

“Promise People”

Eight Sunday after Pentecost

Romans 9:1-5

**“From their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen”
Romans 9:5**

Sometimes the most ordinary objects can tell the most extraordinary stories. Consider a certain bridge and a certain window. The hohenzollernbruecke in Cologne, Germany is, by most standards, a pretty ordinary bridge except for one extraordinary feature. If you were to walk across this particular bridge or view it from a distance you would gaze at thousands upon thousands of locked padlocks of various colors fixed to the fence that runs across the bridge. Closer to home, one can visit the *Bo Beau* French restaurant in Ocean Beach and witness something similar as you walk past a barred window on your way to the front entrance to the establishment. The phenomenon is called Love Locks (or Love Padlocks), which many believe to have originated from Italy. Lovebirds, often married couples, lock padlocks bearing their names against fences, gates, bridges, or another public place to symbolize their everlasting love. The result is that an otherwise ordinary object in an ordinary location becomes a vehicle for telling extraordinary stories of promise and commitment.

Sometimes extraordinary stories can be told using ordinary things. We are reminded of this truth this morning as we listened to the short passage of Paul’s letter to the Romans. We might say that this portion of Paul’s letter is just an ordinary a prayer. In five short verses Paul presents a prayer, a cry and plea to God on behalf of his fellow Israelites. Through this prayer a story of anguish and frustration can be heard. Paul cries out in anguish for his fellow Israelites who have rejected Jesus as the promised Messiah and proudly consider themselves non-Christians and unbelievers. Paul says, “I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh” (Rom 9:1-2). Through something as common and ordinary as the form and medium of prayer, we learn about one man’s extraordinary, heartfelt anguish over a people that have rejected God’s true story of promise and commitment. And so Paul prays for these people.

Paul’s prayer and plea to God on behalf of his people bears striking resemblance to a prayer of another child of God in the Old Testament. As the patriarch Abraham stands above the city of Sodom and Gomorrah and surveys the actions and practices of a city that has lost the Will and Word of God, he calls upon God and pleads for them. Abraham’s prayer might at first not sound like a prayer. It might sound more like one man bargaining with God while human lives hang in the balance. But woven into Abraham’s anguish and sorrow is an extraordinary story of a God of righteousness, a God of justice and mercy all at the same time, a God who makes promises and keeps them. Our God of promise and commitment.

In Paul’s prayer that we heard this morning we are especially reminded of our God of promise who joined a people to a promise, a covenant, which he made even as far back as Abraham. Paul even

names the promises and privileges that belonged to this people, this offspring of Abraham. He says, “They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises” (Rom 9:4). In Paul’s cry of anguish to God on behalf of his people we are reminded of an extraordinary story of a God of promise and commitment who called and gathered a people to be his very own and to live as his people of promise.

This is the Church—a people who are joined to God and his promises. It has sometimes been difficult for the Church to remember that she is first and foremost a people of God, a collection of believers. We can often leave behind this corporate picture of the Church in favor of more privatized, individual expressions of the Church and of the Christian Faith. Christianity can then become something it was never intended to be. It can become a private, personal religion that is more about our private devotional time or about Christ as a best friend, a person who supports us when times get tough, and someone who helps us accomplish our plans and fulfill our dreams. In this picture of the Church we reverse roles with God. Our story takes center stage. Our promises and our commitments to God become central. Rather than us being joined to God’s greater story, God is brought into our story (This insight is borrowed from the sermon series by Dr. David Schmitt, *God’s Greater Story*).

In our sermon series we are reaching the point in chapter nine of Paul’s letter to the Romans in which Paul reminds us that God’s greater story involves a greater people. God has come in Christ not only to save you and each person but he has come also to join you to a people that we call the Church. He joins you to a people of promise that live by his promise. And through that people he carries out his work of salvation and redemption in Christ for all people.

About six months ago I had a conversation with a member of the Church, one person who is a part of the people of God, who demonstrates well what it means to be joined to God’s greater people of promise. During the conversation this particular layperson who is a member of a different parish in a different area shared with me one seemingly ordinary thing that he does every Sunday morning before the start of any Worship Service at their congregation or any other in the area. This person told me that he makes it a point to say a prayer to God for his Pastor and every other Pastor in the congregations around his own. Before any Pastor greets a parishioner, speaks an invocation, pronounces absolution, prays a prayer, proclaims God’s Word in a sermon, or distributes the body and blood of the Lord, this one parishioner prays a prayer for them and their Ministry that morning. One ordinary prayer that tells an extraordinary story of a people joined to their God and his promise in Christ. It might not be as dramatic as the bargaining prayer of Abraham for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah or as heartfelt as the Apostle Paul’s cry of anguish and sorrow for his fellow unbelieving Israelites but it is nonetheless a prayer that captures what it means to be joined as a people to a God of promise who has a desire for the lost to know him and his love in Christ.

As the Church you and I are joined as God's people to his promise in Christ. I would like to conclude the sermon this morning by showing a visual depiction of this promise of salvation to which we belong. The visual aid is actually a painting by Lucas Cranach, a contemporary of Martin Luther. The



painting is titled *Law and Gospel*. It tells the story of our God of promise. If you look closely you can see a depiction of Adam and Eve and the Fall into Sin. You can see Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. And in the background and foreground of the painting you can see the seemingly ordinary objects that bring about the extraordinary fulfillment of God's promise of salvation—the cross and the empty tomb. Also in the foreground are the prophets of God pointing you and me,

as the viewers, to the work of Christ that joins us to God and his Gospel promise. As members of the Church let us believe more firmly the ordinary work of our seemingly ordinary days is redeemed and transformed in Christ and used to proclaim the greater story of our God of promise. Unlike “love padlocks” on a bridge in Cologne, Germany, or those on the bars of a window at a French restaurant, God's work in Christ for you, not your commitment to God, is what joins you unto eternity to his greater story as a part of his greater people. That is cause for rejoicing. Amen.