

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Back in 1971 my high school presented a production of the popular musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. When it was over, my father told me about one part of the play that disturbed him. The Jewish father, Tevye, learns that his third daughter, Chava, has eloped with a Christian. In Tevye's view, his daughter had revoked the family covenant. When Chava returns and tries to reason with Tevye, he won't even speak to her, declaring her dead to him and to his family. My father said to me, "I couldn't imagine ever saying that to one of my children." I realize that I was blessed with an extraordinary father, and not everybody gets one; some fathers have abandoned their children. But this episode from my youth helped me understand why Jesus taught his followers to call God Father.

God the Father established a covenant with the Jewish people and renewed it many times. Even when ancient Israel broke the covenant, worshiping false gods, God kept calling them back and remained faithful to them. For that reason, St. Paul in today's passage from Romans characterizes the gifts and the call of God as "irrevocable".

This verse stands at the head of a 2015 statement from the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, called "A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* (no. 4)," the declaration of the Second Vatican Council on the relationship between the Catholic Church and non-Christians. Right on top of the 2015 statement stands Romans 11:29: "The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable." Among the non-Christian religions, Judaism holds a special place in the heart of Catholicism. The Vatican's Commission said that "Christians and Jews are irrevocably inter-dependent, and that the dialogue between the two is not a matter of choice but of duty" (13), and that "The New Covenant does not revoke the earlier covenants, but it brings them to fulfilment" (27). We Christians believe that we experience the fulfillment of the same covenant that God made and renewed with Israel throughout the Old Testament.

In Paul's letter, this topic arises in the section where he appeals to his Jewish brothers and sisters to profess faith in Christ as the promised Messiah. To Paul's frustration, the Gentiles, the non-Jews, were accepting Christ, but his own people did not share equal enthusiasm. Paul reflects on it this way: He believes that God allowed the Gentiles to respond favorably in order to make the Jews jealous. When they saw the promises fulfilled, they would want to follow along. Paul has come to realize that he may not get all the other Jews to follow him, but he hopes that his efforts will at least help "save some of them."

When we cannot see the way forward in a disagreement with someone we love, we may experience something that Paul did: God may be using someone's disobedience—including our own—in order to show mercy. Paul says quite broadly at the end of this passage, "God delivered all to disobedience, that he might have mercy upon all." Even when we cannot see the way out, God, our Father, does. Our own inability to resolve a dispute could still be part of God's great plan to save people through a relationship that cannot be revoked.

Sunday, August 16, 2020