

The Remnant: God Screens or Cleans

Romans 11:5

Sermon transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

It seems in America often to differ, so I need to ask the question: What was the top sport in your high school? In Ireland it was rugby. Even though yours was an American school and mine was an Irish school, I'm sure the beginning of the academic year saw exactly the same thing happen. At the first rugby practice everyone turned out. Everybody! The fat ones, the thin ones, the skinny ones, the unathletic ones, the ones who could see, the ones who couldn't see! On that first Wednesday, everybody wanted to be a rugby player! We came in hordes for the first practice.

The next week, at the second practice, those of us who couldn't find our rugby boots or who didn't like playing in the rain, decided to stay in study hall and do our homework assignments. Then the next week, at the next practice, those of us who didn't like the Saturday morning calisthenics opted for the chess club, and we didn't turn up either! So, bit by bit, the numbers diminished until eventually there were left only those who really wanted to play rugby so badly that they were prepared to put up with the discomfort and the self-discipline that was necessary. Of course, those of us who wanted the glory and the self-gratification of being rugby players found ourselves in other sports.

What was left, therefore, was a mere remnant of the great hordes of us that turned out at the beginning. You might call it a remnant. It was just a little piece of cloth that was left compared with the original coat that made up the freshman class.

Now, loved ones, that's what God is speaking about in the verse we're studying today. It's Romans 11:5: "So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace." And God is obviously referring first of all to the preceding verse: "But what is God's reply to him? {That's Elijah} 'I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.'"

So in 860 B.C. all the Israelites had followed Ahab their king in worshipping Baal, except for seven thousand people who were prepared to pay the price of continuing to worship God himself – a little group that was left that was willing to pay the price of loving and obeying God. You remember that Paul referred to the same thing in the whole of chapter 10 of Romans, where he points out that it is not the national Jews that are really God's people.

Of course, many of us misunderstand that. Many of us have a great misunderstanding today. We think it's all the national Jews that are God's people. Paul with the whole of Chapter 10 in Romans points out that it is not all the physical descendants of Abraham that are God's true people. It's only a small, small group. It's the spiritual descendants of Abraham, who trust God as Abraham did. They are really God's people.

Those are two examples of God saving a remnant out of a huge mass of people. And loved ones, that's the way God deals with us all down through history. He deals with us according to this principle of the remnant.

Why does he? It involves a tremendous loss and waste of people, doesn't it? Why does God deal with

us according to this remnant principle?

For the same reason as our coaches and teachers at school did. They knew that we're like them. We're primarily selfish people. We're always looking out for something for ourselves. We're always taking opportunities to develop fully -- such as you might get in a game like rugby or football or baseball -- and turning them into opportunities for self-glory and self-gratification. The only way they find out which of us really want to do a thing, is to get us to do it bit-by-bit ourselves -- until gradually our own selfish love simply eliminates us from the group.

I know that it is a little different in that often coaches and political leaders will make use of the sheer intensity of some of our egotism to get us to make tremendous self-sacrifices in order to attain some self-serving success. In that sense, the human analogy breaks down in regard to God. Yet, generally speaking, the analogy is the same.

God uses the principle of the remnant for the same reason as every coach and every teacher -- all of us who have presented something to selfish people have used that principle. First we know they misunderstand what we're asking them to do. It is only after some time of taking part in it that they really see what it involves. So it is with God. He has to deal with that selfish perversion within us, that always wants to use the opportunity for self-glory and self-gratification that his invitation seems to mean to us.

In other words, God has said to us from the beginning of time, "Do you want to be like my Son Jesus and live with us together in a universe of infinite love?" And we have tended to answer, "Yes! Yes, we do!" With Adam we tend to say, "Yes, we want to be like your Son Jesus -- as long as we can be like him in our own way and by our own strength."

And then God comes back to us and says, "No, you have it wrong! Only if you are willing to trust me for my strength like my child Abraham did -- only then will you be able to become like my Son Jesus and live in the land that I have given to Abraham." But we look at the benefit that it will be to us, and we grab at that and say, "Yes, we would love to live in that land that you are giving to Abraham -- as long as we can live in it by our own strength and in our own way."

Then God comes back to us through Moses and says, "No, if you are going to be like my Son, and live with us together in a universe of infinite love, then you have to live in this land that I have given you, trusting me and obeying me. If you trust and obey me you will live like these ten laws describe -- as these Ten Commandments describe you. That's the person you will be."

We tend again and again to try to cut the thing to our own pattern, and we say, "Yes! We'll obey those laws. We want to obey those laws as long as we can obey them outwardly, and in our own hearts we can trust our own strength and have our own way." What God then does is he exiles us with the rest of the Israelites and sends us off to Assyria and Babylon, away from any outward temples or outward forms of worship.

