

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

II Samuel 7:1-14a; Psalm 89:20-37; Mark 6:30-34; Ephesians 2:11-22

II Samuel 7:1-14a deals with another attempt by King David to domesticate God. But God will have none of it!

In this story, David reflects upon the consolidation of his kingdom that he has accomplished. He had been chosen as king over both Israel and Judah, creating one nation out of two kingdoms. He had captured an impregnable city that had defied being taken by Israel during the entirety of the amphyctyony and had made it into his capital. He had renamed the city Jerusalem, and had brought the Ark of the Covenant to the city, thus making it into the religious center as well as the political and economic center of the nation. David had finally conquered the Philistines and had annexed much of their territory, thus beginning the formation of an empire. And he had built himself a magnificent palace of cedar. Now, reflecting on all that he had accomplished, David considered building a temple that could become the center of the Yahweh cult of his nation. “See now,” he said to the court prophet Nathan, “I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent” (7:2). Nathan tells him to go ahead and build a temple in which God can dwell.

But God has other plans. He speaks to Nathan, declaring, “I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel saying, ‘Why have you not built me a house of cedar?’” (7:6-7). God is in essence saying to David, “Don’t try to domesticate me, David. As the God of Israel, I have always been on the move, never confined to one place or one temple, always moving among my people, impacting and influencing them. Do not try to confine me to a temple. It just won’t work; I will not be controlled.”

I do not think that David intended to domesticate God. It is not that he was committed to setting up a kingdom in which God and his prophets could no longer remain critical of him and call him to accountability. Instead, I think he simply wanted to honor God by bringing the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem and building him a temple because God ought to have as fine a “home” as the king had! He wanted to honor God. But God could see the danger of subsequent rulers seeking to limit the influence of God by using the Temple as a way to gain control over the priestly caste and using them to endorse the king’s political and economic decisions. So some of Israel’s and Judah’s kings could – and did – use the Temple to build an integrated political, economic and religious system to press the king’s agenda (including David’s son, Solomon) and thus center power in themselves. Thus, God resisted even well intentioned action that would domesticate God.

Consequently, there is a unique twist that occurs in this story through a great play on words. God says to David through Nathan the prophet, “Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish

his kingdom. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever” (7:11b-12, 16).

God will not permit David to build a “house” (Temple) for God. But God will build a “house” (dynasty) for David. God doesn’t approve of David’s sincere desire to express gratitude to God by building a Temple for God, because David can’t see the terrible consequences of such an act on removing God from influence in Israel’s public life. It is far easier for one to see the good that enactment of legislation can accomplish than the possible harm or unintentional consequences that can unwittingly flow from the implementation of such legislation.

But God has his own plans both for Israel’s future and for David. He will build a “house” for David. God will establish a dynasty of Israelite leaders and rulers who will, over the millennia, build an enduring “kingdom” that will move far beyond a physical nation to that of a kingdom of God created and sustained under a Davidic Messiah that will bring “the kingdoms of this world” into a godly society of justice, equity and relationality with God (cf. Gen. 17:16; I Chr. 17:3-15; Isaiah 9:1-7; 11:1; Jer. 23:5-6; Zech. 3:8; 6:12; Luke 1:32, 33, 69,70; Acts 2:30, 31; 13:22,23; Rom. 1:1-4; II Tim. 2:8; Rev. 22:16). God will do far more for David than David could ever imagine doing for God by building him a “house”! Thanks for the thought, David – but God has far greater plans for you than you have for God!

The Temple is finally built. But it is built by David’s son, Solomon – not David. God permits Solomon to build that “house” for God (II Sam. 7:12-15). But that “house” would eventually become a significant block to the reform of Israel, for it would become the center of the religious authority of Judah that would join in common conspiracy with the king and the nation’s political and economic leaders. That ongoing conspiracy would draw the wrath of the prophets (e.g., Isa. 1:2-31; Jer. 7:1-15; Ezek. 34:1-10; Amos 2:4-16) because they could see how the nation’s systems had so radically departed from God’s intentions for the nation. And that conspiracy would eventually lead to the destruction both of Israel (722 BCE) and of Judah (586 BCE; cf. Ezek. 10:1-22).¹ This destruction of both nations would be the inevitable result of using religion and even a covenant made between God and David to build a conspiracy of national political, economic and religious forces to collude together to oppress, exploit and dominate the people in order to build systemic power, wealth and control.

