

God Sees Your Heart

Romans 11:2

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

The only man who has ever lived on our earth and demonstrated absolute power over death -- by his ability to disappear off our earth and to come back to life as he promised he would -- is Jesus of Nazareth. He above all other human beings has lived in such a way that you really could believe that he knew the Maker of the world personally.

Here is what that man said about the way we should live: "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"

"And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith?"

"Therefore do not be anxious saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well." (Matthew 6:25-33)

Jesus spent the rest of his brief public life explaining to us that the seventy years that we have on earth are simply a probation period, during which God will make it plain which of us trust him as our Father in that way he has described -- which of us will live with him forever -- and which of us will live forever in dark frustration because we refuse to let him be our God.

Jesus did make it plain that the purpose of this whole creation, and the purpose of our lives here, was not so that God could pick out the good guys from the bad guys. Jesus explained God already knew that! The purpose of this creation is to make plain how fair God is, and that we might be able to see from his dealing with us in this life that he only rejects those who reject him as their Father. God will not reject those who trust him and treat him as their Father.

Now, loved ones, that is what God says in the verse we are studying today: "God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew." (Romans 11:2)

All of us probably have the same problem with this fact of God's foreknowledge. We just do not like the idea that God actually foreknows which of us are going to trust him as our Father, and which of us will treat him as some distant lord whom we fear more than we love. We do not like the idea that God foreknows that -- because we feel that if he foreknows it, it must be because he makes us do it. We think that if you foreknow what a person is going to do, it must be because you have made the person do it.

And yet, that is illogical -- when you think of the way we use foreknowledge in our own lives. All of us here depend on a free exercise of foreknowledge for almost everything we do. You foreknow your eating habits, and that's how you decide how much food to get from the supermarket. You foreknow your spending habits, and that is how you begin to make plans for a certain vacation for next summer.

Our whole public life, our businesses, our insurance companies, and our government depend absolutely on foreknowledge for their plans. They depend on their ability to foreknow when people are likely to die and how long they are likely to live. They depend utterly on their foreknowledge of people's likes and dislikes. They depend utterly on their foreknowledge of what the inflation rate will probably be -- in order to draw up their budgets and their sales projections.

Really -- we couldn't move in this life if we didn't depend on foreknowledge in a very forcible and intense way. The whole practice of vocational guidance depends on foreknowledge. We believe that we can read a person's character accurately enough to be able to tell him how he will act in certain future situations and jobs.

And yet, it is obvious we do not have dictatorial powers that enable us to make these people act or these events to occur in a certain way. We do not. We simply depend on our insight into human character and behavior, and we extrapolate from that the events we think will take place. But our foreknowledge does not mean at all that we are making these things happen. And yet, loved ones, without that free exercise of foreknowledge, almost nothing we do in our lives would be possible.

Now let me ask you: If we with our very finite understandings can foreknow how much oil will be left by the year 2000; if we with our very finite minds can foreknow how many people will be in the world in the year 2000; if we with our considerably crude methods of space experimentation can simulate with our computers months-long journeys of space probes at huge distances from our earth -- if we can do all that -- then do you not think that the infinite God of the whole universe with his infinite mind, his infinite understanding of how we were made and his infinite knowledge of all the contingent events and the actions of billions of people in the world -- do you not think that he is able to foreknow without making it happen? He is able to read our characters, our minds, and the trends in our lives, so that he is able to foreknow who will have what baby and what kind of baby it will be, and how that baby's life will develop.

The only reason we refuse to accept this very logical conclusion is because we still have this hang-up: maybe God is like us. And we know very well that if we foreknew all the things that he foreknows, we would intervene. We would stop the thing from happening in opposition to our will. We project that kind of thinking on God. We think, "If he foreknows all this, then he must surely be able to stop things from happening when he wants to."

But, loved ones, do you see that God is all together above us in his virtue and integrity? God certainly has infinite knowledge -- but he has infinite love. He has infinite power -- but he has an infinite commitment to preserve free will in each of us. That is the only way he will be able to gather a family of honest lovers to himself.

So God has a personal vested interest in preserving our free will. Otherwise he can have nothing but robots around him. So it is important for us to see that even though God foreknows, and can read us like a book, and can foreknow what we are going to do -- yet he does not interfere. Once he set up

the process of creation he left it free to develop. We are what we are because we have chosen what to be.

Another fearful human fact that makes God's foreknowledge plausible is this: Have you ever meet somebody you knew at school some twenty years ago? Isn't it incredible! Today they are the same as then -- only more so! The comedians are funnier, the mercenaries are more grasping, the wheeler-dealers are more free wheeling, the hard ones are harder (only more subtly so), and the soft ones are softer. It is just unbelievable!

Allowing for the advantages of maturity and the differences in appearance, people -- in a remarkable way -- continue as they were. People continue to develop to be what they are. Once a person has decided whom or what to trust in their lives, this essential attitude in their life keeps them doing that forever. You can see that when you are dealing with foreknowledge you are dealing with something in a person that strangely enough becomes more of what it already is. It makes foreknowledge a very plausible fact.

The verse says, "God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew." And his people are people who trust him. They are the people who will live with him forever. They are the people who will live in his presence after this world is over. They are the people who trust him as their dear loving Father, the way Jesus outlines in those words in Matthew 6:25.

They are the people who will look to God for guidance for their own lives, who will get together with him at the beginning of the day, and will spend time talking to him in prayer to determine what he has in mind for that day. And, bit by bit as they spend time looking to him and thinking of him, all the furor of their own thoughts, feelings, and motivation for that day fades into the background. They begin to sense what God wants them to do. Those are God's people.

