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The Two Israels

Romans 11:15b

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

I really do hope that the last two sermons that we shared on anti-Semitism and the Holocaust make it clear to everyone that those of us who believe this Book --and certainly I believe it -- have nothing but respect and a desire to protect our neighbors, and that we're committed to this by the greatest commandments in this Book. Those commandments are, "Love God, and your neighbor as yourself."

You can't believe that this Book is the Word of our Creator and still hold on to blind hatred or prejudice. I hope by now everybody agrees that if you really respect the spirit of this Book, then you love not only the loved ones who are Jews, but you love every other human being on this earth. I think it's important to make that clear so that we all understand it.

It might be fair too to say that there are many of us here who don't remember when it was difficult for a Jewish doctor to get a job in Minneapolis. There are many of us here who don't remember those days when in certain Minnesota towns the Catholics hated the Protestants. It's important for those of us who do remember those days to realize that there are many of us in colleges and universities who don't remember them.

To be fair, loved ones, those of us in college today are not interested in those old hatreds. There is to some extent a new attitude in our society, a desire to deal with each other first of all as persons -- and not as Jews or Protestants or Gentiles or Catholics. I think that it's important for us all to realize that that's the spirit in which those of us of the college generation are tackling these things.

We may have all kinds of faults and all kinds of problems, but one of the things we do want to do is to forget those old days when people yelled at each other, and held prejudices against each other. We're anxious to deal with each other first and foremost as people and not as people of a certain color or persuasion.

It's that kind of spirit that pervades this Book. I suppose that's why I enjoy it so much -- because this Bible never encourages us to avoid thorny or difficult problems for the sake of peace. It doesn't. This Book always deals with the thorniest problem and the most difficult subject, knowing that if we really and truly understand the truths of life, we will be able to love each other.

That of course is so contradictory to the obscurantist view that I remember my grandmother said, and at times my mother said. She said, "Ernest, don't think too much! Thinking too much is bad." Of course there's that fear that maybe you'll discover some truth that will make it impossible for you to live in love with each other. Well, the truth is that this Book believes that when you come into truth, you are at last able to live in love with each other.

Of course that's what the spirit of the age is. "Don't be afraid to talk about homosexuality. Don't be afraid to talk about abortion. Don't be afraid to talk about Communism or Catholicism. Don't be afraid to talk about anti-Semitism or Judaism. Talk about these things -- because openness and

honesty will lead to truth -- not fear and silence."

Of course, that's the belief of all the people who founded universities. I don't know if you've ever read the engraving around the top of Northrop Auditorium {a building on the campus of the University of Minnesota}. It states the belief of the founding fathers of the University of Minnesota. You can read it without binoculars, so you should read it the next time you walk by it. "Founded in the faith that men are ennobled by understanding. Dedicated to the advancement of learning and the search for truth." That's what this Book believes, and that's what we believe. That's why we believe we can make a contribution to campus life.

So loved ones, it's important for us not to tread on each other's prejudices. It's important not to yell at each other before we know what each of us is saying. It's important for us above all not to return to the old days of name-calling and fighting. It's important for us to search for truth openly and confidently. So that's what I'd ask you to continue to do this morning.

So I'll ask you a fighting question: Is it possible to believe in Jesus and not hate Jews? Is it? Is it possible to believe in Jesus and not hate Jews, or to have Jews hate you?

I'd point out that it's pretty pitiful if the answer is "no". We are in real trouble if the answer is "no". If the only way that Christians or Gentiles can have any relationship with loved ones who are Jews is if they keep quiet about the central tenet of their faith, then we're in trouble. If the only way loved ones who are Jews can avoid hating Gentiles or can have any relationship with Gentiles, is as long as no mention is made of Jesus, then we're in trouble. Because it means that peaceful co-existence among us is impossible unless one of us denies the central tenet of our faith, that Jesus is the unique Son of God.

In other words, it's vital that we all see a very basic truth -- both those of us like me who are minorities, and those of us who are majorities. Don't push a guy into a corner -- whether a guy is a Jew or a Gentile, or a Protestant or a Catholic. Don't push a guy into a corner from where he can't escape -- because if you do, in order just to survive, he'll be pushed into desperate action against you.

You all know that! Any of us who are half-sane at all know -- even if you are winning an argument in business or finance or theology or anything -- if you have any love for your fellow man, you don't push a guy into a corner where he can't escape-- because he's driven to escape against you!

So I would plead for us all here in our society -- it's vital for us to see that it's possible for Christian preachers and Jewish rabbis to preach their whole gospel freely, without necessarily offending someone else or being called anti-American or anti-Semitic. It is possible! It's possible to believe fully what each of us believe and yet live in peace with one another. This is what God has provided for in this Book.

