

Free to Choose

Romans 10:21

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Have you seen pictures of Jews being herded into railroad cars and transported to gas chambers in the concentration camps? Perhaps you saw The Holocaust, the TV program that outlined these atrocities. As you looked at those cowering faces, those shaven heads, and those little tattered bundles of clothes -- have you ever thought, "And this is God's chosen people! The nation chosen above all others to receive our Creator's first revelation of himself!"

Here are the original promises God made to the forefathers of those poor victims. Keep in mind that these are the people that God is talking about to Abraham. Genesis 17:1-8 "When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.' Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, 'Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. And I will give to you, and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.'"

You can almost hear the shuffling of their feet as they get into the railroad cars, going like cattle to the concentration camps.

How come? How come that the people God had chosen above all other peoples in the world, to be the privileged group to whom he would show himself and introduce himself-- ended up the most hated, the most despised, and the most abused scapegoats in the whole of the world's history?

This is the very paradox that Paul stated in Romans 10 regarding the Jews. In this last verse, he gives the answer from God's own heart: "But of Israel he says, 'All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.'" (Romans 10:21)

You know what rings in many of our hearts: but that's ridiculous and unjust! The little faces of those Jewish children who died in the gas chambers aren't the faces of a "disobedient and contrary people." What justice is there in those little souls suffering? That can't be the explanation of their suffering. What justice is there in that?

There is no justice in it, is there? That is what enrages us about the way this world teats innocent people. They ought not to be walked over just because they are weak. That is what enrages us about oppressors and dictators who do this to innocent people! That is what enrages us about rapists and hijackers and robbers. They do not harm their own kind, but they harm innocent people who just happen to be there at the time.

We'd all say -- that's right. In this world there is little justice. There is a lot of greed and self-gratification, but little justice. But we then ask: Isn't God just? Or is he unjust too?

God's supposed to reward the righteous and punish the wicked! Why didn't God do something about this? Why didn't he speak to the Jews as they used the privileged position that he had given them to lord it over the rest of us? Why didn't he tell the Jews that, and deal with them as he saw them growing more arrogant and proud toward the nations?

Why didn't he speak to the Jews when he saw them taking a personal relationship of trust with himself -- and turning it into a religion of laws and observances? Why didn't he stop them when he saw them trying to grab everything they could and getting a name for being a covetous, greedy, and avaricious people? Even if they put themselves into this position by their attitude, why didn't God stop them?

And you see what the answer is: "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people." God says, "I have tried! That's what I have been doing."

The faces of the little Jewish children are in our minds and we feel that there must be some deeper answer. We feel we should protest to God, "Did you assure them that you were their God? That they could trust you for everything? That they didn't have to grab at every penny they could get? Did you tell them that?"

God answers, "When I say all day long, I mean a day that was four thousand years long. That's how long I've been holding out my hands to them. Four thousand years ago I told Abraham, the father of the Jews, about the land flowing with milk and honey. I led them to that land. I led his grandson back to that land. I led his great grandchildren back from Egypt when they left that land."

"I provided food and water miraculously for thousands of his descendants as they came through the wilderness! I gave them supernatural guidance and power so that they could take the land that I had provided for them -- so that they could destroy enemies that were stronger than themselves. I did everything to show them that they could trust me as their Father -- that they did not need to grab for every penny, and that they did not need to make a name for themselves that stood for covetousness. I have told them that."

"Even in this present century I have given them back that land. I helped them even in the Six-Day War, to show them in every possible way that I love them, and that I am their Father. But all day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people."

But we persist, "Did you show them what would become of them if they did not trust you? Did you show them the nation of contempt and hatred that they would become in the eyes of all the nations? Did you show them that their name would come to stand for greed and covetousness unless they began to depend and trust in you? Did you show them that if they depended on themselves they would become the very opposite of the restful and gentle people that you had planned for them to be?"

And God says, "Twenty seven hundred years ago I spoke to my servant Amos, and I made that plain to Israel again and again, as it's written in Amos 8:4-8: 'Hear this, you who trample upon the needy, and bring the poor of the land to an end, saying, "When will the new moon be over, that we may sell grain? And the sabbath, that we may offer wheat for sale, that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great, and deal deceitfully with false balances, that we may buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and sell the refuse of the wheat?" The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: "Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. Shall not the land tremble on this account, and every one mourn who dwells in it, and all of it rise like the Nile, and be tossed about and sink

again, like the Nile of Egypt?"

This is why God says, "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people." Only now do we really reach the heart of the issue and the heart of our misconception about God. We say to him, "Okay, it was their own fault! All right, they did bring themselves into this position by their attitude to you and their attitude to themselves. But, why didn't you stop them?"

We almost blurt it out: "Why didn't you stop them? Why didn't you do something to stop them? Or to stop Hitler? Why didn't you change his mind? Why didn't you change the course of the war? Why didn't you send angels down -- somehow! -- to stop the Jews being herded into those railroad cars and taken off to the concentration camps? Why didn't you stop them somehow?"

Do you know why we say that? Despite the fact that we often oppose the principle when it is hurting us, deep down we feel that "might is right." Deep down, we feel, "If it gets too tough, we'll go in and we'll take the oil!" This is how we run our own lives. We feel that if you are strong enough to do it, you have the right to do it!

We tend to say to God, "Where have you ever indicated that there is something that you wanted to do and you couldn't do it because of our attitude? Where have you ever said that?!"

And God answers, "Right here in this verse that you're studying. There I've said it. Because all day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people, a people who by their disobedience and their contradiction of my statements are able to frustrate my will."

That is a touching picture, isn't it? The Creator of the whole universe who controls billions of solar systems of stars and planets, that are trillions of tons heavier than all the people who have ever lived in our world -- that great Creator is standing outside Israel's door and is saying, "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people."

