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The following sermon was delivered on “Israel Sunday” 2004 by the retired U.C.C. minister Rev. Martin H. Siebert.

The format and style of the presentation has been maintained, and since this sermon was not prepared for publication no notes were added.

Good morning sisters and brothers of God’s family!

I consider it a privilege to stand in this pulpit today, and I extend my sincere thanks to pastor Michael Klatt and his team for inviting me to preach the sermon on “Israel Sunday”.

I do this with fear and trembling! With fear, because I know that I will not be able to do justice to the text I have chosen nor to all the expectations you might have. With trembling, because the older I get the more I am aware of what an awesome task it is to expound scripture and try to discern between what God’s spirit wants me to say and what I think I have to say.

The word from Psalm 33 that guides us into the new week reads: “Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage!”

Grace and peace be with you all, AMEN

Text: Romans 11:1-36 ( selected verses )

“Gracious, loving God guide us with your Holy Spirit as we face the challenge of Paul’s words about the irrevocability of your covenant with your people Israel. Help us to see how mistranslations and misinterpretations of Paul’s statements have caused severe pain and senseless suffering for the Jewish people during the course of almost 2000 years of ‘satanizing’ them. Give us eyes to see more clearly, ears to hear more accurately, and hands to do more lovingly what you want us to do in order to further your kingdom on earth. By your grace we are accepted, and with your help we may be able to work for a better tomorrow. So we pray in the name of our Jewish brother Jesus, whom we Christians confess to be the Christ – Messiah -, AMEN”

Dear sisters and brothers!

Today on the 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity Sunday we remember the destruction of Jerusalem and her Temple by the Romans in the year 70AD/CE.

It was indeed the most devastating event in the history of Israel, Judaism, and the Jews next to the Shoa of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to be sure!

Jewish and Roman casualties during that struggle for freedom and independence of Israel were enormous. Some historians estimate that up to one million Jews were killed fighting the Roman occupation forces.

As we remember this future changing event for the Jewish people there is absolutely nothing to rejoice about . However, we may stand in awe realizing that inspite of almost 2000 years of calumny, misinterpretation of scripture, persecution, pogroms, and the attempt of total extermination by the “Nazis” God has not abandoned his people. He has suffered with them through thick and thin, thus confirming that his calling is irrevocable.

Jesus knew almost nothing about all of this when he walked the streets of Jerusalem or discussed religious topics in the Temple, nor could Paul anticipate in his wildest dreams what future generations of Christian scholars would read into his writings about his faith in Jesus whom he believed to be the Messiah.

Paul had received a call from his Messiah to become the apostle to the Gentiles. He did not see himself as a convert from one religion to another. That interpretation would have been totally alien to Paul! In 11:13 he writes explicitly, "I am speaking to you Gentiles!"

And as Krister Stendahl, Bishop em. of Stockholm and Prof. of divinity em. at Harvard writes so aptly in his commentary on Romans, "he lectures them on the fact that they are newcomers, that they should stand in awe, that the Jews are in the hands of God, and that it is none of their business to try to manipulate or perhaps even evangelize the Jewish people."

Indeed, according to Stendahl Paul perceived the first signs of Gentile-Christian anti-Jewishness calling their attitude towards the Jews (v.20) 'proud' or 'conceited'. Stendahl claims that Paul was the only one who really warned Gentile-Christians expressly against false missionary zeal since he had already been burned once, when he had persecuted the early Christian community out of religious zeal, and he wasn't going to let history repeat itself.

Paul simply says: The Jews are in the hands of God, and you Gentile-Christians should accept this, it's truly a mystery. Get off the backs of the Jews, leave them in the hands of God, and all you have to do is to be faithful; and if the Jews' salvation according to God's plan is not cast in christological terms, so be it, it's God's business not yours.

Now, that is pretty good stuff about Paul and sure makes for a challenging introduction to our text, doesn't it.

If only the three monotheistic religions 'of the book' – Christianity, Islam, Judaism – would truly live by the rather tolerant standards which Paul demands in Romans and very explicitly in chapters 9-11, this world would be in much better shape. Friedrich Schiller's 'Ode to Joy' wouldn't be that far off with the reconciling words : all humans on earth shall become brothers, so be embraced millions, brothers above the tent of the stars there must dwell a loving father. We just sang it a little differently: Fatherlove is reigning o'er us, brotherlove binds man to man. Of course we understand all of this gender inclusively.