How does it come about? It seems that this Book, the Old and New Testaments, teach that there are just two Israels. The first Israel is the physical nation of Israel, the nation of the Hebrews, the nation of the Jews. That's the nation that God founded under Abraham. That's found in Genesis 12: 1-3: "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves.'"

That's the first Israel, loved ones. It's the Israel nation -- the nation of all those who are privileged to be born children of Israel. It's the physical nation of Israel, called and chosen by God for a specific service.

That's it! Chosen by God for a special service. He chose them so that he could, through them, show us what he was like. At times he did it through their successes. At times he did it through their failures. At times he did it through their obedience. At times he did it through their disobedience. But the significant thing about the nation of Israel is -- they were chosen to perform a special mission by God -- that is, to show us what God was like.

Here, for instance, is one of their successes, in I Kings 18:36-39: "And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, 'O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that thou, O Lord, art God, and that thou hast turned their hearts back.' Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt offering, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, 'The Lord, he is God; the Lord, he is God.'" That was one of the successes -- one of the many times when the Jewish nation obeyed God and turned to him with all their hearts. God used it to show other people that he was God.

One of the failures is II Chronicles 7:19-22: "'But if you turn aside and forsake my statutes and my commandments which I have set before you, and go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will pluck you up from the land which I have given you; and this house, which I have consecrated for my name, I will cast out of my sight, and will make it a proverb and a byword among all peoples. And at this house, which is exalted, every one passing by will be astonished, and say, 'Why has the Lord done thus to this land and to this house?' (In other words, the world will connect the Lord and his actions with this specially chosen people of Israel.) Then they will say, 'Because they forsook the Lord the God of their fathers who brought them out of the land of Egypt, and laid hold on other gods, and worshiped them and served them; therefore he has brought all this evil upon them.'"

That was the function of the nation of Israel. The Irish may say, "Oh, we've disobeyed God too. Why didn't he do that with us?" The Germans may say, "We've disobeyed God too. Why didn't he do that with us?" Well, whether you think you're lucky or unlucky, you are not the chosen people! You are not God's specially chosen people.

There is a way in which God has dealt with Israel as a nation in which he does not deal with the rest of us. You may say on occasion he seems to deal with America or Germany in the light of the attitudes of all the individuals that make up those countries, but never has he dealt so consistently down through the centuries with any of us as he has dealt with the nation of Israel. Loved ones, God has used Israel to show himself to the rest of us through their obediences and their disobediences, through their failures and their successes -- in a way that none of the rest of us have ever experienced.

That's why they have a unique relationship with God. That's why they have a unique protection from God. Do you realize that? That's why they have a unique promise of protection that Ireland doesn't have, Germany doesn't have, America doesn't have, or Japan doesn't have! They are uniquely promised protection by God.

You'll see it if you look at Genesis 12:3 – which was one of the verses we read at the beginning, you remember, regarding the time God originally chose Israel. "I will bless those who bless you," (he never said that to Japan or Germany or France) "I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves." There's a unique protection there in the eyes of all of us who believe this Word. We know that if we touch Israel, God touches us. There's a protection there built in.

Loved ones, another verse we read in an earlier talk is in Psalm 105:12: "When they were few in number, of little account, and sojourners in it, wandering from nation to nation, from one kingdom to another people, he allowed no one to oppress them; he rebuked kings on their account, saying, 'Touch not my anointed ones, do my prophets no harm!'"

The best friends a loved one who belongs to the Jewish nation can have are the people – whether they be Christians or Jews – who believe this Book. For Jews the safest neighbors they can have are people who respect and obey the spirit in this Book. This is because this Book tells us that God chose the nation of Israel to perform a special function in his world -- to show us by their obediences and their disobediences, their successes and their failures, their exiles and their terrible experiences -- what kind of person he is -- so that we also could begin to trust him and obey him. Loved ones, that runs right through this Book. Israel was chosen to perform a special function -- to show us what God was like.

What is vital for us all to see – and I would say including the loved ones who are Jewish -- it's vital to see that God chose them to perform a special function. He did not choose all of them by that act of choice for salvation. That's not what the choice is about. He chose them to perform a certain service.

Throughout this Book you can see that there are many Jews who are obedient and there are many who are disobedient. So their choice by God to perform a certain function in our world does not mean that all of them automatically spend their eternal destiny with God. It is not a choice for salvation. It is a choice for service. We have to be really honest about that. God chose the nation of Israel to reveal himself to the rest of us, but he did not thereby choose them all to be saved and spend their eternal destiny with him. That still depends on their obedience and disobedience.

So what you see as you read the Old Testament is -- within the physical nation of Israel there develops a spiritual Israel. There develops not only those people who disobey God, but there develops the Davids, the Abrahams, the Pauls, the Jeremiahs -- who not only perform the function that God has given them, but who also trust and obey the God who made them. What you see is a spiritual Israel developing inside the physical Israel nation.

