

God grant us serenity to accept the things that we cannot change. Courage to change the things that we can and the wisdom to know the difference in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen. Please be seated.

I want to begin this morning by naming a very specific tension that is present and at work in all of the texts, but especially in Romans and in Matthew, that we hear today. And that is this tension that exists in the early church, which is made up of Jews. And the Jews who have decided to follow Jesus and that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel.

And then there's a leadership movement within that early church to invite people who aren't Jewish. So, we call Gentiles into this community and to create new communities following Jesus that are both made up of Jew and Gentile together. This creates great tension. To bring two groups that have historically lived separately, worshiped separately, and held each other at arm's length. To try to bring them together and create community together creates tension.

And that shows up in our scripture. And we got to mention it today because we want to be aware of the fact that we are in a time of rising antisemitism. We are at a time where the antisemitism that's always been present is becoming more obvious and is being spoken out loud. A lot of people who were thinking it quietly are saying it loudly and it makes a difference.

We want to be aware as Christians that our Jewish siblings are in a place of heightened fear, right? And that we have a part to play in their fear. We have a part to play in the potential of their security, their hope, and their health as we share this world with them and with each other. So we want to be aware of the dynamics, because there's some language in our scriptures today that has actually been used to harm Jews in Jesus' name, and we have to reject that.

We cannot allow for that in our lives. But we also cannot just chuck this book and chuck the scriptures because they can be difficult. And just say, ah, we'll just make some stuff up. We actually want to engage with the texts we're given and understand that tension and try to recognize where God is present and what God is calling us to do and be in this world.

Let's start with Paul. Paul, like all the other authors of the Bible and like Jesus himself, Paul is a Jew. Side note, very important point. When we're combating antisemitism, we worship a Jew. It's super helpful for us to know that, okay, I'm back. So, Paul is a Jew and Paul is working within a specific context.

In his own past, he and his culture, they have been seeking and hoping and yearning for deliverance from God. I'm not talking that they're hoping that they'll get to go to heaven when they die. They are hoping that in this world, in this life, God will show up and help bring justice and equity, peace and mercy into their lives.

And Paul is among a group of Jews who believe that there is someone who will do that, who is called the Messiah of God. And Paul is of a group that of people who believe that Jesus was that Messiah, is that Messiah. Is the one who has done the things necessary to bring justice to the world, to bring justice, peace, mercy, and love to Israel.

Not in some far away fairytale future, but right here and now. He believes God is working to make this world healed and reconciled. But he also believes that what God has done is not just for the salvation of one group of people. Paul believes that the Messiah did not just show up to bring justice to Israel, but in

fact to the whole world, to every single person and all the inhabitants and all of the creation. God has brought justice through Jesus.

This creates tension, not because Paul's Jewish siblings are bad, but because they're human and humans, we don't like change. We don't like when people mess with us. And we definitely don't like when people tell us to reexamine our past and have a different relationship with our past than we've had before.

We get really protective of our history. We get really protective of how we became what we are. I remember when my wife and I had our first child and then, you know, consequently our first argument. It's not true. We argued way before that. It's a good priest joke though. But, I remember we were talking about how to actually raise this human in real life, not abstractly.

Now here it is, what are you going to do? And I was the person who was saying, well, my parents did it this way and I turned out all right. First of all, no, I didn't. No, I didn't. That's not true. Okay. It took a lot of work, and it still takes a lot of work for me just to be a person. Okay? But secondly, I found myself being very protective of the things that I had been raised with, and the ways that I understood, because I felt nervous. If I was going to treat my child differently, what did that mean about my past? Was there something wrong with it? Was there something wrong with my parents and something wrong with me? You get nervous.

We're seeing this played out in our country as we reexamine our history. There are people who go, don't look at our history like that, that makes me uncomfortable when you look at the breadth and the wholeness of the things that are true about us, let's just focus on the parts that make me feel good about myself.