Indeed friends, we live in a beautiful world where love reigns in many places, sustains us, gives us zest for life, bestows meaning upon the things we do, and provides us with a great vision for a better tomorrow. Yes, that's good news! The bad news is that all isn't well! We are painfully aware of this fact in our daily lives right here, and on a larger scale nation wide and globally through all the readily available media. Natural disasters – this morning news about 'Charlie'-, ethnic cleansings, terror bombings, strife and warfare, the spreading of prejudice by militant religious fundamentalists of various and sundry persuasions etc. remind us day in day out of the complex problems and tasks that need to be solved and completed in order to heal this wounded world. Our Jewish sisters and brothers have been calling this task for two and a half millennia 'tikkun olam' which delineates the Jews' purpose in history of humankind determined by God's irrevocable calling and unabated love. Their's is an horizontally targeted goal in history as God's cooperators, whereas too many Christians seem to be vertically oriented, prioritizing personal salvation over the 'healing of this wounded world'. Sometimes we just can't see the beauty of this world for all the pussy wounds, and we'd rather withdraw into a personal or individual faith system that leaves the rest of the world out in the cold. Shaul from Tarsus wouldn't like this attitude nor would Jeshua from Nazareth although both commiserate since they knew the human heart and the unredeemed state of this world.

Just take a brief look at the terrible mess which the most questionable war against Iraq has caused. It's a good thing, no doubt, that the ruthless regime of Saddam Hussein is gone, but at what cost! There must have been some kind of a supremacist ideology of the current U.S. administration behind all of this that claimed to be in possession of an ultimate truth. It caused the attitude: we are stronger than others, so we must know better and have the right on our side. Now mix that attitude with some religious fundamentalism and you'll get that simplistic yet dangerous view of 'we are right and they are wrong'. Are they really? Did not the occupation turn into an ongoing disaster with adding casualties by the day?

This is not the time to elaborate on the situation! I just took it as a striking example of the unredeemed state of this world, and because the whole problem could have been approached quite differently if those in charge, who claim to be God fearing people, had listened to what Paul had to say to the Gentile-Christians in our perikope from Romans: Don't think you are right and they are wrong! Get the picture folks! Look at the whole tree, the root supports all the branches no matter into which direction they branch out, and they all grow on the same trunk, so do not dismiss the maturity of any of them, each one has life of it's own, don't ever get conceited but stand in awe, and then build a relationship on that profound equality which truly is God's mystery.

I hope Paul wouldn't mind my extending his explanations and admonitions from a rather parochial level unto a global one. Incidentally, I think he wouldn't! Neither would he mind my connecting his thoughts to a recent TV report on Antisemitism in EU countries esp. in Slovakia and Hungary or to last Wednesday's news about the desecration of a Jewish cemetery in France.

Challenged by Paul's letter to the Gentile-Christians in Rome we also have to deal with that age-old disease called 'Antisemitism' - the dislike of the Jews -. This disease has permeated the ideologies and agendas of many religious and political factions all over the world including the minds of too many Christians. Sad to say, but as we shall see, misinterpretation and questionable translation of scripture has on a large scale contributed to the development of the disease, which lead to hatred of enormous proportions, to murder, and the attempt to exterminate a whole people and faith community just because of who they were- Jews!

The virus that caused the pandemic disease way back has a name. It was Christian triumphalism and its subsequent teaching of Christian superiority, explicitly manifested in the doctrines of the Early Church Fathers and Christian Councils. They maintained that the Church had superseded Judaism and is the New Israel. The Old Israel, however, made up of all the Jews who did not accept Jesus as the Messiah, is rejected by God, condemned to perpetual misery on earth as living proof of the Christian truth and God's abandonment of the Jews. As the rejected by God they would be soon labled as a deicide race – bishop Melito of Sardes 2<sup>nd</sup> century -, then Christ killers, the enemies of humanity, sons and daughters of the devil, a sheer misfortune for the whole world – Martin Luther -, the most inferior and develish of all races, and finally infectious vermin that needed to be exterminated once and for all, the latter was the attempt made during the Shoa/Holocaust by the Nazis.

It is not easy to admit that the virus was spread by the Church ever since the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, and that it could be found, unfortunately still can be found, in stereotypings, generalizations, and misinterpretations of scripture from the pulpits of Christian churches all over the world.

It still haunts me today when I think of some of my sermons 30some years ago stereotyping the Pharisees as hypocrits and underhanded folk. Thank God I learned quickly, and for the most part of my ministry, two thirds of it with the U.C.C., I focused and focus on the eradication of the disease. What a painful yet enlightening and hope creating journey it is !

One profound statement about Antisemitism needs to be recalled at this point. It is from Joel Carmichael's book "The Satanizing of the Jews". Carmichael writes: "Hatred of outsiders is commonplace, Antisemitism is unique! It is unique because of its source, its intensity, its duration, indeed its very nature. It is a major component of European as well as Jewish history over the past 2000 years, and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has had a very decisive effect on the world." Still has I should say!

