

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Romeo and Juliet are but one example of two people from different backgrounds who never should have fallen in love. But they did. It caused anguish for their families, and—I don't want to spoil the ending for you, but—it didn't go well. In any family one person may fall in love with another, causing joy in the hearts of the lovers, but apprehension among parents and relatives. The differences may pertain to faith, political party, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, race—or family rivalry, as in the case of Shakespeare's star-crossed lovers. We all subscribe to principles such as "Love one another" and "Let there be peace on earth." But sometimes we discover we don't include everyone in our love, by encountering an actual human being from a group we in fact exclude. The young person then wails, caught between love of parents and love of friend. That person's attempt toward inclusion in the family has led to exclusion instead.

In today's passage from the Letter to the Romans, Saint Paul in a way faces the dilemma of that lover. For the first eight chapters he has preached a message of inclusion. Paul grew up Jewish and famously persecuted Christians before becoming one. Then when he started to preach Christ as the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham, some Jews followed him into discipleship; others did not. So as Paul begins chapter nine of Romans, after preaching the message of inclusivity, he looks over his shoulder at his own people, his own family, and finds that he has lost many of them. Some of the Jews were saying about Christianity, "If the Gentiles are in, then we are out." It probably wasn't so much prejudice as a principled belief in the limits of membership. In this passage Paul begins to rebuild his argument first by wailing as a young person torn between parents and a fiancé might do, and then by affirming what the Jews have.

Paul says, "I have great sorrow and constant anguish in my heart. 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." He loves his people, and he loves Christ. He believes in the promises of Christ, and he wants his own people to enjoy them as well. So he affirms everything that the Jewish people have: "They are Israelites," the special family of Jacob. "Theirs [is] the adoption," Paul says. They are God's children. Theirs is "the glory": God made himself present to them. Theirs are "the covenants," the multiple agreements God made with them throughout history. Theirs is "the giving of the law" from Mount Sinai. Theirs is "the worship" in synagogue and temple. Theirs are "the promises" of redemption. "The patriarchs" even belong to them. They have everything, and now God gave them something more. Paul reminds his Jewish family and friends that "from them, according to the flesh, is the Christ." Paul will build on this argument especially in the passages we'll hear the next two Sundays. Today we just encounter his opening cry of pain at the lack of unity, and his affirmation of God's chosen people.

Perhaps that's where dialogue can begin within families, between neighbors, and among races. We preach mutual love, we preach inclusivity; when it disappears, we cry with pain, and we affirm the goodness of the other side. Paul realizes that inclusivity challenges people, but he is convinced that in the end it is the will of God, and it explains why Christ came into the world.

Sunday, August 9, 2020