You may recall that in my sermon last week I offered a spoiler alert that this Sunday we were reading what I called one of the greatest declarations of faith written anywhere. I am excited to look at these verses but before we do that.

Can we talk?

You may have deduced by now, in fact you probably figured it out long ago but I believe that God is redeeming all of creation including every human. As an idea, this is called “universalism.” I am not a universalist because I wear rose coloured glasses and so I want it to be true. I believe in the ultimate salvation of all people because I believe it is the view most consistent with an all loving God. I also believe it is a responsible reading of scripture. I will tell you that this is a minority position and that the majority of Christians believe in a heaven and a hell, salvation and damnation.

I try to read the bible with a wide open mind. While it doesn’t happen often anymore I still get “aha” moments when I am forced to reconsider something I believe in because of something God has revealed in his Word.

I’m having this conversation today because we read things written by Paul in his letter to the Romans today and in at least one of the parables of Jesus that seem to contradict my belief in universal salvation. Rather than gloss over them and pretend we didn’t hear them or ignore the passages because we don’t like them I would like to share with you how I treat these challenging words we read this morning.

Before moving on I also want to say that I am not try to convince you of anything. I don’t want to alter your beliefs this morning, I really don’t. I am not in the convincing business. I am in the sharing business. What I think might be useful is to share with you how I unite my very optimistic life view with some challenging passages.

Let’s start with Paul who wrote, “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.” This passage and others like it in scripture give rise to a school of thought called “predestination”. You can easily see why; ” For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son” certainly suggests that some are destined, even from before they are born to know the salvation of God. The tricky word in what we heard from Paul this morning is the word “those”; “those whom he foreknew”, “those whom he predestined”, “those whom he called” and “those whom he justified.” The word “those” suggests that there “others”, that there are two camps, two different fates; people that make it and presumably people that do not.

This is the step I won’t make. This is the inference I won’t draw. While it may be an easy assumption that if there are those who are foreknown, called and justified there must be those that are not.

Perhaps those that were known in advanced, called, justified and predestined to salvation are all of us. Maybe “those” doesn’t have to be specific or exclusionary. Paul says here that there are those that are destined before they are born to know God’s kingdom; to this I say, “Yes there are!” I just happen to believe that most consistent with an all-loving God is that “those people” predestined are “all people”.

I believe this is what Paul meant in large part because of the final two sentences he writes on this matter, that spoiler alert I gave you last week, but let’s save that for the big finish, shall we?

Turning our attention to today’s gospel we heard Jesus offer three parables to indicate what the kingdom of God is like. These actually follow the parables we read each of the previous two weeks so there are five “kingdom parables” in a row. It is unlikely that Jesus recited them all on the same day rather that Matthew brought them together when he was writing his account.

Parables, as you know, are a unique form of communicating through metaphor which intentionally leave a lot of room for interpretation. Right in the middle of this list of parables Matthew writes, “Jesus told the crowd all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing.” By definition, parables require interpretation. Sometimes scripture includes Jesus offering an interpretation and sometimes we are simply given the parable.

While I didn’t preach on it, last week we read the parable of the wheat and the weeds in which a field sown with good seed comes to yield wheat and weeds. The landowner tells his workers to let both grow and at the harvest the wheat will be gathered into the barn and the weeds will be burned in a fire. Lots of room here for the interpretation that some of us are wheat and some are weeds. Some of us have one ultimate destination and some have a much less fortunate future.

Today Matthew recalls Jesus comparing the kingdom of God to “a net thrown into the sea that caught fish of every kind; when it was full they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets, but threw out the bad.” “So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous, and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”

The parallels are easy to see in these parables; the good will enter the kingdom of God while the evil will be burned with fire, “wailing and gnashing of teeth” and all of that dramatic language.

As with Paul’s talk of “those who are predestined to salvation” one can easily read these parables to suggest that some people will know eternal love and happiness with God in glory and some people will be condemned to hell. But what if in the first parable we are not so much individual crops as “the field”; each of us grow to maturation containing good and bad? According to this interpretation,those parts of us and our lives that are good and loving are taken into the kingdom while those parts of us that are unhealthy, hurt-causing, evil if you will, well those things must be shed before we enter God’s presence.

Similarly with today’s fishing parable; perhaps instead of trying to identify as a ‘good fish” and not a “bad fish” we should see ourselves as the net. In us, each of us and all of us, is good and bad, things that are kingdom worthy and things which must be thrown away.

If we choose to read these parables as I’m suggesting then we do forfeit the right to condemn some people as weeds or bad fish. This is consistent with Jesus’ dictate that we not judge. Also, if I am the wheat and the weeds, the good fish and the bad then I am left with homework, aren’t I? I am left to begin, prayerfully sifting through my own life for those things that are not kingdom worthy that I might begin to shed them.

Why do I read scripture this way? Why is it that I choose to worship a God, who in his own way and in his own time intends to redeem all of creation? Well, today we got that answer too. Paul concludes this section of his thoughts with his most splendid declaration.

“Who is to condemn?” Paul asks. Where is this condemnation; this division between those in and those out?

And his answer… “It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.”  
  
For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Amen and Amen and Amen