We're scared of people messing with how we got here. We're scared of people messing with us. And why is that? Because our past is how we define ourselves. If I'm getting to know you and I say, tell me a little bit about yourself, you say, well, I was born in such and such a place. If you and I were talking, and we were getting to know each other, and you said, tell me a little bit about yourself. I'd say, well, I was born in California. I grew up there part of the time, and then I moved to New Hampshire when I was a teenager. And I'll start to describe my past, tell you a little bit about my family, since I'm a priest, and I'm probably talking to you in a church context. I might tell you a little bit about my religious history, but I'm going to tell you that story. Tell me about who you are, and I'll tell you about who I was.

So when someone asks me to reexamine or, or makes me reexamine that past, I get nervous. Paul is telling the people of this church, both Jew and Gentile, that they have to look at their past differently and it doesn't get to define them anymore. And particularly Paul's Jewish heritage is emphasizing very carefully and very clearly a way of being in the world of living in the world of following a specific set of rules and guidelines to make sure that you all understand who you are, and this is how we live in faithfulness to God. And Paul is now saying, and the new Christian movement is now saying, you don't have to live like that anymore.

That might sound liberating to some people, but to others, that is terrifying. Something happens within us. What are you telling me, to chuck my past? To reject it, to look at it and say, oh, it was awful, and to be mad at my family, or be mad at my heritage or history and be angry and ashamed and disgusted. Or

am I supposed to hold fast to it and hold tight and dig my heels in and say, no, no, no. This is who I was. This is who I'm supposed to be. We see a lot of that going on.

The Christian way, as Paul is describing it is landing in a different space in our lives and in our hearts. Paul says today, those scriptures from your past are important, and he's not just talking about the writings, he's talking about what they represent. Your history, the way you have defined yourself matters.

It is a place that you have found encouragement and steadfastness. And then he says, may the God of encouragement and steadfastness use your past and your present to bring you hope, bless you. If it is our responsibility to hold tight to the past. Then we start to focus on that our histories, whether they be our national or our local or our personal history in a defense mode, we defend it.

We defend what we have been and nothing was allowed to be wrong. And look, I did my best. I'm trying my best, get off my back. If we look at our past only to seek all of the places where we have completely been disasters and screw ups, and our parents were disasters and screw ups, and all the stuff that comes out in therapy, if that's the only reality about our past, right? That too is not a full picture of who we are. Paul presents a new option for us today.

What if we examined our past, not trying to prove anything and not trying to defend anything, and not trying to hide anything and not trying to let go of it all. But what if we looked at our past, at our history, personal and shared history, what if we looked at it honestly, looking for where the God of steadfastness and encouragement showed.

God has shown up throughout your life, you would not be here because you don't have to be here. You would not be here if you had not recognized God showing up throughout your life. Our past, we have such a complicated relationship with it because we're so worried. We're so worried about what it means about us.

What if instead of holding it tightly or throwing it away, we hold it loosely and examine it, not for the purpose of justifying ourselves or damning ourselves. What if we look at our history and look for the places of hope? Where in your life have you seen God show up? Faithfulness, God's steadfastness, God's encouragement to you.

What if this is the story of you? What if you are defined neither by your achievements nor your mistakes? Neither your country nor your parents? What are you? What if you are defined by the God who loves you? Calls you belonging. How might you look? How might we look at our past, at our history? How might we treat it?

If instead of trying to prove anything, we were able to look at it and examine the places where God has been. What's happening in the community, in the church in Rome is as they face the difficulty of learning how to share life, each community is retreating back to their previous ways and holding each other at arm's length again, even while trying to stay in community. Paul reminds them that it is a shared hope that they have now. That it's not an individual or private hope, but a hope they have together to glorify God in the love that they share, and in the way they participate in the justice and mercy of this world.

This is our shared life. It's a life where God shows up this season, this season of preparation for Christmas. We can make that too, about our past or about achieving or about rejection, about frustration or about hope. I think we choose hope. I think we choose hope.

May we use this as a time not to focus on all the things we have been or could be or would be. All the places in our lives, God has been so that we may see where God is now and by the grace of God, we can follow Christ into what we are becoming together with a hope that fills us all in peace and love and in Jesus' name.