

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
8/17/2008, Pentecost 14A
Romans 11:1-2a, 11-32, Matthew 15:21-28

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My sermon text is from our Second Lesson, from the Eleventh Chapter of Romans. St. Paul writes this:

²⁹for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.(Romans 11:29, NRS)

They are fixed, binding, incapable of being withdrawn.

If the Lord gives his heart to you, he gives it for good. You might break his heart, but he loves on, waiting and hoping for you to love him in return. Along the way, he might discipline, train, and teach you, but it is always the discipline that springs from deep and abiding love for you, for after all, “Whom the Lord loveth, he chasteneth.”(Hebrews 12:6, KJV) You might wander from him and from his ways, and in the wandering, come to be told that you do not amount to much in this world. Aye, and you might believe that condemnation, yet your Maker does not. In his eyes, you are great! That’s because his eyes see through the lens of his love for you.

There is a world of wonder in that children’s hymn, “Jesus *loves* me, this I know.” It is a wonder to think that the One to whom the holy angels sing all the day long, the One heaven adores, adores you, adores me. Why? What is there about us to cause our Maker to love us? I think the answer is, it’s not so much about us, but rather about him, about how large his heart is.

In this world, there are some people with the patience of Job. They love easily. They could love a tree stump. Some of those good people run orphanages, for example, and if no one has loved the orphan before, this one will. There is the orphan, nose running, clothes dirty, bruises without, bruises within, angry, hurt, wild, even mean, but the mother of the orphanage throws her arms around the child and loves that child whom too few people have loved before.

Or, there are the nurse’s aids up there in The Wartburg, where my wife serves as Chaplain. Some of the elderly become problems. They are miserable and they cause misery in return. They might refuse to bath, refuse to socialize, refuse to dress. They might cuss, they might attack with their frail arms flying. But there are nurses and aids there who love them anyway and cannot turn away from them. Their heart is just too big.

There is a wonderful passage in the Fourth Chapter of Deuteronomy which compares God to a fire:

²⁴For the LORD thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God.(Deuteronomy 4:23-24, KJV)

This kind of jealousy is good, it is holy, and in the end it is for your salvation. The LORD thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God. He will not surrender you to anything else that might have beckoned to you, might have allured you, for they will let you down, and he will not stand for that.

Be pleased to think this: If the Lord gives his heart away to you, he becomes for you a burning fire of love, who simply will not go away. Like one of those California forest fires, his love is relentless, stubbornly approaching you, always marching on toward you, never giving up on you, “for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.”

I started this sermon with a hypothetical: “*If* the Lord gives his heart to you, he gives it for good.” Now, we get to go beyond the hypothetical. Does the Lord in fact give his heart away? Does he become smitten? Does he lose his heart to others? Well, there are two grand answers to this: First, the Lord has given his heart away to Israel. And second, the Lord has given his heart away to you.

Let’s begin with Israel.

During the Second World War, after France had fallen and Germany had installed the Vichy regime, Jews were sheltered, among other places, in a French mountain village called La Chambon. The wicked Nazi intention, you know, was to arrest all the Jews of Europe, transport them to concentration or extermination camps in Eastern Europe, and kill as many as they could. But the Jews who made their way to La Chambon received shelter there, even at the risk of death for the villagers.

These villagers were simple Bible-believing descendents of the French Huguenots. God bless ‘em! We need more of them. It meant life and death when a Jew knocked on a French door seeking shelter. The great thing about La Chambon is that when a Jew knocked on the door there, father would answer the door and say to his wife, “Come, Mother, one of God’s people is here!” And then they would shelter that Jew, at cost to themselves and at risk of their own lives.

Well, that’s one of the advantages of being a Bible-believing Christian. You are likely to have read, to remember, and to believe that...

the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.(Romans 11:29, NRS)

The villagers of La Chambon knew that the Lord had elected Israel, and when the Lord gives his heart away like that, he does not change his mind. He does not revoke his promises.

St. Paul knew that too. And so, the apostle poses and forcefully answers a question concerning the Jews:

¹I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means!(Romans 11:1, NRS)

I imagine the saint roaring his answer, “By no means!”

Two of our Bible readings for this morning speak of the extending of God’s call to include the Gentiles as well as the Jews. In our reading from the Fifty-sixth Chapter of Isaiah, we read a glorious promise meant also for the foreign nations:

...for my house shall be called a house of prayer for *all* peoples.(Isaiah 56:7, NRS, my emphasis)

And in our Gospel Lesson, we see the initial reluctance of Jesus to deal with the woman from Canaan, for she was a Gentile, but his eventual cry of admiration for the woman’s faith and the healing of her daughter.

These two Bible readings are very important, especially for those of us who are Gentiles, because it means that in the many mansions in our Maker's house, there is room for us too. That, naturally, is a very big deal.

And yet we must never suppose that the extending of God's call to the Gentiles means the abandonment of the Jews. No such thing! In fact, as St. Paul sorts things out, we Gentiles can claim no higher status than that of wild branches grafted into the cultivated olive tree which is Israel. The Lord's love and call to Israel is tireless.

So, that is the first answer to the question, Has the Lord in fact given his heart away? The first and eternal answer is, "The Lord has given his heart to Israel."

And the second answer is like unto it: "The Lord has also given his heart away to the Church, and therefore to you."

That is the important thing about this morning's Gospel Lesson. It is strange how unwilling our gentle Saviour is to help the Canaanite woman. At first he is silent toward her cry for help. Then when the disciples ask him to grant her request so that she will go away and leave them in peace, he refuses, on the ground that he is called to Israel, not to the Gentiles. Undeterred, she makes her way right into his presence, address him most courteously, and pleads with him to help her daughter. And to this plea, Jesus answers with an insult, referring to her and to the Gentiles in general as "the dogs." Yet she has heard of Jesus that he is a good man, that he has healed others, and she is determined to keep on appealing to him till she prays her way through to victory. And at last, she succeeds. Jesus cries out in admiration of her faith and immediately heals her daughter.

I wish I could adequately magnify this event. Perhaps this determined woman should be called the patron saint of the Gentiles. With her, the great thing happens: The Lord gives his heart away to *anyone* who believes in him, both Jew *and* Gentile. This is the beginning of the church. There had been hints and anticipations in the past of the inclusion of the Gentiles. Especially we can think of this morning's reading from Isaiah with its promises to the foreign nations. Also, we could think of the Epiphany visit of the Wise Men to Jesus. But the Wise Men were dealing with a Baby. Here in this story, the Canaanite woman is dealing with the grown man Jesus. And it is from him, that she wins his heart. And once she wins his heart, there is no going back for him, for the gifts and call of God are irrevocable!

Nor would we want the call of God to be revocable, lest we ourselves be lost. We would not want the Lord to be capable of being so very disappointed in us and so offended by us, that he revokes his love toward us.

When we were baptized, the Lord swore his love to us, and he does not forget his word. He does not revoke his promises. You and I might forget to love him, and we might wander from his ways, and we might even break his heart, yet his love for us is still warm. His love has not grown cold for us. His love yearns for us to return to him, where we will be safe and where he will make us into a blessing for this world.

Indeed, he stands ready right here and now to renew the walk with you and me, for he meets with us in this Blessed Sacrament to speak his sweet words to us yet again: This is my body, this is my blood, given for you for the forgiveness of sin." This Jesus who healed the daughter of the Canaanite woman loves you too and longs to make something good of us: to set them ablaze with love for others, that we will take our place with the villagers of La Chambon and with Christians throughout the ages in deeds of extraordinary goodness, to the benefit of our neighbors and to the glory of Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.