Psalm 89:20-37 is one of the clearest (and certainly the most exhaustive) statement of the covenant made between God and David, when God promises to build David’s “house”.

¹ It is important to note that there is significant ambivalence in both the Hebrew and Christian Bibles toward government, economic and religious institutions – but particularly government. There are those in the scripture who strongly support a dominance agenda that combines a coordinated and intentional combination of oppressive policies on the part of the government, economic exploitation and religious control (e.g., Solomon, most of the kings, the Jewish priesthood, Rome). And there is also a strong emphasis on government being used under Yahweh to work for justice, an economy of equitable distribution of wealth and a prophetic relational tradition (e.g., Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Hezekiah, Nehemiah, Paul, the author of Revelation). A helpful summary of this ambiguity toward government is presented in the Excursus: “Biblical Ambivalence to Government” in the *New Interpreter’s Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), p. 407, and is thoroughly explored in the book, *The Prophetic Imagination* by Walter Brueggemann (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), the entirety of the book, but especially pp. 1-38.

This psalm divides into four parts, only one of which records the actual Davidic covenant and the conditions God sets upon it (vss. 20-32). But one cannot appreciate that passage without building a larger understanding of the entire psalm.

Part One of Psalm 89 (vv. 1-19) present the awesome power of God in nature – that God with whom Israel is dealing in this covenant. This is the power of the Creator God who arbitrarily chose Israel to be his people. The psalm begins with the great lines (perhaps the best lines of the Psalm):

“I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, forever. With my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations. I declare that your steadfast love is established forever; your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens” (vss. 1-2).

With this introduction, the psalmist then moves into the covenant itself, which is Part Two (vv. 20-37). The preamble of the covenant (vss. 20-27) expresses in many different ways God’s love for and choice of David (“my hand shall always remain with him”, “I will crush his foes before him”, “his horn shall be exalted”, “he shall cry to me, ‘You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation’”). But then the psalmist moves to the covenant itself:

“I (Yahweh) will make him (David) the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth. Forever I will keep my steadfast love for him, and my covenant with him will stand firm. I will establish his line forever, and his throne as long as the heavens endure” (vss. 27-29).

The covenant is twofold. First, God will always treat David and his successors with “steadfast love” (*chesedh*). *Chesedh* was the Hebrew term for grace-filled love. It was the profound love that God had toward humans that accepted, redeemed and forgave them. That is the kind of love with which God will treat David. It is not that David and his successors will not be held accountable for their actions (particularly their public actions), for they most certainly will! But underlying that accountability is the most profound love and grace.

Second, that covenant will be “forever”. God “will establish (David’s) line forever, and his throne as long as the heavens endure”. Israel – and even in a profound sense – the whole world will be ruled everlastingly by a monarch who is a descendant of David. Certainly each king in the Davidic dynasty will be expected to be faithful to Yahweh and just towards the people – and severe punishment will come upon that king who doesn’t remain faithful. But even though they may be faithless, “I will not remove from (the king) my steadfast love, or be false to my faithfulness. I will not violate my covenant, or alter the word that went forth from my lips” (vss. 33-34).

But that is precisely what seems to have happened, the psalmist suggests. Part Three (vv. 38-45) deals with the disillusionment of the psalmist and, in fact, all Israel through the turn of events they face. Shame has come upon Israel and the monarchy due to the faithlessness and lust for power and dominance of the successors to David. The result has been Israel’s defiance of the king, and the overthrow of his authority (this is likely a reference to the revolt against the monarch during Rehoboam’s reign and the creation of the northern kingdom as ten of the twelve

tribes abandoned the Davidic monarchy). And even worse is the eventual defeat of both nations and their consequent entrance into exile.

