Grace Community, 9th after Pentecost, Proper 13A, 6th August, 2017

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2 I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it
by the Holy Spirit— 2 I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. 3 For
I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my
own people, my kindred according to the flesh. 4 They are Israelites, and to them
belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship,
and the promises; 5 to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the
flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen.

Romans 9:1-5 *(NRSV)*

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If you were to say 'What is something special about my family', what would you say? This is not to say that this 'something special' is unique to your family, but what is something special? (eg: All love "Lord of the Rings'; enjoy large family functions; sporting; love outdoor activities, etc)

Something else to think about – if you were to speak about the 'values' that are important to your life and family, what would you say? For me there have been two key word/phrases – happy in soul, firm in faith.

At this point our hearts may go out to all who feel that family members are 'lost' in life. We see people make choices that we are know are ultimately destructive to personal and emotional well-being, and relationships. We feel for friends and family members who are 'near and dear' to us who seem to be backsliding and drifting from the faith. Do you have a sense of 'pain and loss' in this regard?

I appreciate what one person has said in this regard: Sin is not just breaking God's laws; it is breaking His heart." And, in love, often our hearts ache and break for those whom we may see as a little 'lost' in 'life'? In our hearts we wonder, "What does it profit a person to gain material wealth and comfort, but lose their soul?" Have you ever felt this sense of pain and loss toward someone near you? The Apostle Paul felt this sense of 'pain and loss'.

There is something very fascinating in the Apostle Paul's letters that we do not always appreciate: there is something very personal in the way Paul was inspired to write. He often speaks in personal terms, reflecting not only 'objectively' on 'the faith', but how 'the faith' has affected him (and thus, affects us also). How often does Paul speak of his prayers for people…? Multiple times… And today we hear Paul say, "I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit — that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart."

Paul calls three things (nb: 3) to bear witness to his mega sorrow and continual anguish: the truth in Christ, his conscience, and the Holy Spirit. His knowledge of Jesus that he sees others 'missing out on', his own 'personal journey of faith', and the leading of the Holy Spirit make Paul feel such anguish. We don't want to 'force our faith upon others', but at times we feel so greatly, 'Man, you're really missing out!'

Paul's personal pain is so great he says, "For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh." There are three things going on here. Only last week we heard Paul say, "What shall separate us from the love of God?" His answer was essentially, "Nothing at all!". And yet he sees his own family rejecting Jesus. And so, secondly, he asks (Romans 3:3-4), "Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?" His answer is, "By no means! Absolutely not!" Thirdly, as one who formally persecuted those of the Faith, he does not gloat over the doom of others, but in love – with the love of Jesus that comes from the cross – his heart goes out to his people.

The other thing is Paul's prayer is genuine. Just as Moses prayed he was willing to be destroyed if God would spare his people (Exodus 32:32), Paul also would be willing to 'trade places', if only that would make a difference. Of course, there is ever only One who could truly 'trade places' for us, and that person is Jesus.

And then Paul speaks of all the blessings the people have (Note: 'Israel' here is not to be equated with modern Israel today: this is a spiritual reality about a people of faith and promise). Note, Paul speaks of seven benefits for the people. These are (1) the adoption (that is, God called them out of all peoples of the world to bring His light to the world. Cf. Gen.12:1-3); (2) the glory (ie: the presence of God in the fire at night, the cloud in the Temple); (3) the covenants (ie: various promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the great covenant at Mount Sinai); (4) the giving of the law (essential for all people, and still The great reference point for law today, moral and legal); (5) the worship (that is, the temple rituals, together with personal prayer), (6) the promises (ultimately of the Messiah), and (7) the patriarchs (the great people of faith). And then the eighth thing Paul list is that from his kin comes Jesus, who is God over all, and who is to be praised for ever. Amen!

Paul's heart goes out to his people, but he notes as the Apostle John did (John 1:11), "He (Jesus) came to His own, but His own did not receive Him." And yet Paul also notes (in his various writings in various ways) as John did (John 1:12): "Yet to all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God."

There are many things we could focus on within these few verses the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to speak, but there are three I wish to focus upon to day.

The first is the need for compassion, and for us to have compassion in our hearts. Knowing personally the wonderful relationship with God given him freely through the Bread of life, Paul expresses his utter anguish that his fellow Jews have rejected Christ. Even though they had callously rejected God's plan of salvation in the covenant, he would gladly give up his own place in heaven if it were possible to save them from eternal separation from God by doing that. We are to really care about the eternal future of others.

But the important thing here is to ‘have compassion’, and not simply ‘be compassionate’. Our ‘source’ of ‘compassion’ is not to come from our emotions or feelings (which often can actually lead us astray). Rather, the true source of ‘compassion’ is Jesus. At the feeding of the 5000 Jesus had compassion. There is a ‘double compassion’ here’.

Why was Jesus ‘in the wilderness’? He had just heard the news John the Baptiser had been beheaded; and His heart ‘went out’. But ‘in the wilderness’ He also saw the crowd whom He saw as ‘lost souls’. And on the cross He displayed God passionate and holy and forgiving love in Jesus. Have compassion.

Second, we are to uphold those around us in our prayers – with the compassion of Christ in our hearts. The Apostle James says (Jas.4:8), “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.” Jesus prayed for those who nailed Him to the cross.

In our Gospel today we hear of this incredible event (a truly remarkable and real event of history) of Jesus feeding 5000. How did He do this? Well, on the one hand He is God. He is The Almighty. But notice, He looked up to heaven and ‘gave thanks’. Jesus prayed. Prayer ought to be the first weapon we use – not the last – as we face the battles of life.

Indeed, if you only pray when you are in trouble, you are in trouble! Prayer is to be our ‘steering wheel’, not our ‘spare tyre’. Prayer is to be a lifestyle, not an emergency exit. Luther says, “Pray, and let God worry”. No prayer is too small for the Lord.

We face a humanity too precious to neglect. We know a remedy for the world’s ills that is too wonderful to withhold. We have a Christ too glorious to hide. We have an adventure of faith that is too thrilling to miss.

Thirdly, we are to have a ‘Spirit of joy’ in our hearts’. This ‘Spirit of joy’ does not negate our sense of pain and sorrow at what we see happening in the world, and the lives of those around us whom we love. But the ‘Spirit of joy’ comes from knowing Jesus. Someone has said, ‘A relationship with God that doesn’t really change your life really isn’t a relationship’. Faith is not simply believing there is a ‘God’; we have to trust in Him.

Throughout his life and letters Paul often spoke of the joy of the Gospel – even though his heart was also filled with sorrow and joy. It is this ‘joy’ we are to share with others. Remember, counting other people’s sins does not make you a saint, nor them. Rather, it is Jesus. This is Paul’s prayer for his people, that they know God’s grace, peace, love and mercy in Christ. This is ours for the world.

Jesus is real. He is our ‘Bread of Life’. As we wrestle with life let us rejoice in Him who is our God and Saviour. Amen.