

Sermon: 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Romans 11: 1,2a, 113-15, 28-32 (v.32)

Theme: God is inclusive in His Mission through the Church

Goal: To highlight the grace of God to all, stressed in the four readings for this Sunday

Dear Friends,

Introduction: We grew up in a multicultural society. People of different background, culture and colour were or are our classmates and neighbours; or, if it is not so in some cases, we are all citizens of this “rainbow nation”(as Bishop Desmond Tutu called it) with more than 11 official languages and several other languages as well. And even if some groups try to isolate themselves according to their tradition or common interest, they cannot avoid different people when they go to the shopping centres or to the market.

This was not the situation of the Jews in the New Testament time. Even though they had the Romans as their oppressors and conquerors, even though the Greek culture was strong among them, they had built a wall around themselves to protect their race and culture, and they despised the other peoples. They were unique.

This was a big challenge for the first Christian Church, as many of the first Christians had Jewish background. As people from other backgrounds confessed Jesus as Lord and joined the Jewish Christian community, how would be the relationship among them all?

*God had established a special relationship with Israel as the nation through whom the nations of the world would come to know Him* (ABC 1367). But Israel failed in her mission, in spite of being aware of God’s promises to all since the first promise given to Abraham, that “all

peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:3). Jesus came to restore the original plan of God to reach all with His mercy and grace, without distinction of race, language, culture or other differences. The Apostle Paul was God’s great tool to implement this old-new concept of the Kingdom of God. Yes, I said: old-new, because it had always been in God’s plan to reach all. The plan needed just to be well refurbished and be put in practice.

We have to learn from this, because our tendency is sometimes to isolate ourselves as Lutheran Christians as a form to protect ourselves. The original plan of God to reach all is still valid. We are His tools to accomplish it nowadays.

We will go through the four readings for today and see how God’s plan was clear in the Old Testament and how it was accomplished in the New Testament till now.

I – The Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 56: 1, 6-8

God spoke words of promises and comfort to the foreigners through the Prophet Isaiah: “Let no foreigner who is bound to the LORD say, “The LORD will surely exclude me from his people.” Foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants...and who hold fast to my covenant— these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer... for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.” – Jesus quoted this passage when He cleared the temple (Mark 11:17), proclaiming the goal of His ministry: to reach all and to bring all to the house of His Father.

II – Psalm 67:

The prayer of Psalm 67 asks for blessings upon God’s people, so that, through them, all peoples would come to worship the LORD. We read: “May God be gracious to us and bless us / and make his face

shine on us— / so that Your ways may be known on earth, / Your salvation among all nations. / May the peoples praise You, God; / may all the peoples praise You. / May the nations be glad and sing for joy, / for You rule the peoples with equity / and guide the nations of the earth.”

The Book of psalms was the hymnal of the Jewish church and even of the first Christian Church. But, like it happens with some of our mission hymns, the Jews sang them well, but...they didn't put to practice what they sang. This is seen clearly even among the disciples, as we read in the Gospel Reading.

### III – The Gospel: Matthew 15:21-28

The story of the Canaanite Woman can be approached from different angles. We can highlight this woman's strong prayer; we can highlight her faith... We went through this story at our Bible Study last Wednesday. I want to stress the angle linked with the other readings: She was a foreigner. Jesus had crossed the border from Israel to Syria. He was looking for a quiet place to be with His disciples. But even there, He was a well-known person. When the woman recognized Him, she began to plead with him for her daughter. She was crying loud, asking for help. The disciples became bothered with her cries and they asked Jesus to dismiss her. She was nothing but a foreigner, a gentile, an enemy of God's people... She was like a “dog” in the concept of the Jews. She was unclean, because she was not part of God's people.

We have to understand Jesus' silence, and after this His apparently harsh reaction to the woman, saying that she was not from God's people and calling her a “dog”, as a lesson to the disciples: This was their thinking about the woman. Jesus spoke what they would have spoken. On the other hand, Jesus wanted to show them how big the

faith of the woman was. Because from the very beginning she approached Jesus with a true faith, calling: “LORD, Son of David, have mercy on me!” She passed the test and the disciples learned from this episode that Jesus was for foreigners too.

#### IV – The Epistle: Romans 11

Remember that we were foreigners as well. Paul writes in the Epistle: “You ...were at one time disobedient to God (and) have now received mercy...For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that He may have mercy on them all.” It is not a matter of being a Jew or a Roman, a South African or a British, - but it’s a matter of faith in Jesus as the “Lord, the Son of David”, our Saviour. We sing in our Liturgy the same words the Canaanite Woman addressed to Jesus: “*Lord, have mercy, Christ, have mercy, Lord, have mercy*”. It’s a confession of faith and a plea for mercy that the Christian Church all around the world sings in the greatest variety of languages and cultures. This faith unites us and makes us one people, God’s people.

*Conclusion: God’s love was not limited to the people of Israel; He wanted to gather other folks to Himself. But now, as the people of God, we are just as tempted as they were to think that the love of God is somehow limited to the club of which we are a member. It can be just as difficult for us to remember that God’s love is extended to all, even those with whom we have a problem... As Christians, our old man loves to set up a boundary which would explain why we are inside the kingdom and why the other guy is outside that same kingdom... Salvation by grace through faith without works means that the dividing wall of hostility is broken down.* ( PBrandt@cu-portland.edu). —

Let us learn and practice that Christ is for all and that His mercy is available to all through our behaviour and witness. Amen.

(Pastor Carlos Walter Winterle, 17 August 2014).