Part Four (vss. 46-52) is the Psalmist's plea to God. "How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire" (vs. 46)? It is the Psalmist's prayer that God would restore the Davidic monarchy. If this psalm was written during the time of the divided kingdom then it is a plea for their reunion. If it was written during or after the Exile (which is more likely), then it was a plea for the return of a Davidic monarch to the throne, and the restoration of Israel from its exile. Of course, neither Israel reunited nor was a Davidic monarch restored to the Israelite throne after the Babylonian exile. Instead, Israel's divided kingdoms went down to defeat to Assyria and Babylonia and they were taken into respective exile. And when the southern kingdom of Judah was eventually returned from exile, they were never again ruled by a Davidic monarch but with those appointed by the nations that controlled them. It looked as if God had reneged on his covenant with David. But God had not reneged; rather God had other plans! And those plans still lay hundreds of years in the future, waiting for a rabbi to come forth from the inconsequential town of Nazareth!

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56 continues the account of Jesus' disciples reporting back to him on their successful mission throughout the villages of Galilee. Mark reported that the disciples had met with great success and unusual acceptance by the people to whom they ministered. But that story was interrupted by Mark's telling of the story of the beheading of John the Baptist, thus reminding the Christians reading these accounts that success is often accompanied by rejection and persecution, especially by the "powers that be" if they feel threatened by such ministry.

The story of the disciples' mission then picks up where it left off as "the apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught" (6:30). Jesus then invites them to "come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while" (vs. 31). But their effort to retreat by boat was anticipated by the crowd who ran to that "deserted place" to which they were heading and met their boat when it landed. There was no getting away from the crowd! Jesus, upon seeing the people, "had compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he began to teach them many things" (vs. 34).

The scene then shifts in 6:53-56. Jesus' disciples cross a storm-crossed Sea of Galilee toward Gentile territory. Jesus, who was not with them in the boat, comes walking to them on the water and calms the sea, so that they can complete their journey (6:45-52). When they arrive in Gentile territory, they are greeted with a large crowd of Gentiles, who are far more receptive than the Gentiles in 5:17. "People at once recognized Jesus," Mark tells us, "and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed" (vss. 54b-56).

In this Gospel lesson, the compassionate nature of Jesus is demonstrated. Not only did he have compassion upon the Jewish peasants, but upon the Gentiles, as well. The implication of 6:53-56 is that Jesus ministered for a significant period of time to Gentiles in Gentile territory. Thus, the

text tells us that, whereas Jesus was rejected by his own townspeople in Nazareth and by the political, economic and religious leaders of Israel, he was embraced both by the Jewish and by the Gentile peasants. He was loved and sought after by them all. Not only were his disciples well received, but he was also enthusiastically accepted by the people. The systems hated Jesus because he exposed them for the greedy, power-mad and dominating people and structures that they were. But the people heard him gladly – and it was irrelevant whether it was Jews or Gentiles – for all responded to him with enthusiasm and commitment.

The reason for Jesus' popularity is stated most simply by Mark. "He had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd" (vs. 34). He simply cared deeply for them, and thus acted as a shepherd toward them.

The term "shepherd" tends to be romanticized today, as one who gently and persistently cares for his sheep. But the metaphor of "shepherd" is used throughout the Hebrew Bible in a far different way. It is used to describe the leaders of the political, economic and religious systems of the nation. These "shepherds" (or caretakers) of the people are criticized for using their power and position to benefit themselves, rather than to strengthen the people. "You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with their wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So my sheep were scattered, with no one to search or seek for them" (Ezek. 34:3-4, 6).

The political, economic and religious leaders of the nation have used their positions of privilege to privilege themselves – to increase their power, to build their wealth, to strengthen their control. They have not sought the empowerment and sustenance of the people. By doing so, Israel's leaders have not been true to the example set them by Moses (Num. 27:15-17; Ps. 77:20), David (Ps. 78:70-72) and even God (Ps. 23:1; 74:1; 78:52-53; 80:1; Ezek. 34:15). Thus, Mark declares, Jesus follows in the tradition of Israel's true shepherds – Moses, David and even Yahweh – in that he healed the people, embraced them, taught them and had compassion for them (Mk. 6:34, 56) so that, like the hemorrhaging woman in Mk. 5:25-34, they too could touch "the fringe of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed" (vs. 56b). Jesus, Mark tells us, was the true shepherd to the peasant people – whether they were Jews or whether they were Gentiles! And the result was that they received him with enthusiasm and with joy!