Thank God, there have always been theologians, historians and laypeople in the past who fought the disease tooth and nail, however, those who spread it dominated.

One important and truly exciting event in rather recent history, which stressed the interrelationship of Judaism and Christianity was the convening of the "World's Parliament of Religions" at Chicago in 1893, just 111 years ago. Unfortunately there is no mention, whatsoever, of this event in any of the pertinent German literature that I know of, and that's why I want to tell you about it. I am indebted to the American historian Prof. Egal Feldman who furnished the subsequent information in his book "Dual Destinies – the Jewish Encounter with Protestant America".

The convention in Chicago occurred at a time when here along with European nationalism, and fostered by various anti-Jewish clichés, which were also spread all over Europe, an anti-Judaism had grown up, which was now no longer just religious but had a racial and biological basis. It was pretty much in line with the social Darwinist principle of selection – "the survival of the fittest" -. This anti-Judaism – now called Antisemitism, a misleading term coined by pamphleteer Wilhelm Marr -, was thus not biblical and religious but allegedly scientific; pseudo-science of its worst I call it. According to that pseudo-science history was a struggle between races; foremost the struggle of the Indo-Germanic 'Aryan' master race against the Slavs, and above all else against the Semitic race of the Jews, which was labeled the most inferior of all.

Count Joseph Arthur Gobineau, French diplomat and writer, put together this view of the world. Anglo-German Houston Stewart Chamberlain – son-in-law of anti-Jewish Richard Wagner – followed suit with a four volume "Essay on the Inequality of Human Races".

These 'works', among others to be sure, contributed to the fact that Antisemitism esp. in Germany was made presentable as a political component of German nationalism, foremost within the 'Antisemitic League', and names like Heinrich von Treitschke –historian-, Adolf Stöcker –theologian and court preacher at 'Kaiser's'- et al. come to mind.

Only a few decades later the Nazis would feed on all of that with an insatiable appetite.

The World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago was quite different, although Antisemitism was very much alive in the U.S. too since immigrants didn't just carry good things in their bags.

In conclusion let me highlight the mood in Chicago back then with a few encouraging observations before and during the convention. Let the witnesses speak!

Mordecai Manuel Noah, prominent Jewish journalist, diplomat and politician addressed a Christian audience with these words: "Our law is your law, our prophets are your prophets, our hope is your hope, our salvation is your salvation, our God is your God. Why should we change? Why surrender that staff of Jacob, which has guided our steps through so many difficulties?" Presbyterian pastor Rev. Nathaniel West informed his congregation in preparation for the 'Parliament': "The Church has not displaced the Old Israel, God did not attach any conditions to his covenant with Abraham and his descendants, except to keep it of course, Christians have not taken and never will take Israel's place for the Jewish covenant with God is perpetual, and Israel can never be amalgamated or lose her right of primogeniture in the Kingdom of God."

The basic idea for the 'Parliament' was that Jews and Christians correct their views of their respective religions, because as the Jewish theologian Gustav Gottheil said: "Nothing strengthens faith in the Father more surely than the growing sense of brotherhood among his children." And he rejoiced, "that the chasm, which separated the daughters from their mother is narrowing and bridges are being thrown across it on which those who were, but never ought to have been, estranged from each other may meet for the exchange of assurances of restored friendship."

The ecumenical spirit all over Chicago was profound before, during, and after the 'Parliament'. Rabbis lectured frequently from the pulpits of Congregational and Methodist churches et al. to show, that "Jew and non-Jew could meet from time to time in the spirit of common worship of the universal Father", as Rabbi Stephan Wise put it.

Energetic Christians and Jews organized the event, and chairman Rev. John Henry Barrows, 1<sup>st</sup> Presb. Church of Chicago, exclaimed: "The Congress at Chicago will give thousands a coveted opportunity to hear such a series of lectures as no university in the world could furnish." Of course, there were also those who hoped that the Congress would show forth the superiority of Christianity, voices that would prevail in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, almost obliterating the great visions of the Congress.

However, at the Congress its president Charles Bonney said: "The religious faiths of the world have most seriously misjudged each other. Such errors it is hoped that this Congress will do much to correct. Each faith captures a portion of the ultimate truth, for each must see God with the eyes of his own soul, each must behold him through the colored glass of his own nature, and each must receive him according to his capacity of reception. I am willing to call myself a New Testament Jew as others are willing to call themselves Old Testament Christians."

Josephine Lazarus –Emma's sister- speaking for the Jews said: "John, Paul, Jesus himself, we can claim them all for our own, but we do not want missions to convert us. We cannot become Prebyterians, Episcopalians etc. Christians as well as Jews need the larger unity that shall embrace them all, the unity of spirit not doctrine; the times are full of signs, on every side there is a call, a challenge, hath not one God created us?"

