

## **Romans 9:1-5**

<sup>1</sup>I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit—<sup>2</sup>I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.<sup>3</sup>For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh.<sup>4</sup>They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises;<sup>5</sup>to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

## **Matthew 14:13-21**

<sup>13</sup>Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns.<sup>14</sup>When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.<sup>15</sup>When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves."<sup>16</sup>Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."<sup>17</sup>They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish."<sup>18</sup>And he said, "Bring them here to me."<sup>19</sup>Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.<sup>20</sup>And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.<sup>21</sup>And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

## **Improving our Ball-Handling Skills**

Last week on our camping trip I had the privilege observing the **stark** behavior of young children. I say *stark* behavior because **children are not as adept as adults are at hiding their intentions**; children and adults are usually motivated by the same desires, but the motives are not quite as obvious in adults. We brought an assortment of balls on the camping trip – a big pink ball, a spongy football, and a miniature soccer ball – and I attempted to teach a small group of children a game using the large pink ball before realizing that the rules of game were more complicated than the potential players could comprehend. Foolishly I assumed they understood the rules but quickly realized they hadn't a clue. And so immediately upon starting the game one of the "players" changed the rules of the game to something that his fellows players could understand, and his game had but

one simple rule: *the ball is mine*. Quickly I discerned that they no longer had any need for a coach, and I shifted my focus from teaching them all a game to teaching this one player the importance of sharing, but here is where I saw something that taught *me* a lesson. The other players, rather than fighting for the large pink ball, simply moved on and started playing a new game, leaving the one player holding the big pink ball a bit surprised, or disappointed, that the other children were not interested in playing with either him or the big pink ball anymore. And when this solo player noticed that the object he was clutching was no longer of any immediate interest to the others, he too lost interest in the large pink ball.

There was nothing particularly sinister about the child who possessed the large pink ball, and I'm confident that someday he will either lose his ball-fixation as a result of some trauma suffered in a game of *Smear the Queer* or (just as politically incorrect) *Kill-the-Guy-with-the-Ball* or he will become a rugby player. His impulse to "hog the ball" is normal. In fact it's ageless in the sense that adults are just as prone to "hog the ball" – in fact the troubling question we should ask ourselves is, "Do children learn to be selfish from their parents?" Perhaps. That impulse to possess and to not share goes back as far as history can record. The same impulse is present in the man and the woman in the Garden of Eden; God said to the man and the woman, "Okay, here's how the game is played; you eat from any tree *except* that one over there," and what did they do? They broke the first rule. They broke the *only* rule! Why? Because they wanted the ball. It wasn't enough to hang out with God. They didn't want to *play* with God; They wanted to *be* God. They had to have what they thought they couldn't have. The tragic irony is that in trying to gain something from God, they lost their fellowship with God, just as the child who tried to possess the big pink ball lost fellowship with the other children.

In today's readings, both Paul and Jesus are addressing our ball-handling skills. It may not seem that obvious, but let's look first at the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand, which was more likely feeding ten thousand or more because there were five thousand *men* PLUS an unspecified number of women and children. Jesus and the disciples find themselves in a deserted place along with...let's say ten thousand people who have followed them, and it's supper time. The disciples are in possession of five loaves and two fish, and based on their calculations there is simply not enough to go around, so they urge Jesus to call it a day, clock out, send the crowd away, and have a little dinner. That seems reasonable to us. We think along those same lines today; ***Jesus, we would like to provide food for those folks, we'd like to take care of their needs, but we simply don't have the resources. We can only give them a small percentage of what is necessary to adequately address the problem, and since our resources are so***

***inadequate it would better to not even initiate a relief effort. The five loaves and two fish will however address our personal nutritional needs, so let's just focus on those. We'll pray for those others.*** And we might expect Jesus to find our recommendation prudent and wise, even commendable. After all, five loaves and two fish is hardly enough for thirteen hearty men. But Jesus doesn't go along with their recommendation. He vetoes it and puts forth his own proposal: "You feed them." Now the Gospel of Mark makes it clear that there were those Jesus' own family who thought him to be a little soft in the head, and if there was ever a time that Jesus' disciples wondered if perhaps his potato had been baking a little too long, this would have been that time. And who could blame them? Imagine those disciples looking around at this huge gathering knowing that they were hungry not only because it was dinner time but probably a good number had not eaten lunch or breakfast – many peasants lived in chronic hunger back then; famines were far too prevalent, and landowners and tax collectors could seize your food stores and leave you desperate. How could the disciples feed this crowd? How could they address this challenge with only five loaves and two fish?

In a way this story is a lot like the parables, because Jesus is saying the exact opposite of what we would expect a "reasonable" person to say. A reasonable person would say, "You're right; the challenge is too great." Perhaps we could imagine Jesus saying to each of the disciples, "Okay, take your piece of bread and portion of fish and share it with two other people," and thus making this a story of Jesus feeding the 39. But five thousand plus with five loaves and a couple of fish? That's crazy.

But Jesus does not focus on what the disciples DON'T have; he looks for what they DO have, and he expects them to share it. Though logic tells them and tells us that the resources are not enough to adequately address the problem, Jesus sees that YOU HAVE SOMETHING, and something is a lot different from nothing. It doesn't matter if we have a big pink ball or a tiny gumball, we have something, and as disciples we are told to share it, whatever it is.

Because the biggest temptation about having anything is withholding it from others with the excuse, "It's not enough for everyone," which leads to the next temptation of saying, "why even bother?" And once we give ourselves and excuse for holding onto a little ball it becomes quite easy to find an excuse for holding onto the big pink ball. The same logic still applies: "This is not enough to have any real impact, so why even bother?" And Jesus is telling us to bother. It doesn't matter how small the ball is; you still have the ball and somebody else doesn't. Share it!

Paul is taking this idea of sharing to a spiritual level in our Epistle reading. He understands that God, through Jesus Christ, is feeding the entire world, that this Messiah is not simply a Messiah for the Jews but for all humanity. While many of Paul's fellow Jews were saying, "God's blessing remains only with the Jewish people," Paul is saying that in and through Jesus Christ that blessing now applies to everyone, Jew and gentile both. Just as Jesus is telling his disciples to share their food with everyone, Paul is seeing that God is now sharing his blessing with everyone, and Paul is telling his comrades, "Stop hogging the ball." As Jesus drives in the point that all we have needs to be shared, Paul drives in the point that Christ himself needs to be shared.

And we discover that when we do freely share what we have, that all are filled, and we even have leftovers. Generosity has an amazing way of coming back to us; when we live our lives freely sharing all that we have with our neighbors we end up having friends who freely share with us, and when we share Christ's love with everyone around us, we find that everyone around us shares that love with us. When we toss the ball around, everyone has a good time.

We don't want to finish the game of life selfishly grasping a large pink ball, alone and forsaken by those around us. God wants us to play ball with everyone, and that involves sharing the ball. God created us to enjoy life, and such joy can only come when we share both our wealth and our faith, because God, Immanuel, is with us, in the form of "the least of these," the ones with the greatest need. May the Holy Spirit prompt each of us to share our lives, our gifts, our love, with one another more fully. Amen.