

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
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The People of God: Promises Made, Promises Kept

Genesis 22:1-14, Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

It had to be a scam. That was the only conclusion they would draw when a nicely dressed stranger appeared at their door and told them that a Count had left them an inheritance. They wanted to know what the catch was, because all the people had to do was sign a piece of paper and they would receive a check. As it turned out, this was not a scam at all but a rather odd event. The place was Portugal. And what had happened was that seven years before his death, Luis Carlos de Noronha Cabral de Camara, a Portuguese Count, had gone to a registry office in Lisbon, and in front of witnesses had chosen, at random, seventy people to whom to leave his money. This is odd enough in and of itself, but it was even odder in Portugal where people do not make wills. Instead the laws are very clear on who inherits, usually the family, and how the money is divided. So all in all this was one of those moments when both the family and the ultimate recipients were taken by surprise. I offer that story as a way of getting at the question Paul addresses in this part of his letter to the Romans; who will inherit God's coming Kingdom? Will it be the "family" the biological children of Abraham or will it be those "chosen" by God outside of the family?

First we have the family, the Jewish community. Their claim to the inheritance is that they are the descendants of Abraham; the one to whom the promise of a renewed Kingdom was originally made. As a review for all of us who are here this morning, once upon a time, God came to Abraham and made a covenant, a contract, with him and his descendants that they would inherit land, children and blessing, as well as being a blessing to the world. This promise was one that was often tested, such as the time when God asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. In the story Abraham upholds his end of the bargain by almost sacrificing his son, and God upholds God's end of the bargain by providing a sacrifice, thus preserving the promise and the inheritance of the Kingdom. So Jews in the time of Jesus and Jews today see themselves as the family to whom the inheritance promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob ought to come.

The second group consists of those who have been "chosen." This group includes those who believe that they are the recipients of the inheritance of the Kingdom are followers of Jesus of Nazareth, including the Christians in Rome to whom Paul is writing. The Christians believe this because it is what Paul has taught them. Paul taught them that those who have faith in Jesus are those who will be saved. Paul has told them that they have been called, chosen, justified and glorified. Paul has told them that the true children of Abraham are those who have faith, just as did Abraham; the kind of faith that allowed Abraham to almost offer up Isaac. In a sense this is Paul's great theological move that the promise of

blessing that had come to Abraham and his descendants had now been made available to everyone through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In a sense then Christians are those people who had been chosen at random to receive an inheritance.

The question thus arises, who ought to receive the inheritance? Is it Jews or Christians? The answer Paul gives us is that it is both. Evidently what was happening in the church at Rome was that the Christians were saying that they were the only ones who would inherit. Paul makes it clear that this is not so. Paul states that the Jews will also inherit. Earlier in Romans Paul stated that to the Jews, his people by the way, belonged *“the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; <sup>5</sup> to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.”* (Romans 9:5) Paul continues this argument in the passage we read this morning where he writes, *“I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. <sup>2</sup> God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew....for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.”* Paul can do this because he is a good Jew, who understands that when God makes a promise, God keeps that promise. Even though, at the moment, his brother and sister Jews do not believe in Jesus, he trusts that in God’s infinite grace, God will grant them their inheritance.

At the same time Paul makes it clear that Christians will inherit as well. And as he does he wants them to be clear that their inheritance comes because they have been adopted, or grafted into Abraham’s family. This is how he puts it. *“But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, <sup>18</sup> do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. <sup>19</sup> You will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” <sup>20</sup> That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe.”* (Romans 11:17-20) If Paul had our story of the Portuguese Count in front of him, he would probably remind the Christians in Rome that they had done nothing to receive their inheritance but instead, had been picked by God to receive something amazing. And, just as importantly, Paul had already told them that there was nothing that could separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus, meaning that when God makes a promise, God keeps it.

What then are the practical applications of this understanding? First it is that we are to see our Jewish brothers and sisters, as just that, our brothers and sisters. We are all part of the great Abrahamic family. This means that we ought not to push Jesus on them, for in fact not even Paul did that. He offered them his insights and teachings, felt badly when they did not accept, but did not try and either shame them or force them into converting. Second we are to be clear about what we believe as Jesus’ followers. Sometimes people want to pretend that all religions are basically the same. This is not so. We as Christians hold that we believe that in Jesus, God became incarnate, lived, was crucified, died, was buried and rose again. We believe that because of our faith in Jesus we have become new people, capable of living new lives. We are not to be afraid of making this claim, not as one that makes us superior, but as one that makes us grateful for having been chosen by God. Finally we are to take

seriously our call to live a life that reflects the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ; a love that is offered to everyone we meet.

The challenge for us then is to, on the one hand be certain of who we are and what we believe, and on the other hand living a life of service and humility in which we treat every other human being we encounter as children of God. My challenge to you then for this week is to ask yourselves, how am I showing the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ to everyone I meet in order that they might see the love of God within me?