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Pentecost 12, August 20, 2023

“Families in Christ”

Read: Romans 9: 1 – 5 and/or memorize Romans 9: 3 – 4a

As I came to the Romans lesson this week, I thought about a recent family experience. As I’m sure you know, family can be both a joy and frustration. That’s just what families are like.

It is the joy of being together; it is the frustration that there can be difficulties and misunderstandings when together. We went down to see my sister, Ruth, and help spring her from a rehab. We really thought it would be quite simple. As soon as I say that, you know it wasn’t. Unfortunately, communications broke down.

We expected a call at 1 from my niece, saying she was heading home with her mom. Our plan was to join them in about an hour. About 3:30 or 4 we called my sister, having left messages and texts for my niece and hearing nothing. We found out that Ruth was in their car, heading to her daughter’s home.

The truth of the matter is, family is family, friends you get to choose. If you think about it, the Russian war against Ukraine is a war among a family. Sadly, it is a metaphor for how some families live.

Paul certainly understood the difficulties within families. As I read Romans 9:3 - 4 it broke my heart. Paul says, “For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cutoff from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel.” His family was not sharing the joy of knowing Jesus. It pained Paul so much that he was willing to give up what he found in Jesus, if it would mean that the Jewish people would accept Jesus.

It was only after I had children and they grew up that I came to understand another thing that my mom often did. No matter how old we were, we were always her children. Whenever we left her to return back home, she would always say, “Call me when you get home. I want to know you have arrived safely.”

Paul led me to think about how I would have gladly taken the pain of our kids to save them from it. Even though we realize it’s not possible, we often find ourselves wishing, like Paul, that we could take the pain that those we love are suffering, as Paul says, “for the sake of my own people.”

Families’ kind of define themselves. They understand who is really part of the family and who is a member of the family only for some other reason. There is the in-law who is a boor, the cousin who is chronically broke, or perhaps a distant relative who showers only once a month

but insists on long hugs whenever family gets together. They are vaguely parts of the family, even if they might be related by blood, for they separate themselves by their actions or attitudes.

Then there is that inevitable problem: the black sheep of the family. Relations with the black sheep are usually strained, sometimes severed, on occasion to the point that the rest of the family changes its name, maybe to avoid any association with that person who has become infamous.

Sometimes the situation is based on a misunderstanding. This was certainly the case with two young girls walking home from Sunday School one morning. One of the girls turned to the other and asked, "Do you think there really is a devil?" The other girl responded calmly, "Of course not, it's just like Santa Claus. He's really your father."

Then, there is the other family we are part of, the family of God. We'd like to think that that one is perfect, but it's just like our biological families. There is joy, anger, frustration, disappointment, care, concern and many other emotions, which are all part of our experience with families.

As much as we would like to believe that only the best parts of a family are present in the church, if we look at it honestly, it is clear that some of the less savory aspects of families are also present. The parts that want to disagree and argue; the parts that cause distrust and hurt. It should not surprise us because the church family is made up of people.

There is certainly a hint of that in the first verse of our lesson. Paul begins by insisting he is "speaking the truth in Christ – I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit." Some have suggested the likelihood that Paul is talking about some rumors circulating in Rome about him.

Some felt that Paul had deserted his own people by his actions. He's writing to those who have recently become Christians, who were Jewish, along with Gentiles. The church in Rome is a mixed bag and some have raised questions about him.

Paul's defense, that he is speaking the truth in Christ, is bolstered by the fact that he talks about two witnesses of what he is saying. This was the requirement of the law. He wanted the Jewish people to know that he fully understood the law. He provides the name of the two witnesses – one is the Holy Spirit; the other is Jesus. It would seem that life in the family of Jesus was not quite as perfect as we might expect.

The reality is that the church is composed of people; people always have misunderstandings and differences. Some just stay within the congregation. At other times, they extend past local congregations to include national churches. More than that, we are related to all Christians, all around the world.

We are all members of the family of Christ. That makes for a pretty big family but it's even bigger than that. We are related to all who are Christians now, and to all those who have ever been part of the Body of Christ.

Many people try to trace their family history. Sometimes, they find out that they had relatives who were in WWI or WWII or, even the Civil War. Perhaps they find the name of someone who immigrated, the first relative to become an American and is held in high honor. The reality is that most families have heroes and knaves among them, no matter the generation.

Paul recognizes this issue in the two last verses of our lesson, as he highlights the history of Judaism, "the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the Law, the worship and the promises." Then he goes on to talk about the patriarchs and from them reminds his readers of the ancestry of Jesus. The coming of the long-awaited Messiah should be the highlight, but, for Paul, it was the sadness that they rejected Him.

This is the point made both by Jesus and by Paul. Jesus came first to the Jews as the Messiah and proclaimed the Kingdom to them. They didn't recognize Him because He wasn't what they expected. If only they would have listened, they might have believed, but they chose not to.

The Jewish people had to make a choice about Jesus. They might believe in Him, as the Messiah, and follow Him. Or turn their backs on Him. By the time of Paul, their decision was quite apparent. There were some Jewish converts, but the majority had turned away from Jesus, in essence, thrown Him out of their family.

This rejection is the source of Paul's sorrow and anguish. The people who should have recognized Jesus turned their backs on Him and His offer of salvation. Paul is greatly distressed by their decision. As you heard earlier, he makes it quite clear that he was willing give up all he had gained in Jesus, for their sake, but as in many families, there is very little he can do to make them accept Jesus.

In many ways these last verses in our lesson sound rather foreign to us. We have no one who is of Jewish descent, who has come to Jesus, in our congregation. The highlights of that Jewish history are only vaguely part of our background. We treat the Old Testament as kind of ancillary and focus on Jesus as the center of our lives.

But before we dismiss these verses as unimportant and unrelated to our situation, we might want to consider them in a little more detail. Rather than being literally applicable to our situation, consider them as a model which leads us to examine our heritage as Christians.

They were the Israelites, those who have the name of the favored people of God. We are Christians, those who bear the name of the Son of God.

To them belongs the adoption, selected to be the chosen people. To us belongs the adoption, through the waters of baptism, which makes us part of the family of God.

In between belongs the glory of the Shikina, the continuing presence of God among the chosen people. You may have heard the candle that burns here referred to as a Shikina light, representing the continuing presence of God among His people. To us belongs the glory of the promise of Jesus that He will be with us always, to the end of the ages.

To them belong the covenants of Noah, of Abraham and of Moses. To us belongs the new covenant of Jesus.

To them belongs the giving of the Law. To us belongs the freedom from the Law.

To them belongs the worship of God in the temple. To us belongs the worship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, wherever we might be.

To them belong the promise – when God speaks, “I will be your God and you will be my people.” To us belongs the promise of Jesus - to equally be the children of God and participants in the Kingdom.

To them belong the patriarchs. To us belong the apostles, the disciples and the very Son of God.

And to all of us, both Jew and Christian, beyond the confrontation, the choice we face: will we accept what God has promised? Will we accept our adoption as children of God? Will we be part of the family of Christ that welcomes others into that family?

God has never changed His plan or the means to accomplish it. He wants all people to be saved. He sent Jesus to accomplish that plan. All who believe in Him are saved by faith alone!

Count me in: What will you do to invite and welcome others into God’s family?