Ephesians 2:11-22 is the epistle lesson for this Sunday's lectionary, continuing the study on public life that makes up Paul's letter to the Gentile church of his day that was facing Roman persecution. In the previous lesson, we discovered that Paul demonstrated that we Christians have been blessed by God, chosen, adopted, redeemed, forgiven, called and empowered by the Holy Spirit for one purpose and one purpose alone – to be involved as God's people in public life, seeking its transformation. As God has transformed us with the gospel, so we are to be at work in the world seeking to bring its political, economic and religious systems into conformity with God's will for them.

In today's epistle lesson, Paul lays out the essential mission of the church: to reconcile the systems and humanity to God by becoming one body in Christ. But why should this be the mission of the church? Why not simply be a revolutionary force, seeking to reform the systems to function as God intended them to do? Why should the primary mission of the church be that of reconciliation? This pivotal question is answered in one of the most strategic portions of Ephesians that is not included in this lectionary reading. But today's Epistle lesson cannot be truly understood without first understanding the conclusion of the first chapter of Ephesians.

Ephesians 1:20-23 states, "God put his power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all"

Paul here declares that God "raised (Jesus) from the dead and seated him at (God's) right hand in the heavenly places." Why would it be important for Paul to begin this assertion with Jesus' resurrection rather than with him being "seated at God's right hand"? Paul begins with the resurrection because that act indicates that Christ's power over the systems began with that initial act of resurrection. Rome and the Jewish clerical aristocracy – the truly powerful systems of the Gentile and Jewish worlds respectively – could put Jesus to death. *But they couldn't keep him dead!* God would set aside the physical laws of death and raise Christ from the dead. Thus, God can do with the systems whatever he chooses to do. He reigns! They don't!

Now Paul can move on to declare "and seated (Christ) at the right hand in the heavenly places". Here, Paul is declaring that Christ's ascension into heaven was the indication that God had now made Jesus the monarch of heaven. This is a rather common theme in the New Testament, taught not only by Paul, but also by Peter, John and the author of Hebrews (Rom. 8:34; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3-4; 10:12-13; 12:2; I Pet. 3:21-22; Rev. 1:17—2:1).

What is so significant about the image of one "sitting at the right hand"? Being seated at a monarch's right hand was not simply the highest place of honor. It was the seat that the heir apparent to the crown occupied. It was the seat of the vice-regent! Therefore, to say that Jesus was "sitting at the right hand of God" was to say to people at that time, "Jesus is God's selected ruler of heaven – right now!"

The sentence continues: ". . . far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named". Here is the popular formula that Paul repeatedly uses (in other translations, "thrones, dominions, principalities and powers"). That is, he is describing Jesus as ruling over all nations, territories, monarchs and the powers they exercise through their office – both in heaven and here on earth! Christ, as monarch of heaven, rules over every political, economic and religious system and even the spirituality behind those systems that gives them such immense power. He is "above every name that is named" – for his name, "Jesus", "God Saves" declares God's intent in making Jesus both Lord and Messiah of every earthly system.

Let's be honest about this sentence written by Paul. We use it today as a beautiful spiritual and theological statement. But it is far more than that. It is an extremely political statement – and it

was meant to be so by Paul. Keeping in mind the cosmology to which Paul and all other Jews and Gentiles held – that earth and heaven are so linked that an action in heaven would occur before it occurred on earth but which would inevitably, relentlessly happen on earth – what Paul is saying is that *Christ has already been crowned monarch over all nations, economic orders and civilizations that do now or will eventually exist!*

In other words, Paul is here declaring that ***Jesus is the true God-appointed Caesar of the world!*** This other one who claims to be Caesar and who claims to be divine – in this case, Nero – *is an imposter!* Nero is not Caesar! Jesus is Caesar!

