

NOT ONE LEFT BEHIND
The Ninth Sunday After Pentecost
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We are in the third week of our four-week series on Paul's Letter to the Romans, and today is a good day to stop and ask ourselves a question. We have been exploring Paul's call to us to turn away from the toxic commitments in our lives—the parts of our lives that contribute to racist structures, an unsustainable environment, and economic disparities. We have seen that Paul assures us that we are not alone if and when we choose to take the leap of faith and turn away from our participation in these oppressive structures; that the Holy Spirit will lead and guide us in new directions that the Spirit will make clear to us. But still, despite all of this hopeful and encouraging teaching, there's that question I mentioned: what do we do with the pain of having to let so much go? Aren't we having to reject people and things that we have loved and cared about? What about the very human side of all of this?

Paul knows all about it. "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart," he tells us. (Romans 9:2) Paul's sorrow and anguish have to do with his own Jewish community, many of whom have not joined him in recognizing Jesus as the promised Jewish Messiah. Paul wrestles mightily with the question of the status of these brothers and sisters who have not embraced Jesus. He seems to be remembering the story of Moses pleading with the Lord after the people of Israel built the golden calf: "... if you only will forgive their sin—but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written." (Exodus 32:32) Paul writes, "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." (Romans 9:3) Paul is saying that if his non-Jesus-believing brothers and sisters are to be cut off from God's promises, he wishes he could stand in and take the penalty for them.

But as we have noted earlier in this series, Paul concludes that there is no need for him to do this: God will never withdraw his promises to the Jewish people, nor will God end the special relationship He has with them. It is not Paul's job to resolve the issue of their relationship with Jesus: everything that is happening in Paul's religious world, among Jews *and* Gentiles, is part of God's plan to redeem the world and save humanity. Paul has one job only: to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles. His beloved Jewish community will not be left behind—they are in God's faithful hands. God, Paul concludes, is a God who keeps the commitments He makes—forever.

Which brings us back to the people and things we may need to leave behind as we turn away from our participation in oppressive structures. For some of us—certainly for me—this involves coming to terms with cherished memories of people I now see clearly as flagrantly racist; or memories of experiences that I enjoyed at the expense of others; or gratitude for opportunities I have had on the backs of others. I won't call out anyone specifically, but I have formative memories with beloved people—some of which I have alluded to over the years in my sermons—that contained elements my participation in which now cause me embarrassment and pain. Do I need now to relegate them to some sort of trash heap of memory, now edited out of my experience?

Paul's answer to this is: **most certainly not**. Remember words we heard last week: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28) Paul has entrusted his past to God, recognizing that God was at work in it and continues to be at work in the lives of those he has had to leave behind. Our challenge is to have the same faith. We do need to turn away from some very powerful attachments in order to live

changed lives. But this doesn't mean that God was not at work in those attachments, nor does it mean that God abandons anyone, ever.

As an adult, I became somewhat estranged from a man who had been a shining figure in my boyhood, someone whose approval and regard gave me much of my confidence as a child and teenager. We stayed in touch over the years, but the relationship we had enjoyed seemed irretrievably lost. Decades passed; then came news of his death, and instructions in his will that I participate in his funeral and preside at his burial.

On a gleaming day in a beautiful cemetery, I spoke the words of committal at his final resting place. Picking up a handful of earth and making the sign of the cross on his casket, I knew profoundly that's God's faithfulness to him had been constant even as mine was not. We are free to turn away when we are called to do so. As for God, not one is left behind.