

Romans 11:1 I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.

2 God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.

29 for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

30 Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience,

31 so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy.

32 For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

Matthew 15: 10 Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand:

11 it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles."

12 Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?"

13 He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted.

14 Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit."

15 But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us."

16 Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding?"

17 Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?

18 But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.

19 For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.

20 These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.

22 Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon."

23 But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us."

24 He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

25 But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."

26 He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

27 She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

28 Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Loving Creator, shine as a light before me that you may be seen and not I.

Give me words that I may speak, give us ears that we may hear, and through your Holy Spirit help us understand.

Amen.

It was on this weekend four years ago that I stood here before you for the first time. I had just finished seminary, and I was here to lead worship so this community could decide if I was to be its next pastor.

Each year a sort of a way of celebrating the anniversary of my becoming the pastor of First Church, I have been preaching a sermon with the same title as the one I did in 2004.

Don't worry, I'm not getting lazy and preaching the same sermon, it just has the same title.

I opened that sermon four years ago with these words:

A couple was on a trip. They were cruising along and the driver says to the passenger. I have some good news and some bad news. The bad news is we are lost; the good news is that we are making good time.

Good news bad news jokes have been around for a long time.

One Christian said to another, the good news is the Romans have been feeding me really well since I got here. The bad news is they haven't fed the lions in two weeks.

Good news bad news jokes resonate with us because that's how life often is, a little bit of good followed by a little bit of bad. I think we can all relate to that.

One thing I have said each year in this sermon still holds true. The good news is I am still your pastor. The bad news is I'm still your pastor. For some people one may be truer than the other. This is because we are a diverse community which is also good news and bad news. The good news is that a diverse community brings many gifts for ministry. The bad news is that we don't always agree what that ministry looks like.

First Church has seen a lot of changes during the four years since I arrived. There have been changes on the committees that serve First Church; there are new programs, such as our work with habitat for humanity, which, while not entirely new, has been resurrected in the past year; we have seen a rebirth and renewal of our vacation bible school, one of the most exciting weeks of our whole year; we have a gardening group, a prayer shawl ministry, and the Let's Eat crew making breakfast every Sunday; the Nomads have added a third trip each summer, and the First Church website has been completely redone and revitalized.

We have also seen some major building projects including the ceiling in the fellowship hall, the new roof that's just about completed, and the installation of a new boiler system. And there have been a number of new people who have joined the community making us more diverse and stronger. This is just some of the good news.

There has unfortunately it also been bad news.

Costs are increasing, and even with the new boiler system that was installed last year reducing dramatically our energy costs we still have seen increases in the cost of heating this building and the parsonage; there are people who have backed away from the church for one reason or another, for some of them my presence here is the bad news, for others they've had personal reasons for leaving, and others may have been offended by one or another thing that someone said Saturday it within the community; we have drainage issues and water has been coming in the basement through a number of places that really will need attention at some point, and we have been saddened by the loss of some of our close friends within this community who have gone to their final rest.

And this is just some of the bad news.

How do we deal with this mix of good and bad? How do we approach life as a community? This is perhaps one of the most difficult challenges we face.

When we look around us at the world in which we live, Jesus' words are as true today as they were in his own time. In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells Nicodemus: "the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed."

This is also bad news, that there is evil and darkness in the world. We can see this every day as we watch the news. Yes, we see crime, and violence all over the place, but I am talking about an even more insidious challenge that we face in this world. Greed has become of virtue and our society, and selfishness is considered a positive. The burning of fossil fuels has locked us into a single way of doing business. Racism and sexism still hold many people back from fulfilling their God given gifts. And healthcare in our society is rationed by a system of have and have not. Darkness pervades our world.

Many of these problems, many of these issues hide in the darkness, and we even have trouble talking about them. We're not sure how will we could cope with such difficulties, how we might make a difference in this world. But Jesus assures us in the scriptures that God's will, God's way, eventually wins out.

Jesus went around saying lots of things that were not popular with the establishment of his day. He was always getting himself in trouble. The Pharisees saw themselves as the arbiter of God's will, gatekeepers of the divine. The problem was that they were not right, and the rules they invented for others did not reflect God's will.

We have many leaders in our society today who say we need to do thus and such, but they're not reflecting God's will.

In today's passage we have this strong contrast as Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for their ungodliness, and then but Canaanite woman comes to him asking for help.

Now, this scripture has been the source of much discussion theologically over the years, because Jesus doesn't come across looking so great here. He's rather dismissive of this woman. She was a foreigner and he says he was sent to Israel, and he gives this rather snide comment about not feeding the dogs the children's food. He doesn't come across looking so loving and kind in this scripture, but, being that he's Jesus, I wanna at least cut him a break. I have to wonder how many people came to him looking for something, wanting a handout, or a free lunch.

Perhaps being a pastor for the last four years has opened my eyes. I have seen things from a different perspective, and I wonder if Jesus' response came from the frustration he felt in often having people trying to deceive him, or wanting to get something from him.

I have a lot of people come to me looking for help, looking for a handout. I've had people show up at our door lead in the evening looking for money so they could buy food, and when I offered them food they refused. I've had people who have shown up claiming that they needed help with one thing or another, claiming that they don't have enough money to get from here to there in their car, or claiming that they need some kind of help. They often have elaborate stories about hard times, and when I first arrived as a new pastor I tried to give help to everyone who asked.

The reality is that we don't have enough to go around for genuine needs, and it is difficult to tell when the needs are real.

So I can understand that Jesus did not want to be hoodwinked, he did not want to be deceived by yet another person with their hand out looking for a free ride. Sure, her daughter had a demon, she was ill in some way. The chances are good that we would say she was mentally ill, this would be bad news to any parent.

He was ready to dismiss this woman and her needs. Take your bad news someplace else. So what changed his mind in this case?

This woman clearly had faith in who he was. Yes, she was in need, but she came to Jesus because of faith. She came because of faith.

When Jesus saw this, when he understood that she was not simply looking for a free ride, but expressing her faith in him and in God's power, he granted her request.

At that point the bad news in her life was turned around.

We do live in challenging times. In our times there is both good and bad. How do we manage the bad of this world? What is to place our faith in the right place.

Do we put our faith in greed, and earthly powers, and selfishness, and darkness?

Or do we place our faith in the one we call the light of the world, the prince of peace, Emmanuel God among us?

I don't know about you but I need my faith to see me through as I deal with this life and the challenges that we have here. I need some help to figure out which way to turn. The Pharisees of today, the powers and principalities of this world would have us believe that they have the answers. I would prefer to take the path of the humble foreigner, a woman with no position or status who relied on her complete faith that God would see her through.

In this world we may have good news and bad news, but in Jesus Christ there is only good news, and it is very good news indeed!

The Glory be to God!
AMEN.