

The beauty and dangers of identity (20A; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32)

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A few reflections on this reading from Romans:

- Wonder at whether God has rejected God's people is a question that bears much weight. A positive conclusion can, and has, been used to justify discrimination and systemic oppression of every kind. Some expressions of the church have too often gotten around this notion by declaring some people to be "not God's" and therefore warranting rejection. We can't repeat a holy "no" often enough in response. Paul's assertion that Jews and Gentiles would be equally beloved by God was meant to be a radical statement.
- Paul describes feeling accepted by God in terms of being descended from God's people by ancestry, birthright, or identity. Some Christians do, too. There is beauty in feeling connected to Christ through the liturgy, ritual, language, and cultural practices of one's ancestors. There is a danger, however, that aspects of that identity can overshadow the faith itself, excluding others who do not share the same background.
- Gifts and callings that are irrevocable are hard to come by outside God's reign. Careers, money, relationships, and even health get "revoked" all the time. It's important for faith communities to create space for lamenting these things when they leave our lives. God's callings and gifts, however, are different. Our identity in baptism belongs to us forever.
- The notion of God imprisoning all in disobedience in order to liberate all is one Paul arrives at from his lived experience of being a persecutor and subsequently a prisoner. I think he sees in himself both sinner and saint. Anti-semitism lurks in interpretation here, however, if Christians see themselves as being God's "real" people while Judaism has become "disobedient." That

assertion would stand in direct opposition to Paul's emphatic declaration that "God has not rejected the people whom [God] foreknew."

- If you disobey the law, you go to prison. That makes logical sense in Paul's world and ours. But the notion that everyone in prison has broken the law cannot be inferred here. Nor that every law broken that mandates imprisonment is just or applied justly. Paul himself knows this all too well. God's application of merciful justice leads to freedom. The same cannot be said for the human application of justice.
- The idea that in Christ God's primary orientation is toward mercy has deep implications for the life of Christian faith communities. If we are the body of Christ, then effectively communicating mercy in our interactions with one another and our communities becomes our primary orientation as well. What would it mean to weigh the choices we make in community by the metric of mercy? To ask, Is this budget merciful? Do we show one another mercy in meetings? Would our neighbors and community describe us as a merciful people?
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