

Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church
Brillion, WI

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Aug. 21 and 25, 2013

Romans 9:1-9

I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen. It is not as though God’s word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham’s children. On the contrary, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” In other words, it is not the natural children who are God’s children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring. For this was how the promise was stated: “At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son.”

It was back in the 1960’s when a shift began to occur in America’s churches. Up until that time America’s best preachers were known for their fire breathing sermons. There was Charles Spurgeon who was known for highly descriptive sections on hell. And then there was Jonathan Edwards who was best known for a sermon entitled *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. And then in the 1960’s - and I’m stealing the words of a more recent commentator - hell got air conditioning installed. In other words, churches stopped preaching about hell and its terrors.

Even outsiders have observed this phenomenon. A noted Stanford anthropologist who has studied evangelical churches said, “I’d be willing to argue - although I’m sure this is controversial - that God has been unconditionally loving since about 1965, and the huge social upheaval was that atheism was an allowable life identity. There were many different ways to be spiritual. There were many different ways to be in the world, and Christianity... then became a buyer’s market.”¹ What she’s saying is that pastors noticed that people were finding spirituality outside of Christianity starting in 1965. Preachers fought to keep their parishioners by talking less about hell and talking more about popular topics.

The problem with this is that a Christianity without hell is not a Christianity that Jesus taught. In the Scriptures, Jesus was hell’s most fervent preacher. I’m sure you noticed that in the Gospel today. Jesus never used the term hell, but wow did he preach it! We heard descriptions like weeping and gnashing of teeth, which - by the way - sound a lot like what we heard in the Old Testament reading about their worm never dying and their fire not being quenched. We know why the Scriptures preach

¹ <http://m.npr.org/story/149395287>

hell. It's so that we never go there. Why else did Jesus spend time emphasizing *who* would be there? Today in Romans 9 we're taking a look at this group of people that are in great danger of hell fire.

Jesus and Paul are agreed on who this group of people is and they grieve over them. Grief is the right word. Paul grieved in a tremendous way. If you think I'm overstating the way Paul felt, listen to this: **"I speak the truth - I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit - I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers."** (v. 1-3) Paul's heart is broken, bashed, and bleeding. You can just feel what's happening inside of him through his writing. His sentences are broken up. His emotions are heightened. You almost get the sense that he was dotting the ends of his sentences with tears. He is so worked up about this because he knew something that his fellow Jews didn't know. He knew they would be cursed and cut off from Christ - the word he used here is anathema. And he knew that was an ending that is so awful that he wished it could be him instead of them.

What's especially troubling is that it's not like God hadn't given them every opportunity to avoid that fate. In fact, they were handed every spiritual advantage. You might even say that they were born with the spiritual silver spoon in their mouth. They were spiritual rich kids. Paul says, **"theirs is the adoption; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship, and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen."** (v. 4-5) Paul's Jewish brothers and sisters were the ones that God had picked out among all the nations of the world; they were the ones to whom God had appeared at various times in glory; they were the ones God had covenanted with on a number of occasions; the list of spiritual advantages goes on and on. The cherry on top of all of this is that the Christ - the great God of the universe - was born from one of them. And you know what they did with all these advantages? They made a seemingly intuitive and logical assumption. They assumed it meant, "God must really think we're something special. What else could explain all of these blessings?" Or to say it another way, "I am one of Abraham's natural born kids. I must deserve all this." What they didn't understand was that this belief had placed them on the highway to eternal anathema. Paul knew it and it was tearing his heart to pieces.

Little did those ancient Jews understand that they were living out a common, deadly spiritual condition that I'm going to call the rich kid condition. There is more than one thing we could say about the rich kid condition, but for today we want to notice this: people with this condition feel entitled to their salvation. In other words, at heaven's gates they treat God like we might treat a TSA agent. If you've flown over the past few years, you know what I'm talking about. You know there is one thing you must have to get past a TSA agent. You must have the proper credential, the proper ID. And so I pull out my driver's license and think, "See? It's me! And now you better let me into this terminal because - well - it's my right and I deserve this."