This, of course, is an extremely radical concept that Paul is espousing here – in fact the kind of conviction that would be considered as treason by Rome and therefore worthy of death. No wonder Rome so relentlessly persecuted the early church! From Rome’s perspective, this was extremely revolutionary talk that struck at the very heart of the legitimacy of the Roman Empire.

It is very important to understand how radical Christianity was in its first century. It wasn’t more liberal than other philosophies. Nor was it simply revolutionary. It was extremely radical – and this statement by Paul captures how radical the gospel actually was.

The difference between being liberal and being radical is important. Being liberal means being open-minded or generous, especially toward those who are not as economically or politically fortunate as you are. Liberalism assumes that the liberals are holding the primary power, but because they are open-minded and generous, they choose to share some of the benefits of that power. The premise of liberalism, however, is that the primary power remains in the hands of those choosing to share it and only enough benefits are shared to better the living standards of the lower class while not sacrificing any of the power of those who wield the power.

The difference between being revolutionary and being radical is equally important. Being revolutionary and being liberal are the exact opposites of each other, not gradations on a common scale. Liberals hold onto their power but in their largess choose to share some of its benefits while not surrendering any of the power. Revolutionaries, on the other hand, often consist of the powerless that build sufficient political or military power that they are successful in overthrowing the liberals. Because revolutionaries overthrow the established order, they are often seen as being radical, but in reality, they are reactionary. The reason why is that power is perceived in the same way by both liberals and by revolutionaries. Power is perceived as the exercising of might – whether that is military might, political might or economic might. And its operating premise is “might makes right”. Therefore, the oppressed, rising up to overthrow the oppressor, always become the new oppressors. That is why revolution is not a radical response, but a reactionary response. And that is why revolution is always bound to fail.

First century Christianity was neither liberal (i.e., compassionate) nor revolutionary (i.e., seeking the violent overthrow of Rome). It was, instead, radical (from the Latin word *radix*, which means getting to the “root”). Neither a generous Caesar who provides “bread-and-circuses” for the people nor a contra-Caesar who seeks to overthrow Caesar and replace him with a new despotism is the answer. What Paul is presenting here is a radical response – a Caesar who is Jesus who acts out an entirely different kind of power – relational power – power that is built

around not being a tyrant but being a servant (Mark 10:42-45) – power which has as its purpose sharing, building mutual power, building reciprocity – power that is built upon the relationships one has carefully built with others that seeks the good of the other as well as one’s own self. That is the radicalism Paul is presenting here when he declares that Jesus is the authentic Caesar of Rome and of all nations and peoples!

Thus, Paul is teaching in Ephesians 1:20-23 that because Jesus has been crowned the true Caesar of all the nations, all the political, economic and religious systems and all the people of the world (even though they don’t yet recognize his rule), then the job of the church, as Christ’s hands and feet, is *to bring about the submission of the systems of every nation and economy to Christ*. But that will happen only to the degree that the church will actively involve itself in working for justice in the public arena. And that, in turn, brings us to the epistle lectionary for this Sunday, as Paul explores how we are to carry out that assignment.

Paul begins, “At one time you Gentiles were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility between us” (2:11-14).

Paul, in essence, creates a dichotomy here. He insists that there are only two types of people in the world – Jews and Gentiles. No matter whom you are, what nation you are in, no matter what it is you believe, you are either a Jew or a Gentile.

What are the implications of you being born a Gentile? You are without hope because you are “without God in the world”. That reality seems to separate you from Jews, who are part of God’s people and who have known Yahweh in their history. But, in reality, they too are without hope in the world. They are without hope because they seek to be right before God by their good works (that is, by obedience to the Law) rather than through embracing the grace of God through Christ. Therefore, whether you are Jew or Gentile, you are hopeless!

But God has acted in two ways through Jesus Christ. First, he has acted through Jesus to adopt, redeem, forgive, choose and call you to Himself; he gives both Jew and Gentile hope. Plus, through Christ’s death, he makes us all one. He has broken down the hostility that lies between Jew and Gentile, or that lies between races, ethnic groups, nations, economies or religions. For he has made us into a new humanity; we are no longer, finally, Jew or Gentile – but a third race – Christians (2:14)!