There we are forced to develop a private inner life of trust and obedience with him alone. But the group that is left at that point is much smaller than the large group of us that totally misunderstood what God meant at the beginning. Now brothers and sisters, that's why God is always dealing with us according to the principle of the remnant.

He's always correcting our misconceptions and our misapprehensions of what it is meant to be like

Jesus. He is always correcting it and trying to make clear to us what it means. You could say that God is always involved in a screening process. He is always involved in giving us a great invitation and then clarifying for us what that invitation involves. Each time he clarifies -- it is tragic -- he has to screen some of us out -- or rather, some of us screen ourselves out. And that's why, in a sense, God is always involved in screening and cleaning what is left.

He said to Adam at the beginning, "I'll give you freedom to choose!" But really only a small group -- in Noah's family -- actually chose to trust God. And then God took only one of that small family, Abraham, and he opened out to him the possibility of trusting in such a way that he would obey. And so out of Abraham came a nation. Out of all the nations of the world, God cut out this little remnant and started to try to train them to be like his Son.

You and I know that gradually they became a self-righteous nation, and we need to see that is still what they are. Now God has taken and used one of them, his Son, who was a Jew, to beget individuals of all different kinds of nations who will trust him and love him and submit to him simply because he is God.

So that is what God has been doing down through history. The verse we are studying today says: "So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace." (Romans 11:5) That's the terrible truth -- that here in this room there is a remnant. And we're all being foolish people and naive optimists if we don't see that. There is a remnant in this room -- and in every group of people that are meeting all over the nation today -- who are interested in God. In each one of them there is a remnant. There is a group of people who really do want God.

Now, don't you agree the "Jesus Movement" {a movement of people interested in Jesus and Christianity in the 1960's and 1970's} was exciting? It was exciting. None of us ever gave anybody a ride without witnessing about Jesus to them. They were just great days, in many ways. And the Jesus Movement was a great move that had something of God in it.

But don't you agree? There were large numbers of people caught up in the Jesus movement who didn't know or didn't care much about Jesus himself. Out of that Jesus Movement there was a great mass of people who were simply hedonistic self-seekers who liked the excitement of it and who thought that it was some kind of answer and meaning for life. But as the Jesus Movement slipped away, so they slipped away.

Now, loved ones, let's not be silly. Exactly the same thing will happen today. There is a charismatic movement or an evangelical popularity today {in 1979}. There are huge masses of people who are following after the crowd. They are really camp followers. They think they want God, but really what they want is the good things they see in God. They don't want God himself, and they don't want to pay the price of getting God.

They are following and they are enthusiastic. They're going to church and they think there is nothing like this "born again" stuff. They're all for it, but in their own hearts they have never dealt with whether they want God or not in their own personal lives forever. When this popular religion stuff fades away here in America, they themselves will fade like "snow off a ditch". They will just disappear.

It's the same among us. It really is, and I don't say it because I don't like you or love you. I love you! I just know that there are loved ones who will come here because it is not a bad place! It

is a nice atmosphere that God has created, isn't it? You do really feel that we're honest with each other, and that there is love among us. It is a nice place to come, and you do meet lots of good people. There are lots of us who are young and dynamic and alive.

It is pleasant to be here. And you might even find a marriage partner if you come here, or you might get a social circle that will really make life more pleasant. But do you see? There will come a day when all of us who have come for those ulterior motives will just fade away. There will just be a remnant of us who really do want God with all our hearts.

Now, I wonder, are you thinking, "What is the factor that determines whether I will be part of the remnant, or whether I will be part of the great mass that will be reprobate and lost?" A very simple factor. God knew when he invited us to come and be like his Son Jesus, and to live with them forever in the universe of infinite love -- that the only way that we would ever become like Jesus is if we could be recreated by him somehow. And he knew we could only be recreated if we were prepared to allow all that we are to be destroyed. Right there, that's the factor!

There is a really pathetic, sad story in the New Testament where you will see very plainly that it is this business of being merged into Jesus' death that is the great separator between the remnant and the mass of the reprobate. If you want to be like Jesus -- are you willing to be destroyed with him and raised with him? Are you willing to be merged absolutely in him? That's always the factor that separates the men from the boys -- that separates the remnant from the reprobate. It's always that issue of identification with Jesus in his death and resurrection.

Loved ones, I'll point you to the story. It is pathetic and yet, so often, we in our kind of popular religion are involved in it.

It was the piece that some of the critics of Christianity in the first century got hold of and said, "Oh, these people are cannibals -- from the way they talk! They talk about eating a man." Of course what Jesus is emphasizing by that is, "Are you really ready to be utterly identified with me? Are you ready to die with me to the things I died to -- popularity and comfort and all the rest of it?"

