

HOW MUCH DO YOU CARE?

Pentecost 9 Year A

Gen. 32:22-31; Ps. 17:1-7, 15; Rom. 9:1-5; Mt. 14:13-21

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A shepherd who had been given a position of great honour by one of Scotland's kings would often go alone to a certain room in the palace. The king became suspicious and thought he was plotting a conspiracy. So he asked to look inside this secret room. To his surprise, all that was there was a chair, a shepherd's crook, and an old plaid scarf. "What does this mean?" asked the king. The nobleman answered, "I was a humble shepherd when your Majesty promoted me. I come to this room to look at the crook and the plaid scarf. They remind me of what I used to be—and that I am nothing but what the grace of the king has made me."

How do you think the king felt when he discovered the deep appreciation this man had for the king's blessings? How much different is this from someone receiving such blessings and then squandering them or taking them for granted?

This morning, I want us to take a look at Romans 9: 1-5. You heard me preach on this passage six years ago, so I'm sure you've all got that sermon fixed firmly in your memory and are wondering what more could possibly be said about it. You will, of course, recall that I spoke about the accusations some had been raising against Paul, and how he answered them—and that he goes on to speak of the advantages of the Jewish people in regards to their adoption into God's family—that they received God's glory, received the covenants, the Law, temple worship, God's promises etc. etc. and that the Messiah came from them and to them. You no doubt recall hearing that as Christians we will see many reject Christ, just as the Jews rejected their own Messiah and that in spite of that, we must continue to have a heart for those who are lost. You *do* remember all that, don't you? Good—that way I won't have to cover it again—at least not all of it.

This morning, I want to focus on just one part of this passage that I probably didn't focus on so much last time and bring it into closer light. I don't want to take this particular section and use it out of context (that would be anathema, to use Paul's words) but to use it in its context and to contemporize it just a little bit. In verses, 2 and 3 of chapter 9, Paul writes these rather unusual and emotive words...

I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed (anathema) and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. (9:2-3)

Now, we all know that Paul felt this way because most of the Jews had rejected and continue to reject Jesus Christ as their Messiah. They are his own people, so of course, Paul is concerned for their salvation. But to wish that he was accursed and cut off from Christ for their sake, is a little, how shall we say it...out there—a little severe.

We are, of course, acutely aware that there was one particular person who was accursed and who sacrificed himself for his people—Jesus Christ. But this is not Paul’s only model—Moses too asked God to spare Israel for making the golden calf. Moses said (in Ex. 32:32), “if not, please blot me out of your book which you have written”. The difference is that Moses would have perished with his people, while Paul would perish in their place.

Both Moses and Paul had an unbelievable willingness to be sacrificed for Israel—to give themselves up totally because of their love for their people—the people that God had chosen as his own. They wished to be cursed by being separated from God *if it would save those who squandered God’s blessing*. They were willing to swap their salvation for their doom if it would lead to the salvation of Israel.

The depth of Paul’s concern for the lost (in this instance, the Jews) is revealed in his willingness to give up his eternal salvation for them. Why did he care like that? Well, it was because Jesus Christ stood in Paul’s shoes at Calvary—and now Paul was standing in Christ’s shoes. He cared that much because he was inhabited by One who cared that much. Jesus was the One in history who was willing to leave his eternal throne of glory, be made a man and die an excruciating death on the cross. Why? Because he cared about his people—people like you and me. Christ, then, is the real source of this kind of love.

Even in the gospel reading this morning from Matthew’s account, we see Jesus’ compassion for the multitudes when he looked out at them from the hilltop. Matthew writes, “*When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.*” This too should be our attitude—not just to the lost or those who need healing—but to all who need to hear the truth of the gospel—the sad, the lonely, the lost and well, everyone—even those within the church.

Sharing Christ's concern for the lost is more than a four or even five-step plan for salvation. There are those who try to communicate the gospel with no real concern for the person being taught. Some also come from some sense of superiority—as if their faith gives them some kind of greater authenticity or authority. As Christians, however, we are to love the lost and love one another—lost or not (because we are all at different places in our spiritual journey) as Christ loves and sacrificed himself for that person.

The motivating factor for our life and witness, as Christians, is not to share theology, but to share our self with others with the love of Christ. Our mind-set often makes that difficult. When we look out at a lost world we tend to see only what is wrong. We tend to see only the negative. We understand their condemnation, but do we understand their deepest needs.

The question I want to put before you this morning, then, is—Do you care enough to sacrifice yourself for others so that they might know the fullness of life in Jesus Christ? In other words, how important is it for you to be in ministry for, to pray for, to give up your life for, your friends, your relatives, others outside the church and even your brothers and sisters in Christ, so that they might know Christ's love and sacrifice for them?

This doesn't always mean dying physically or being accursed. In some sense, both Moses and Paul understood that God wouldn't really do that to them and there is some sense of overplaying the sentiment for the sake of the strength of passion they felt for the salvation for their own people. However, I am aware, as most of you will be, that there are some Christians whose ownership of their salvation is so selfishly held on to, that they fail to apply the same kind of passion to those around them, as Paul did for his people—to both those we might regard as saved and those we might regard as unsaved.

In some ways, Paul is giving a warning to Christians that being God's people can sometimes be a problem. It can be a problem when people fail to distinguish between a right and privilege of which the latter is true in terms of the church. In the light of being invited into the family of God and of the unchangeable promises made by God to the church, especially the ancestors of our faith, we, who are their siblings, can easily slide into an attitude of superiority and fail to extend God's grace and mercy, not only to strangers, but also to one another.

In some ways, justification and salvation does not depend merely on being a Christian—it also depends on being in loving relationships with others—and generally how we act out being a Christian. Despite the privileges of justification and salvation, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Christians have the potential of being a closed community—and like Paul, church leaders, and indeed all of us, must prayerfully and sadly reflect on this predicament.

One of the basic tenants of Jesus' teaching is that we should love and care for one another. Jesus tells us that there are three categories of people we are to love. We are to love one another (other Christians—John 13:34-35). We are to love our neighbour (people in general—Matthew 22:39). And we are to love our enemies (people who, well, don't like us—Matthew 5:44). So, you see, there is no one who we are not to love or show compassion for. Everyone fits into one of those three categories.

Love makes Christianity an appealing way of life. Unfortunately, this has not always been the case. All too often, people have used even Christianity as an excuse to treat one another harshly, even to persecute and kill one another. Some people point to those events and rightly condemn them. Sadly, they then write off true Christianity as well. But true Christianity is not like that at all.

This does not mean that we accept as true everything that someone may do or teach or believe as right. Sin is still sin, and false teaching is still heresy. But it does mean that we love those people anyway. You see, when Jesus told us to love people, He did not limit it to people like us, or people we agree with, or just our friends.

As Christians, our lives should display the kind of love, the kind of compassion, the kind of sacrificial passion for others that Paul so vividly displays here in chapter 9 of his letter to the Romans. How else are we to reach the lost and care for one other. We will not be able to show this love, compassion and concern for others, whoever they might be, while ever we take for granted the blessings that God has given us, or selfishly squander his love for us.

“Choose love”, as the saying goes. Choose to show God's love and be prepared to sacrifice yourself for that end.

To God our loving Saviour, be all glory, honour, majesty and praise. Amen.