And yet, that is in line with all the other statements that God has made down through history about our ability to frustrate his will, and his inability to force or overrule our free wills. You remember Jesus looking at Jerusalem and saying, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" (Matthew 23:37)

This is the mighty God of the whole universe saying, "I wanted you, but I cannot make you come unless you want to come." You remember Elijah saying, "If Baal is God, then follow him; if God is God, then follow him." Every time God presents through his servants a choice, he is saying to us, "You have free will! Because of what I've done in Jesus, it is truly free. You are free to choose."

The Jews have been free to choose all along. Do you remember that Moses said to them: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live." (Deuteronomy 30:19)

But you do not say "choose life" to a person -- unless they have the freedom to reject that life. You do not bother to give a command to someone who does not have free will, because you know that you can make him do it anyway! You only give a command to people who can obey or disobey that

command.

In spite of the fact that we treasure freedom so much, you know that deep down we have a rather cynical attitude toward the whole idea of freedom. We tend to say, "Well, what's the big deal about free will? Do you mean that God would endure the atrocities that we have seen in the concentration camps -- rather than destroy free will? Why would he do that?"

The answer is that only people who have free wills can love. People who are controlled or who are manipulated can fear and submit, but only people who are free to oppose and reject are also free to receive and fellowship. You cannot have love unless you have free will. That is God's whole purpose in his creation of the world -- so that he can have people like himself who love because they are free to love, and who can live in loving friendship with him forever -- because they want to.

That's why free will is so precious to God. If you say, "Will he bear anything rather than destroy free will?" That's what he has to do! Do you see that the first time he sends an angel down or a power of the Spirit into the mind of a man like Hitler, and moves against the free action of that man's will -- at that very moment God has destroyed the integrity of his own personality -- and the integrity of his relationship with us -- and destroyed forever the possibility of a heaven of honest love.

The first time he moves against the free will of some Jewish father who takes the wrong attitude toward the Gentile world -- and defiles and desecrates the free exercise of that man's will -- that moment, God destroys the integrity of his own personality and the whole possibility of a fellowship of honest love.

You can see it yourself. You will never develop a relationship of honest love between you and others if they have to do what you tell them. They will constantly resent you. They may give an appearance of submission, an appearance of agreement, but they will resent you forever -- unless you give them the freedom to do what they want to do.

You may say, "Will God put up with anything in order to preserve that?" Not only will he put up with the tremendous cruelty and oppression that people worked on little Jewish children whose pain ground into God's own heart. Not only will he put up with disease and sickness that man's immorality and abuse of nature brings about in our world. But he will even face the death of his own beloved Son, in order to preserve our free will.

What about you and me? God says the same to us. "All day long I have held out my hands towards you. You have skin that I made. When it is pierced, it will seal again. I have given you eyes that are more adaptable than any camera lens that people have ever invented. I have given you a sun that rises and sets on time so that all your appointments and the business life of your nation can be run by its reliability."

"I have given you all these things -- signs that I love you. You can depend on me and trust me. You don't need to grab for every penny. You don't need to manipulate other people and things for your own benefit. You can trust me and live freely, and treat me as your Father. I have given you all these signs. And yet, you have the freedom within the context and framework of all these signs of my faithfulness, to refuse to trust me, and the freedom to refuse to love me."

That's the truth. You and I like to bluff it out and say, "It is because of my background that I am as I am. Or it is because of my parentage that I am as I am. Or it's because of determinism that I am as I am. Or it is because I am predestined that I behave as I do."

God states plainly to us, "You are free. You are free to accept me and depend on me – or you are free to reject me and live your life dependent upon yourself. You are free to live your life listening for the footsteps of God that will show you the way God wants you to go in your life. Or you are free to rule your own life, doing what you want with it, whoever you hurt. All day long I have held out my hands towards you."

The absolutely shattering fact is this: that you have the freedom to determine whether God has done this to a contrary and a disobedient people, or whether he has done this to a people who have thanked him for what are in his hands, and have put themselves in those same hands.

You are free. Forget all about determinism. Forget all about the bluff and self-pity that we produce. According to God's own word, you are free and I am free, and we are masters of our own destiny. And you are at this moment what you are because of what you have chosen to be. That is God's own word. That is what he is saying: "All day long I have held out my hands, but you have disobeyed. You have contradicted what I have said to you."

So think about this – especially if you have been hiding behind the usual excuses, that "I can't do what he tells me to do." We have a dear loving Father. He does not tell you to do things that you cannot do. He is too kind for that. He has given us too many signs of his kindness. You can do whatever God tells you to do -- if you choose to.

Let us pray. Dear Lord, we are humbled when we see that the mighty Creator of the whole universe has to stand at the door of our own life, and say, "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people."

Lord, we'd like to argue that we couldn't find you because you didn't want us. Or we couldn't find you because you made it too hard for us. Or we couldn't find forgiveness because you wouldn't forgive us.

Lord, we see now -- that isn't true. All day long you hold out your hands towards us. You invite us to come and be your children -- to get to know you as a dear and kind Father. Lord, we have the freedom to do that now – to turn towards you and say, "God, I will begin to treat you as my Father, and not as some impersonal being. I will begin to trust you for the things that I am meeting through the week. I will stop being afraid and nervous -- because I have the power to face things I face. I will depend on the strength that you have already given me in my life so far. I will begin to trust you as my dear and loving Father."

Lord, thank you that we have that freedom now -- that any of the agonies that come into our lives, come because we abuse that freedom. Thank you Lord, that you are not the one who sends the concentration camps, or the diseases, or the unhappiness, but we bring these things upon ourselves, by our abuse of our freedom. Lord we would not abuse further. We would say yes to you now -- for your glory. Amen.