You know where my mind goes when I think about that? I wonder about myself. And I wonder about us in this church. And I'm a little terrified because this whole rich kid condition hits a little too close to home. I was born with the spiritual silver spoon in my mouth. Most of us were. I was baptized days after I was born. I heard Bible stories before I knew they were Bible stories. I prayed before I knew it was prayer. I went to the Lutheran grade school. I was confirmed in the 8th grade and have been communing ever since. I went to a Lutheran high school. I went to a Lutheran college and I went to a Lutheran seminary. And now, I'm a Lutheran pastor! I'm the ultimate rich kid in a poor world. And there's an awful intuitive and seemingly natural explanation for this. There must be something pretty special about me. I should be able to flash my ID at heaven's gates expecting that God will say, "Sure enough it's you. I've got the executive suite all ready for you. Head that way." I can tell you this. People who think that way have got a stunning, awful surprise coming their way. God will say, "You had more spiritual advantages than anybody on my green earth and yet you don't know me. I do have a special place for you... it's definitely not here. Anathema for eternity."

The thought of being among a group of people like that should frighten us and lead us to come out from them. If it does, then the teaching of hell has done its proper work. We're ready to join the ranks of a different group of people altogether. **"It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.' In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is children of the promise."** (v. 7-8) There are two groups of people that Paul is talking about here. There are people who are Abraham's natural children and there are people who are Abraham's children of the promise. The natural kids are the hell bound ones. They're like Abraham's first kid. Here's his story. Sarah said, "Abraham, sleep with my maidservant." It was an awful, sinful idea. Abraham did it anyway. Ishmael was the natural result. Never did Ishmael have a place in Abraham's true spiritual family. Never. And why not? God is teaching us. He's saying, "Natural kids aren't my kids." Neither biology, nor family history, not even moral behavior we know by nature will place us in God's family. Natural kids aren't God's kids. God's kids are like Isaac. Abraham was old. Worse yet, Sarah was old. Then God promised and a woman in her 90's had baby Isaac. There is no explanation for that - nothing natural - Isaac was born because of a promise.

There's nothing natural about us either. We are children that by all rights should be spiritually dead. We shouldn't believe. We shouldn't be counted as God's. We had about as much a chance to be God's children as Abraham had of being a father to Isaac. And, yet, we are who we are and we believe what we do. And why? Because the promise gave us birth. The promise told us that God ached for us and grieved for us in his inner being. The promise told us that God values us though we have brought him nothing but trouble. The promise told us that, in point of fact, God valued us so much that no price tag was too much for him up to and including the infinitely valuable life of his Son. And the promise told us that because of Christ's death and resurrection we are entitled - yes, I said entitled to salvation. We can

expect to show up at heaven's gates and hear God say, "Yep. It's just as I promised. Your executive suite has been bought and paid for in full. Right this way." We're children of those promises because we believe them.

That helps us understand all of the remarkable spiritual advantages we have had. Our Christian parents, our early baptisms, our lifelong communion habits, and our Lutheran educations - however long they lasted - don't tell us that we're special and different and better than others and entitled to eternity with God. On the contrary, they say nothing about us. They say everything about God. They prove that he's merciful. They prove he's lavish with his blessings. They prove that he's absolutely full of grace. They show us that he wants us to know his promises so we can be children of them.

If you have the gumption, I highly recommend a trip to Bethlehem someday. There's a remarkable church there. It's called *The Church of the Nativity*. It's the place where people think the Christ child was born. I'll never forget walking up to that monolithic, stone structure. I got closer and closer and I remember thinking to myself, "How do I get in there? Weird!" As we got closer, the tour guide stopped us and said, "There's the door." I looked over and around the people in front of me and sure enough there it was! I was stunned. It was this low, tiny door. I'm not sure what the original designers of the church were thinking when they built the church that way, but I know the message I received. Nobody gets in to see God standing tall. If I wanted to stand tall and proud of who I was biologically or morally, I was welcome to stand outside, be cut off from Christ, and be anathema eternally. I'm convinced that's not a group of people I want to stand with when my time comes. That day I bowed low and entered through that tiny, narrow door - an opening through which many of God's children had entered before me. And I thought about eternity and I realized I would enter heaven's gates the same way: I would be bowed low with sin and trusting the promise... because I'm an Isaac. And so are you - a child of the promise. Amen.