost as if it's in God's “traffic plan,” Krister Stendahl observes, Paul is saying that Israel's delay in responding to the Christ is giving the Gentiles an opportunity to step forward and be included [Final Account, 7]. Far from an occasion to puff themselves up and look down on their Jewish cousins, however, they should recognize the priority of the root over the branches that have been grafted in and sing praise to the God who acts on their behalf.

“All Israel,” Paul assures his readers, “will be saved” (11:26); and the assurance of Israel's salvation is just this: the promises of God. Chosen by the God who makes covenant, “they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors.” God, you see, does not forget God's promises: “The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (11:28, 29).

Paul does not say that all of Israel will come to God through Christ. The answer to Israel's salvation, just like the answer to the Gentile's salvation is simply this: It rests in the unbounding goodness and mercy of God. True, the Bible does at points show God repenting and changing God's mind. “God might repent of God's plans of judgment, but God never repents of God's plans of mercy” [Stendahl, 40].

The mystery, then, is just this: The Jews are in God's hands, just as we are in God's hands. Commitment to the way of Jesus does not come through the route of deprecating the people from whom Jesus came. To the contrary, we come to understand Jesus more profoundly and are enabled better to follow his way as we grow in understanding of the tradition that gave him birth. Far from watering down our faith or emptying it of its rich treasures, Jewish-Christian dialogue, understanding, and collaboration open us into the boundlessness of the Divine, challenging us, in the words of Mary Boys, “to move

beyond the narrow limits in which we confine the Holy One and to acknowledge in our heart of hearts that God, Mother and Father of us all, has many children—and more than one blessing” [*Has God Only One Blessing*, 278]. Thanks be to God!