

Epworth Chapel on the Green
August 6, 2017
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Nehemiah 9:16-20
Psalm 78:14-20, 23-25
Romans 8:35-39
Matthew 14:13-21

Abraham Lincoln once remarked that the real issue in life is not whether we are on God's side, but whether God is on *our* side. In our epistle lesson from Romans this morning, the apostle Paul affirms in no uncertain terms that God indeed is on our side, if by "our side" we understand Paul to speak of fallen humanity.

God is not against us *for* our sin; God is for us *against* our sin. This is driven home forcefully for us in v. 32, where Paul says: "He who spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, will he not also with him freely give us all things?"

It is a wonderful thing to be loved by God. It is a wonderful thing that God is *for* us, that God is on our side as it were. But the vital question lurking just beneath the surface of this text this morning is this: *Just how far does God's love reach?*

Our Old Testament lesson and our Psalm answer this question this morning with reference to the children of Israel. We are told that the children of Israel were a "proud and stubborn lot," who habitually forgot God's miraculous deliverance in their lives. They tested God, they rebelled against God, they made a mockery of God's love. Yet Nehemiah poignantly tells us that God, in God's great mercy, did not abandon them to die in the wilderness. God sent His good Spirit to instruct them, and did not stop giving them bread from heaven or water for their thirst (vv. 19-20).

At the individual level, we see the answer to the question of the reach of God's love in the New Testament in the "prodigal" son, who takes all that his father has to offer and uses it to pursue selfish and self-destructive ends. He winds up far from home, emotionally and relationally a mere shadow of his former self. And yet when he turns his heart and his feet toward home, he discovers that his father is moving toward him with his arms open and the champagne on ice.

In the case of the Apostle Paul, we see the reach of God's love tested by misguided religious zeal and passion. Paul was so convinced that followers of Jesus were a threat to society and to the religious establishment that he hunted them down and killed them. Aggressively.

So, if anyone here today wonders just how far the love of God reaches, the answer is: *As far as our rebellion, prodigality, estrangement, and misguided zeal can take us.*

Perhaps nothing demonstrates this more clearly than Jesus in our Gospel lesson. Jesus has just received word that John the Baptist has been martyred, and he tries to retreat into solitude in order to grieve and to process what has happened. But vast crowds and overwhelming human need make it almost impossible for Jesus to deal with his own overwhelming human need.

The text tells us: “He had compassion on them....”

The more I think about this text, I think what truly impresses me is not so much the miracle here, but Jesus’ *compassion*. Do you realize just how compassionate Jesus is?

Perhaps it is Jesus’ *compassion* that is the key for us when we feel overwhelmed by the needs that are all around us and yet we hear him say to us: “You feed them.” *For when you see through eyes of compassion, you see possibilities where everyone else sees only limitations.*

How far does the love of God reach? I ask that question this morning not rhetorically, not of the children of Israel, not of the prodigal son, and not of the apostle Paul. I ask it on behalf of each of *you*. For you are sitting here this

morning, facing something in your life that prompts you to ask the question, not of others, but of yourself. And you wonder if the situation in your life is beyond the reach of God's love and mercy.

How far does the love of God reach *for you* this morning?

If the love of God pursued the children of Israel through their rebellion and disobedience; if the love of God was with the prodigal son while he fed corn husks to pigs; if the love of God was with the apostle Paul while he murdered people out of his misguided religious zeal -- then be assured, the love of God reaches all the way to where *you* are. Right here. Right now.

In a moment I'm going to invite you to come to the Table, to tangibly take hold of bread and wine. As you do that, I want you to understand that this is God reaching out to you in love and mercy. This is God's promise to you that He'll do whatever it takes, that His love and mercy follow you to the lowest depths and to the highest heights, and into the most painful situation in your lives. It doesn't matter where you've been. It doesn't matter where you are. It doesn't matter how you got from *there* to here.

So embrace that love and that compassion today. Welcome and receive it by faith. Rest in its guidance. And carry it forth to others.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.