SERMON TAKE-HOME NOTES — October 26, 2025

Basic questions of salvation:
How is it that we are saved? (By what means?)
What are we being saved from?

As I was growing up, I think the most common answers were:
We are saved by means of faith in Jesus Christ.
We are being saved from going to hell for eternity to instead go to heaven for everlasting life.

Over the past 60 years, I've come to answer these quite differently:
We are saved by means of Jesus's faithfulness in the cross and resurrection to reconcile all people and the whole creation.
We are being saved from the hellish violence we continue to unleash against one another by our refusal to be reconciled, continuing to choose instead various forms of nationalism which divide us.

Personal testimony: this shift in understanding of the basic Gospel message leads me to feel secure about my place in the afterlife but instead to worry a great deal about the hellish violence in which my children and grandson may endure. That's the hell I'd really like to be saved from.

Defining "Nationalism": Any of the ways throughout human history when we organize ourselves based on division rather than reconciliation. Nationalism is fundamentally a way of thinking based on *in*equality. It is based on the belief that some groups of human beings are superior to others. When paired with religion, as it so often is, it is the belief that God favors some people over others, and so it is supposedly God's will that they rule over others.

St. Paul understands God's rule in Jesus the Messiah to fundamentally be about reconciliation:

- Next Sunday, in fact, we will read from Ephesians 1 right after Paul states God's will "that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1:9-10).
- Similarly, Col 1:20: "through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross."
- When elaborating on "new creation" in 2 Cor 5:18-19, Paul writes: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us."

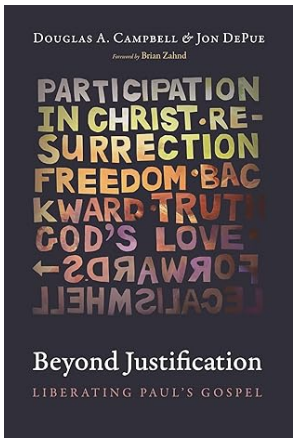
Nationalism, on the other hand, is the quickest way to hell. Jesus came to save us from that. He launched God's reign in the world precisely by letting himself be cast out by both Jewish and Roman nationalism. Hanging on the cross, he is an "illegal" to both Jews and Romans. Since God's rule is completely nonviolent, suffering our violence on the cross and then raising Jesus on Easter is the only way that God could begin to save us from the violence of our endless nationalisms. It is the only truth that can truly set us free.

In today's Gospel, John 8, Jesus is engaging with fellow Jews who believe that being descendants of Abraham automatically wins them God's favor over others. Jesus is trying to set them straight by eventually showing them the truth of suffering nationalistic violence on the cross. That is the only truth that will set them free from the hell of their nationalistic violence.

Finally, today's Second Reading from Romans 3 states the case for equality between Jews and Gentiles, against any Christian form of Jewish Nationalism which makes it necessary for any converts to Christianity also to practice Torah, the Jewish "law." In fact, just such a false teaching had already shown up in Paul's churches in Galatia, and now Paul had word that those same teachers had come to Rome. Paul had to quickly write to the Romans, even though he had never been there and didn't really

know them, to argue against those false teachings — which is what he does in the first four chapters of Romans. But there has also appeared in recent years a proposal by New Testament scholar Douglas Campbell that, since Paul didn't know the Romans, he used a rhetorical strategy called Diatribe, used by many politicians in Rome. In Diatribe you voice your opponent's way of arguing and then argue against it. Paul has been doing this since chapter one, climaxing in his main point at the end of Romans 3. Here, we can see Paul imagining how his opponent might respond in verses 27-30:

Pastor Paul's translation of Romans 3:19-30, with guidance from Douglas Campbell:



St. Paul: [19]We know that, whatever the Torah says, it speaks to those 'in' the Torah, so that every mouth might be shut and the whole world might come under God's judgment. [20]For no human being will be justified before God by Torah-practice, for through the Torah comes sin-thinking.

[21]So now, beyond the Torah, the justice of God has been disclosed and is attested by the Torah and the Prophets: [22]the justice of God through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah for all who have faith. For there is no distinction, [23]since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; [24]they are now justified by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Messiah Jesus, [25]whom God intended to be the source of reconciliation in his blood effective through faithfulness. God did this to show God's justice, because in divine forbearance God granted amnesty for sins previously committed; [26]it was to prove at the present time God's own justice by the very act of declaring everyone just who has the faithfulness of Jesus.

Opposing Teacher: [27]Then what becomes of pride?

St. Paul: It is excluded.

Opposing Teacher: By what practice of Torah?

St. Paul: By none, but rather by the Torah of faithfulness. [28]For we hold that a person is justified by faithfulness beyond practice of the Torah.

Opposing Teacher: [29]Isn't God the God of Jews alone?

St. Paul: And not of the gentiles, too? Of course, of the gentiles, too! [30]Since God is one, then it follows that the God who will justify the circumcised out of the faithfulness of Jesus is the same God who will also justify the uncircumcised through that same faithfulness.

Who is the God shown forth in the cross? I needed to add two verses to today's reading. In verse 29, the false teacher is still thinking in terms of God favoring the Jews. He thinks that God is the special God of the Jews only. This, of course, is against the core of Paul's argument that the oneness of God is the means of reconciling all of creation. The oneness of God witnessed through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah is saving Jews and Gentiles alike. There is no distinction in our sinning, and there is no distinction in God's response of grace.

Siblings in Christ, isn't this precisely the Gospel message we need today in standing against a Christian form of nationalism? In fact, there's ways, like I said at the outset, in which the form of the Gospel message when we elder members grew up is open to nationalism itself. It sees a basic divide between believers and unbelievers, a divide that sorts the world into Christians and non-Christians so that we've ended up justifying Christian rule over all others. Isn't that's what we did with the Africans we enslaved? Isn't that what we did with the indigenous people of America? We counted them as pagans and justified our ruling over them with a deadly violence. No, the Protestant way of reading the Gospel has proven itself *un*faithful to the one who took upon himself the violence of Jewish and Roman nationalism. On this Reformation Sunday, let us first commit to a more faithful understanding of the Gospel message as standing against all forms of nationalism. Let us dedicate ourselves to learning to see the reign of God coming into the world through Jesus as first and foremost a movement toward equality for all people. As a movement that seeks the mutual flourishing of the whole creation. As a movement working to save us from the fresh hell we make for ourselves through movements like Christian Nationalism. Let us be part of saving the world for our children and grandchildren. Amen