That's what Paul talks about in Romans 9:6. Paul, who is a Jew himself, makes this distinction between a physical Israel and a spiritual Israel: "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; but 'Through Isaac shall your descendants be named.' This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are reckoned as descendants."

So it's not just all who are born Jewish who are God's children. They are all his servants. But it is those who begin to trust his promises that are his children.

You find it stated again in Romans 9:27 in the words of Isaiah: "And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: 'Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved.'" So Isaiah says, "There are many loved ones who are being used by God to express his nature to the world. But only a remnant who begin to trust and obey him will actually be saved."

Then in verse 30: "What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, righteousness through faith; but that Israel who pursued the righteousness which is based on law did not succeed in fulfilling that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it through faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written, 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone that will make men stumble, a rock that will make them fall; and he who believes in him will not be put to shame.'"

Many loved ones who belong to the physical Israel have found themselves in the same position as Paul. As a Jew he cried out, "The good that I would I cannot do, and the evil I hate is the very thing I do. I know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal. I cannot do what I want. I do not understand my own actions." {Paraphrase of Romans 7:14-19}

Loved ones, within the physical nation of Israel, I would say -- and I'm sure many loved ones who are Jews would reinforce this -- that there are thousands who cannot obey the law. Even though they are Jewish and Hebrews of the Hebrews, they cannot obey the law of God. Many of them must yearn for the great promises that Ezekiel gave to the Israelites of deliverance from this internal selfishness that prevented them doing what God wanted them to do in their own lives.

Ezekiel 36:24-28 goes: "For I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. You shall dwell in the land which I gave to your fathers; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God." There must be many loved ones, Jews as well as Gentiles, who say, "Yes, I want that."

Loved ones, we Christians believe that when Jesus died on Calvary that promise was fulfilled. That as Paul says in Romans 6:6, our old self that's so selfish and that refuses to obey God's law -- our old self that's so dependent on people and on things and on experiences, was crucified with Christ, that we might no longer be enslaved to the body of sin but that we might be able to obey God's law. We believe that that happened in time-space in 29 A.D. on Calvary.

But we believe it happened forever in a cosmic miracle that took place in all of us. Because all of us were completely destroyed and recreated in Jesus so that we are able to obey God's law. Those of us who believe that believe that the real Israel -- the spiritual Israel -- consists of those of us who believe that Jesus is the only begotten Son of God, and that all of us, Jew and Gentile, were crucified with him 1900 years ago in space-time and forever in eternity -- so that we all are able through his Spirit to obey God's law and to be God's children.

That's what Paul says at the end of his letter to the Galatians, chapter 6, verses 13-16: "For even those who receive circumcision do not themselves keep the law," (Paul says many loved ones who are circumcised are like him. They are physically members of the nation of Israel, but spiritually they

are unable to keep the law.) "but they desire to have you circumcised that they may glory in your flesh. But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. Peace and mercy be upon all who walk by this rule, upon the Israel of God."

Loved ones, that's the second Israel, the Jews and the Gentiles, because there are some of us from both groups -- who have experienced a recreation in Jesus and a change of our whole lives so that we live by God's law.

And so we are committed by this dear Word to protect all who are born as Israelites and as Jews. We are committed to protect them and to love and respect them. But we must hold to what God has shown us in the New Testament -- that it is because of Jesus' death on Calvary that all of us, both Jew and Gentile, are able to be freed from our old selves and are able to live according to God's law.

Those of us who do that are the true Israel of God. Paul says that in Romans 2:25: "Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. For he is not a real Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal. His praise is not from men but from God."

So brothers and sisters, and brothers and sisters who have Jewish backgrounds, we have to say that we respect you and we are committed to protect you. But we believe and we urge you gently and lovingly to see that Jesus is the Messiah, and that he has enabled some of us here to be delivered from ourselves and to be able to live according to his law. We believe that those who do that, whether Jew or Gentile, are God's true children.

I know that many of us claim Jesus' name, and many of us profess his name, and all we are is religious people. But I would say that you will know those of us who are truly in Jesus because we have the same spirit as Abraham, and Simeon and Anna, and Paul, and Peter, and all who allow the Spirit of the Messiah to come in and control their lives. Let us pray.

Dear Father, we thank you for freedom to preach your dear Word. We thank you, Lord, for the challenge to live according to that Word. And we thank you, Father, that after all the fuss, and all the noise, and all the talk, what convinces us is a life lived.

So Father, we ourselves personally would commit ourselves more and more to experiencing that death to self of our dear Savior, so that that resurrection life of his may continue to shine forth in this world, and convince our friends and our neighbors that it is possible to live above self and sin, and to live a life of love and peace -- in your name and for your glory. And now the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with each one of us, now and evermore. Amen.