Jesus talks about them this way: "I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me." (John 10:14) He says that his own are the people who treat his Father in the same way that he does -- who trust him step by step for their lives, and who treat him as their dear Father.

Last Sunday we said that there are hundreds of us who regard ourselves as God's people, yet we really are not. We are like the Jews that Paul talked about: "But it is not as though the word of God had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his descendants." (Romans 9:6)

Many of us are like that. Many of us think of ourselves as God's people, but we're not God's people. We think we're God's people because we run with the right groups and are found in the right groups of Christians. We think, "Yeah! We must be one of them, because we spend time with them."

Or we think we are God's people because we give money to God's work. We begin to think of ourselves as people who are helping God, and surely God will not forget that. Or, many of us think we are God's people because we believe the right things about Jesus.

But during the week, in our daily work and in our daily relationships with other people, we behave just like pagans. When people treat us unjustly, or when they take things that belong to us, we scrap and claw to protect our possessions and our position -- the same way as pagans do. In daily work situations we worry and brood just as they do. When we are left alone, we brood and resent those who ignore us, instead of learning to love God and to enjoy him.

When we are faced with situations that are not fair at all, we react as they do -- not as people who have a millionaire Father -- but as people who grab every dollar they can get. Instead of making our main aim to please God by our work, we act like they do. We try to use our work to grab every dollar we can possibly get.

And so we are only God's people in an outward kind of way. We are not children of the promise. To paraphrase what Paul says in Romans 9:8: There are Israelites who are children of the flesh. They have the outward appearance of being Israelites, and they have the outward appearance of being God's people. So it is with us -- we belong to the right groups, we believe the right things, and we give our money to the right places. But in our hearts we are not children of the promise.

We do not live in our daily work lives the effortless, selfless, relaxed life of children who trust God's promise: "Your heavenly Father knows that you have need of these things. How much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith?" {Paraphrase of Matthew 6: 32, 30} We do not live and trust those promises day by day. So we are not really God's people.

Loved ones, I would ask you and ask myself: Are we his people? Do we live like that? Do we really relax in trust that our Father knows everything we need, and he will not leave us without those things? Do we really live like that? Or, when you see somebody taking advantage of you, or when you see that you are going to lose a position -- do you get down and scrabble and claw and scramble in the dirt like the rest?

That is what determines whether we are God's people or not. And do you see -- that the Father knows us? That is why Jesus says it that way: "I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me."

How do you live during the week? Do you live trusting this dear Father who said, "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." If you wind up not having a piece of clothing that you think you just have to have, or if you find that somebody else has it and you haven't, do you resent and fight, and are you miserable and self-pitying inside?

God said, "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them." But, when it comes to losing a job, or the possibility of losing a promotion, or losing something that is your due and your right -- do you forget that you have a millionaire Father and that your food comes from him anyway and not from your own efforts? And do you resent and fight and complain?

It's easy to see if a person has a millionaire Father. Their car is dented in the parking lot. But they know that their Father has always provided what they needed. If they needed a dented car then he gave them that. If they needed a good car he gave them that. But the one thing they're sure of is that their millionaire Father will give them what they need -- and they respond that way.

Do you see how fine a thing trust is? You can tell whether or not a person is trusting his millionaire Father -- by the way they respond to everyday occurrences in their jobs and in their own lives.

And here is the incredible truth: AS NOW, SO THEN! That's really what we were hinting at when we talked about people being the same today as they were twenty years ago in school. It is a human

fact, loved ones: AS NOW, SO THEN! What you're like today – you'll probably be like that tomorrow. And, what you're like tomorrow, you'll probably be like that the next day. That's a fact of human existence.

Is there any way to escape from such a karma determinism? Well, "Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" {John 3:4} That's the only way! You'd have to have your whole personality changed! Think of all those little things -- from dents in the car, to loss of promotion, to somebody criticizing you. Think of the way your whole personality has been trained to work for years. It would have to be changed.

Now, that's what God did in Jesus. That's the only way. God did actually put you into his Son and he did change you. He did destroy all that you have been up to this moment. He did give you a new personality that can trust him like Jesus trusted him.

But you have to be willing to be completely changed. You have to be willing to pay the price. And here is the solemn fact. If you're not willing this morning to be completely changed, so that you will be like Jesus, and that you will be willing to trust your creator as your dear Father – you probably know what God has already foreknown about you.

In other words, you say "no" today -- it probably expresses a deep "no" inside your life -- that will say the same thing tomorrow. God has already foreknown that. You can see in what a real way, "Today is the day of salvation."

So would you look at it? What would you lose if you stopped defending yourself and trusting yourself? You need to settle that – and decide if you're prepared to lose that, if necessary, in order to be able to treat God as he meant you to treat him when he first made you.

Let us pray. Dear Father, the whole of the universe cries out to us that there is nothing here apart from your power and your energy. We are on this little planet spinning through space at hundreds of miles an hour -- held up by no apparent force. We can't explain springtime. The ground looks hard and absolutely unfruitful. Yet flowers spring up.

Father, we see all around us that there is nothing here that does not depend utterly on your energy and your power -- except us. We so often think this is our life to live by our power, and by our use of other people and other things – to make what we want of it. Lord, we see that's not why you put us here at all. But you put us here to trust you and to be your people, and that you will not reject your people whom you have foreknown.

So Father, we would pray this morning, that by your Holy Spirit you will set out before each one of us what we need to surrender, what price we need to pay -- in order to begin to be really your people, and to trust you as our Father. Dear Lord, I would pray you would give my brothers and sisters here, grace to make that once-for-all surrender, and to begin to live as you meant us to, in peace and relaxation, and in inner quietness and rest -- for your glory.