The verse that I'm referring to is John 6:53: "So Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.'"

Then you see in the next verse the identification: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him." And then here is the pathetic verse, verse 66: "After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him."

If you don't know yourself well enough now so that these verses don't surprise you, at least see that this is you and me today. Whenever we see the cross that has the great "I" there, and has a cross across that "I" -- as soon as God's will crosses our wills -- for our futures, or our marriage plans, or our popularity contests -- as soon as that takes place -- we are among the disciples who no longer go about with Jesus.

It will be the same among us here this morning. A lot of us like the Christian fellowship. We like the excitement. We like the idea of something that is progressive and moving forward. What we don't

realize is, the life that we see around us here and any real life that you touch in the loved one beside you -- comes because that loved one has died to that. If you sense any love or joy or peace in the person beside you this morning -- it's because that loved one has died to the need for any love or any joy or any peace.

I don't know if you know much about the operation here, but it is a success story. Even in just money alone, it is amazing what God has done through all of the people here {establishing several successful businesses}. But do you realize that it is built on blood? On people's life blood.

There are young men and women here who have made unbelievable sacrifices. They have died to comfort and a plan for their own careers in order to make this beauty possible. We tend as human beings always to look at the glittery stuff and look at the stuff that we would like, and then to try to get it without paying the price. That's what determines the remnant and that's what determines the reprobate.

Now, here's the last thing I felt God wanted me to share. There is a remnant within each one of us personally. Each one of us here is like an onion. We have layers. God is peeling layer after layer after layer away -- to get at the remnant inside.

That's what that verse means -- that we are earthen vessels and we have a treasure inside the earthen vessel. {Paraphrase of 2 Corinthians 4:7} God is involved in your own life, in the trials and the difficulties that you are having -- in the decisions you are making moment by moment. He is involved in peeling away the layers of what you think is the real you.

He is endeavoring to get to the inside of your heart, "the ground of your heart", the place where you will submit to Jesus by naked obedience because he is the Son of your Maker. Not because he gives you joy! Not because he gives you peace! Not because he saves you from your sins! Not because you'll go to heaven! Not because you'll have a good life here on earth! Not because he gives you abundant life! But there is a ground of your heart inside that is the only real worship that God wants. That is the worship that comes from a will that is utterly obedient to Jesus, simply because you know he is the Son of your Creator. God is peeling away all the layers to get to that remnant inside you.

So, loved ones, the question is, will you stay with him long enough for him to get to that inner heart? We are tired, all of us, of the phrase "the me generation" -- but we know that it's true. We know that we have been brought up to do what feels good, to do what makes us happy -- and that is satanic. The old puritan idea -- that if it hurts, it's good for you -- was equally satanic. But we've gone the other way. We've gone the way of happiness, happiness, happiness. And we'll be a massive group -- of happy people going to hell. And when we get there, we'll make it miserable.

The question is, will you stay with God long enough for him to get to that remnant that is really you?

So don't be afraid of being honest with yourself. That's what I did. If I saw something of selfishness, I went at it with a hammer! I didn't care if it happened to end up being my thumb or part of me that was dear to me. I went at it as hard as I could -- to nail it to that dear cross. We need to be ruthless and honest with ourselves. It isn't a question of, do you want God? Any of us in our right mind wants God! It's not the wanting -- it's the willing.

Are you willing to have God live forever in your life? That involves experiencing this side of Calvary -- the crucifixion side -- in order to experience the other side of Calvary -- the resurrection side. I would just remind you that there is no resurrection without a death. There is no resurrection without a crucifixion. There is no real happiness without a death to happiness. There is no real joy without a death to joy. There is no real love without a death to everything but God himself and just wanting his will. That's what God is after. And that remnant God can trust forever.

I pray that all of us here will be in that remnant. But we won't. Some of us here are still after something for ourselves. And yet God will draw us until the end of our lives because he is so loving. I would ask you to respond to him and be real.

Let us pray. Dear Lord, we thank you for giving us the opportunity to share truth together in these days. We see, Lord, it is a hedonistic world. Lord, we do like to be happy and we enjoy water skiing and fun, but we do see the place is overwhelmed by the search for happiness and pleasure, so that we'll do anything. We'll sell our own souls to the devil to get it. Lord, we see that that's not right.

Lord, we thank you for allowing us to share truth together this morning. Father, we see this principle of the remnant by which you deal with us. We see it working even in our own personal life. Lord, we would commit ourselves now -- whatever the cost -- to identification to Jesus in his death and resurrection, as much as is necessary, until you can get to the ground of our hearts -- to the place where we can honestly say: we obey you as our God, and we love you as our Savior. Lord we give ourselves to you for this purpose. In Jesus' name. Amen.