

The Rev. Dr. Jan C. Heller
Proper 12, Year A, Romans 8:26-39
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Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA

Introduction

- If you are an ex-Presbyterian or an ex-whatever from some other church in the Reformed tradition, you might recognize this quote from the Westminster Confession:
 - “By the decree of God...some men and angels are predestined unto everlasting life; and others are foreordained to everlasting death.”
 - This is one classic statement of predestination or election—some are predestined by God to be saved and are thus helped along the way, and, more controversially, some are to be passed over and thus damned
 - It is based on an interpretation by Augustine of our text this morning from Romans, and then given explicit expression by Protestant reformers in England
 - They were trying to avoid any suggestion that salvation depended on human effort—that salvation depended utterly on God’s grace and not on *any* contribution by humans
 - While this teaching clearly has its roots in Paul, there is good reason to believe that the Reformers may have misunderstood Paul’s use of the term election and, hence, his understanding of predestination
 - And already I may have lost some of you!
- After “studiously avoiding” Paul for many weeks, as you know I committed to working through some of his dense writing with you in my sermons...right now I’m having second thoughts!
 - We all like to hear that “all things for together for good,” especially in light of what he says about suffering
 - But do we really care get into the weeds with him to understand what he says about foreknowledge, predestination, and God’s elect? (You can let me know...I’ll forge ahead and we’ll see where this comes out)

Context

- Recall last week I mentioned that Paul is viewed by Jews as one of their greatest heretics of all time
 - The basic reason for this has to do with how he took almost all significant stories in the Jewish scriptures and tradition up to that point and reinterpreted them in light of 1) the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah and 2) the Spirit
 - Today, I want to focus on election, which is just one of the stories that Paul reinterpreted—but it's a *major* story, having to do with the call of Israel to be a special people
- In relation to this story, I suggest Paul uses the term “election” simply to mean *choice*—that God *chose* Abraham and his descendants through which to fulfill God's purposes for humankind (in light of the failure of humans up to that point)
 - And, as a Jewish friend once explained to me, this original choice for Jews is viewed as both a privilege and a burden
 - The privilege is that, of all the people of the world, God chose Abraham and his descendants and set them apart; the burden results from the *purpose* of that choice—the Jewish people are to be the “light to the world”—as one author says, “Israel is called to be *different*; but, in and through that difference, to *make a difference*” (Wright, *Paul*, p. 775, emphasis in original). In more contemporary terms, Jews were called to “repair the world in God's name”
 - The way that most Jews of Paul's day believed they were to “repair the world” was by keeping God's law, the Torah, as a witness to the rest of us who are not Jewish

Paul's view

- As a Jew and a Pharisee, Paul started with this same story—it was his own story, after all—but, as I have suggested, he also gave it a radical revision in light of his experience of the risen Messiah and the Spirit
 - It's complicated, but because the long-awaited Messiah, Jesus—against all expectations for the Messiah—was crucified, Paul eventually comes to believe...
 - 1) That the world's situation is much worse than he or most other Jews thought it was, 2) that Jews themselves may have been more a part of the problem than they realized, and 3)

that keeping the law or the Torah won't be enough to get the job done

- Said differently, it's not just a problem of pagan Gentiles and their idolatrous ways; and it's not simply a matter of foreign invaders and their oppression
 - Paul traces the world's problem all the way back to Adam and Eve, and scholars believe he might have been the first to do this explicitly
 - The problem, in his view, is death itself and the sin that infects not only the Gentiles, but Jews themselves—the problem “goes all the way down,” we might say, and more—it infects not only all humans but the cosmos as well
- Bottom line: For Paul, a radical disease requires a radical solution—the cross and then, after the resurrection, the sending of the spirit to renew or transform the hearts not just of the Jews, but of all humanity—
- So, Paul argues, God indeed worked out God's purposes through the election of Israel in that it was through Israel that Jesus was born, lived, and died and then was resurrected and sent his spirit
 - But now, in light of Jesus and the spirit, Paul argues that God is moving on, creating a new family, a community where Jew and Gentile are almost irrelevant categories—what matters now is whether our hearts have been transformed by the spirit and that we are part of the new family of Jesus—this is God's choice, God's election, after Jesus established his new covenant with humanity

Conclusion

- It's time to ask the “so what?” question—why should we care about Paul's arguments?
 - First, it's important to note that, without Paul, it is very unlikely you and I, as Gentile Christians, would be here today asking this question—without Paul it is arguable whether the Christian church would have ever become more than a Jewish sect
 - We can debate whether this is a good thing, and I certainly do not want to suggest that Christians are somehow

superior to Jews—they remain God’s specially chosen people—but the Christian belief, based on Paul, is that we have joined them, we have been adopted into Abraham’s family—and, as I said last week, we should not miss how radical this is just because we now take it for granted

- Second, is to note the *continuity with our earlier discussions of Jesus* who, though he concentrated more on a Jewish audience, seemed to be calling them, as was Paul, to a kingdom or a family that embraced the whole of humanity—this was, again, part of the original call to Abraham, but both Jesus and Paul believed that their fellow-Jews were not being all they could be or should be in light of that original call
- Third, it is on the basis of this argument that Paul says what he says at the end of our reading today—
- “What then are we to say about these things [that is, about being included in Jesus’ family and, through him, into Abraham’s family as God’s elect]? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else [that is, all the blessings God intended for humankind from the beginning]? Who will bring any charge against God's elect [in other words, who will question our legal status in this family]? It is God who justifies [that is, it is the judge himself who bring us into right relationship with God through Jesus and the spirit]. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 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.”

- We often read these last lines at funerals, but Paul may have written them from prison, facing his own death by beheading
 - Paul's utter confidence in God's faithfulness, and in what God did through Jesus and is continuing to do through the Spirit, is truly remarkable
 - And, he leaves this witness to us when we question whether God loves us, whether God will finally "repair the world"—nothing can separate us from God's love in the Messiah—not the powers in this world, human or demonic, not even death itself. Nothing can and nothing will
 - And, what shall we ourselves say about these things...say to ourselves in our distress, to our children and families, to our neighbors and enemies? What shall we say when questioned?
 - Amen.