A love feast of the great faiths of the world the Congress was called, for Christians had at last, stated one participant, discovered "the common brotherhood of man".

Last but not least the best-selling novelist Edward Bellamy wrote shortly after the Congress, expressing his vision for the year 2000: "How long is it since people ceased to call themselves Catholics, Protestants, Baptists and so forth?" Indeed, the dreams and hopes of visionaries back then called for nothing less than religious unity in variety, and Paul would have been beside himself for joy that the Gentiles finally caught up to his teachings, esp. in Romans, but as so often in history we blew it big time!

Christian – Jewish dialogue today ought to be a continuation of the 'Chicago Parliament' 111 years ago. However, it will only have a real chance if Christians finally correct the most devastating interpretation of Paul's essential statements in our text from Romans 11. There is much more that needs to be corrected, but for now we'll stick with our text.

Friends, every evil that the Jews suffered at the hands of Christians throughout almost two millennia originated with the Christian doctrine that God had rejected his people! The proof text for this doctrine, hammered into the minds of Christians all over the world from pulpits, in seminaries, confirmation classes and what have you, has been among other N.T. statements the 15<sup>th</sup> verse of Romans 11. All the translations, and I checked a goodly number of them -including the 1545 Luther edition- state that it is the Jew's rejection by God that is the reconciliation of the world, and that their eventual acceptance by God will be life from the dead. Based on these translations countless generations of theologians taught, that God rejected his people, the Jews, for as long as it would take to convert the whole world to

Christianity , and only then will God accept them again. That's not what Paul says! "I ask then, has God rejected his people? By no means, God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew!" Now, would that same Paul 14 verses later deny what he so emphatically stated in verse 1 and 2? The answer has to be 'NO'! For the Gentile's sake God made the Jews step aside for a little period of time until they could come in back then!! Nevertheless, Paul left no doubt, whatsoever, that God's calling of his people, his gifts and promises to his people are irrevocable. So he explicitly says, that the 'NO' of the Jews regarding the acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah was God's will in order to make the 'YES' of the Gentiles possible. – It was Pinchas Lapide who first called my attention to this matter -.

Finally Paul concludes with a doxology in pure God language without mentioning the name Jesus or the title Christ.

So, if the Jews have not been rejected by God there is no need for them to be re-accepted by him, is there! How then has verse 15 to read? The key words of the Greek text are 'apobolae autown' which means 'their rejecting' not their rejection by God, and 'proslaempsi' meaning their accepting and not their acceptance by God. We owe those scholars eternally who corrected the fateful mistranslation. Now we can read Paul correctly as follows: "For if the Jew's rejecting Jesus as Messiah is the reconciliation of the world, what will their future accepting of the Messiah be but life from the dead!" There is no mention of a second coming!!! Only the Jewish New Testament by David H. Stern features this correct translation. Friends, in faithful accordance with the Jewish teaching about the coming of the Messiah the majority of the Jews could not and cannot accept Jesus as Messiah and Savior due to the unredeemed state of this world. They regarded and regard him as teacher, rabbi, brother, and prophet.

The late Roy Eckhardt, theologian and Methodist clergyman, made this provocative statement about Jewish non-acceptance of Jesus as Messiah: "Jewish non-acceptance of Jesus remains the most sublime and heroic instance of Israel's faithfulness to the covenant with God."

It's sure easy to correct a mistranslation but not the consequences thereof, the latter will take our resolve, the willingness to change our theological views and interpretations.

111 years ago the 'World's Parliament of Religions' at Chicago showed us the way to go, and it's up to us what we make of it.

Our text is a classical example how misinterpretation of scripture can lead to hatred and the wholesale condemnation of a people and religious community.

Let us help to eradicate the virus of Antisemitism and become true and truthful sisters and brothers of Jesus the Jew, whom we Christians believe to be the Messiah for us. In treating one another let us heed Paul's words to the Corinthians: "Now we know only in part, then we will know fully, even as we have been fully known." Eventually, friends, there is a lot to rejoice about, and when the Messiah comes – for the Jews the first time, for Christians it's the 'second coming' – there will only be ONE,

AMEN

Final remarks for the reader: Since I did not prepare this sermon for publication I did not bother with footnotes nor did I prepare a bibliography. If any of you are interested in my sources don't hesitate to contact me. By the way, I prefer 'Antisemitism' in one word since there is definitely nothing small about it.

For the uninitiated: This sermon was delivered during the 'International Worship Service' at Petri Kirche – St. Peter's Church – Hannover-Kleefeld.

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