

Romans 9:1-29

Its a common childhood imaginative exercise: if I were Queen or King or if I were Prime Minister for a day and it is usually followed by a long and idealistic “to do list. Eradicate hunger and homelessness, end global warming, find homes for all pets, free all zoo animals, end all wars, make sure everyone has a family – these are all actual suggestions from kids in the sixth grade. They also suggested no more homework and all you can eat candy all the time. We’ve all thought it, maybe even said it: if only I were in charge, I would do it completely differently. If only we were in charge, we could have done this so much better.

That is, in part, what Paul is addressing in Romans 9. The affirmations made in Romans 8, verses 31-39, are recognized as one of the highest crescendos in all of the New Testament. There, the Apostle Paul, celebrates the promise for those who are called according to God’s purpose, that nothing, nothing; not death nor life, nor angels or demons, not the present or the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth or anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Can I get an Amen?

It would be hard to sustain that kind of exuberance for long. And Paul doesn’t. In the verses that follow in chapter 9, Paul’s joy turns to sorrow when he begins to talk about those who are separated from the love of God. Because not all are called according to His purpose. And that is difficult for us to understand. Some are chosen. Israel is chosen. Its right there in the description of them: the chosen children of God. Israel, they didn’t begin as a people. They began as a man named Jacob. 1 man, chosen by God. And he wasn’t the first. Abraham, his grandfather was chosen by God. And Abraham had a son: wait, Abraham actually had 2 sons. Do you remember the story? Abraham and Sarah were barren – they were infertile. And God promised that He would give them a son. But it never happened. And so they took matters into their own hands and arranged for Abraham to father a son through the servant woman, Hagar. And she gave birth to a son: Ishmael. But God was faithful, even if Abraham and Sarah were not, and He kept His promise to them, and Sarah gave birth to a son, Isaac. And God chose Isaac to become the father of two sons: twins, Jacob and Esau. And he chose Jacob. And God changed Jacob’s name to Israel. And so Israel began as just 1 man. Jacob, Israel, had twelve sons. And they became known as the 12 tribes of Israel. Israel, the chosen children of God. But the relationship was a difficult one. Israel misunderstood the covenant that God had made with them: that he would be their God and they would be his people. They assumed, if they had the right genes, they were in. Confused about their role in the covenant, they inverted the relationship. They forgot that it was God who chooses.

Its easy for us to be critical of Israel – they seem like such blockheads throughout much of the Old Testament. They never seem to learn from past mistakes, keep repeating the same sins over and over again, and they never seem to have a the moment of realization, that aha! that they have been chosen as the beloved

children of God. They completely take it for granted. Instead, they live as if God was their idea, that they chose Him. But let's not be too critical. Because we do it. And when we do, we are misleading ourselves in the same way as those silly Israelites because the truth is, you and I, we would never choose God. Not as a human race, and it pains me to admit, not me personally. Left to our own devices, our eyes are dazzled, mesmerized by so many other pretty things, impressive things, important things, powerful things. Would we ever look away long enough to search for a God we cannot see? No. There are so many other small g gods from which to choose, the most attractive of which is...Me. And this is where the confusion sets in. Instead of letting God be God, we put ourselves in His place, because of course, I could do this better. "For those who are called according to His purpose." That just doesn't sit right with us. A God who chooses? It's not fair. It's just not right. Who is God to choose? If I were Queen or Prime Minister for a day, I could do better. Clearly. This is coming from the person, who one minute can say, "I am going to prioritize spending time on the treadmill today" and while I am thinking about also making better food choices, I remember that there is a pan of fresh brownies sitting on the counter and polish off a whole row like I am a champion competitive brownie eater. I am fickle and completely unreliable. I can't and don't always make the best choices even just for myself. And I know its not just me. I love the very gentle way biblical scholar Paul Achtemier has put it when he writes: "Calling the Creator to account for the way he has created the world or the way he has disposed over its history, lies outside the competence of a creature."ⁱ That sentence reads like an Ontario Ministry of Education report card so let me translate it for us. What Achtemeier is so graciously trying to say, without hurting our too easily bruised feelings, is that we just aren't smart enough as creatures to tell the Creator how he should have done it. God is in charge. God rules and reigns. We are his creation. Yes, we are beloved. Yes, we are made in His image. But yes, we are not God and we don't get to tell him how to do what he does. A quick glance at human history, even a look at the last 100 years of history should be enough for us to be convinced that we clearly don't have a clue about running the world. Here's what is true: these verse in Romans 9 put us back in our place. And that offends us. Achtemeier states it clearly: "Resistance to God as God, as sovereign creator, lies at the heart of human rebellion and sin; and it is precisely such resistance that underlies much of what we tend to find distasteful about these verses. But we are, and we remain, creatures."ⁱⁱ In fact, it s actually a part of the good news of the gospel... "that we are not gods and that the future does not rest in our incapable hands."ⁱⁱⁱ

Here's the other part of the good news. The God who has created us, who has chosen us, who has called us according to his purpose, is a God of mercy, a God of grace. I've said it many times before. I've heard many of you say it too. There, but for the grace of God, go I. In other words, that could easily be me, except for the grace of God. We see a marriage upended by an affair, a family uprooted by job loss, a retirement fund drained by addiction, a future cut short by cancer or ms or heart disease. I say it often now as I watch my mother lose more of her memory, to alzheimers. There but for the grace of God, go I. But what do I mean? A friend this week had emergency surgery to remove a brain tumor. And I realize it is only by God's grace it hasn't been me yet. I could have been me. It might even be me the next time. There is no reason, no logical reason that it didn't

happen to me. There is nothing I have done to prevent it from happening to me. There is no amount of money I could throw at it to stop it from touching my life. There is no magical number of kind acts, of sacrifices I could make that would guarantee that it wouldn't happen to me. There is only the grace of God. But even there, on that operating table, God's grace abides.

It happens to all of us: there is cancer, and heart disease and tragic accidents. There is depression and permanent injury and betrayal and sexual abuse and bad investments and downsizing and the death of a spouse, the death of a child and the death of a dream that comes with infertility.

We are creatures: there is nothing that we "deserve." We only exist at all because of the grace and love of God. And, we exist in a fallen world. We are born into brokenness. We all experience brokenness and let's be honest, all of us participate in brokenness. Because, if we are telling the truth, we aren't always as altruistic as we might to think we are. Occasionally, we might be interested or a little more than interested in looking out for ourselves. That is the real story of humanity's trying to take control. But even in the middle of our own struggles, we are able to catch a glimpse of God's grace at work in our own lives and in lives all around us: the God of grace who gives us strength to carry on. We aren't making it on our own. We can't. It is not, "I am strong." But "when I am weak, he is strong." It is not "I can do this." But "I can do all things through Him who gives me strength." The God who chooses to come close to us in Christ. The God who chose to go to the cross. Did you hear that? God, High King of Heaven, chose His son, to suffer and die for us, for you and for me. Would you or I have chosen that, had we been in charge? To sacrifice ourselves or the one most precious to us for all the others? For the sinners and undeserving, rebellious others? That's how much He loves us. This table tells the story of that love. This is the table where God's choices come together: a people who are rebellious and broken, a people who often think they know better, bread and wine, broken body, poured out blood, the sacrifice of a God of grace, His son, His only Son, offered in your place because of love. Here, at the table, we remember and give thanks that we are the children of a loving father who invites to come and find forgiveness and mercy.

ⁱ Paul Achtemeier, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Romans 9

ⁱⁱ Achtemeier

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