Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





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“Great sorrow and anguish are in my heart” (Romans 9:1).

Rom 9:1-5; Luke 14:1-6

A seminary teacher once revealed that the most difficult passage he had encountered in St. Paul’s Letters was Romans 9:1-5. Each time it appears in the Lectionary readings, I think of him and his deep sensitivity to the dilemmas that caused St. Paul so much suffering.

We know from his letters and from the Acts of Apostles that Paul was the first to really navigate the question of the church’s struggle with its Jewish origins. For at least a decade, the nascent Christian community coexisted in Jerusalem within a spectrum of Jewish sects and temple adherents, even though it taught that Jesus had fulfilled the messianic promises made to Israel. Paul’s mission to the Gentiles caused tensions within the Jerusalem church and eventually led to a resolution of the question of whether Gentiles had to become Jews first before they could be Christians.

After the Jewish-Roman war, the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and the forced diaspora from the region, a surviving Rabbinic Judaism formally excluded the Jesus movement, which expanded into the Mediterranean world and became primarily Gentile. Even at the time of his martyrdom in Rome in the early 60s, Paul saw the inevitable and tragic break between the church and synagogue coming and

in our first reading he is grieving over this rupture.

His grief grew to the point where he offered to exclude himself from Christ if only his beloved Jewish brothers and sisters could be included in his saving grace. It is an extraordinary statement, Paul saying he would be willing to be cut off from Christ if they could be saved. But, in fact, his suffering has brought Paul to the same total self-emptying love that Jesus exemplified in sacrificing himself so that Israel could be saved. We might think of ourselves saying we would be willing to be lost forever if someone we loved could be saved in our stead. It is the most complete act of selfless love imaginable.

Paul's refusal to accept what later became the theology of supersessionism, that Christianity had replaced Judaism, became the basis for the declaration by Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate*, which holds that God's covenant with the Jews will be fulfilled along with the covenant with Christians. It was an attempt to finally repudiate centuries of anti-Semitic sentiment within the church based on the assumption that God had rejected Judaism, with disastrous and shameful consequences in history, including the Holocaust.

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