The question we must ask at this juncture in Paul’s argument, however, is why would he want to declare that Christ destroys the hostility that lies between any two oppositional groups? What is he seeking to accomplish by this argument?

What Paul is arguing here is very profound. What he is contending is that what any political, economic, educational, social or religious system will always seek to do (including both Rome and Judaism) is to divide humanity into “us” and “them” – with “us” always being the “good guys” and “them” always being the very epitome of evil. But why would the systems of a

society do that? They would do that because, by getting the public to identify those others unlike themselves as the enemy, the people's energy will be diverted from discerning the ways the systems use power to secure themselves and instead be transferred to fighting whoever has been identified as the enemy. This, in turn, would allow the system to solidify its power and its control over the people.

But God has acted through Christ to erode any system's attempt to centralize power in themselves and thus control the people. Paul declares, "(Christ) has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances (that is, the Jewish systems that separated both Jew and Gentile) that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off (that is, Gentiles) and peace to those who were near (that is, Jews); for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father" (2:15-18).

God has abolished the power of the systems and their capacity to separate people into warring factions. By our becoming Christians, we become one with each other so that the former so-called divisions that turned us into enemies and increased the power and control of our systems (whether those divisions be white-black, women-men, American-Mexican, Catholic-Protestant) have now been exposed as a lie, and we discover that we are in reality one new people – disciples of Jesus Christ!

Thus, Paul proclaims, Christ has worked in the church and now through the church so that not only as individuals are we reconciled to each other but also the systems and humanity itself are brought to God in one body. What this means for us is that "we are no longer strangers and aliens, but are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone" (2:19-20). On the foundation of Jesus Christ, therefore, we can build a whole new building of humanity and its political, economic and religious systems – a "holy temple in the Lord in whom (all of us formerly divided and separated peoples) are built together spiritually into a (worship center) for God" (vss. 21-22).

What Paul has done in this remarkable chapter is that he has presented the argument for an alternative community to that of Rome or Israel. You no longer need to be a Gentile (Rome) or a Jew (Israel). You can now be a "Christ-one", belonging to a community of "Christ-ones". David wanted to build a "house" (a Temple) for God. But God chose to build a "house" (dynasty) for David. Now Paul takes it a step further. Through Christ, God will build a "house" of believers who will make up its "living stones" (I Peter 2:5). And that "temple" will be a "dynasty" of those who have been adopted by Jesus Christ in one long line down the centuries, a church that is God's community that God will "grow" and "build" as alternative to the systems and peoples of the world (2:21-22).

In chapter one, Paul argued that our essential task as the church is to be engaged politically and economically in the world as well as spiritually, because God had already made Jesus the true Caesar or emperor or head of the world. Now, in chapter two, he takes the argument further by contending that God, solely through his grace, has redeemed us in order to send us forth as the

representatives of his kingdom into the world he wants to redeem in order to work to change that world into society as God intends it to be. That can happen, Paul argues, only as the political, economic and religious systems upon which those nations build their power are struck at the core – their capacity to divide the world into “us” and “them”, as the church works to make all of humanity “us” in Christ!

Therefore, Paul is arguing that by the very nature of its mission, the church is the most radical force in the world, because it is about the most fundamental reconstruction of society into the world as God has always intended it to be. That is why we as Christians have to be willing to operate within the most intense and hostile environments – because we are threatening the most fundamental values, convictions, decisions and actions of that society. Conversely, if human society speaks well of the church (as it has over the past several centuries) or even ignores us as being irrelevant (as it presently does), that is a sign that human society has converted the church to its standards and values rather than the church transforming the world into the City of God.

Paul’s challenge to us would therefore be, “Do not model yourselves on the behavior of the world around you, but let your behavior change (the world). This is the only way to discover the will of God, and know what is good, what it is that God wants, what is the perfect thing to do” (Rom. 12:2, Jerusalem Bible).

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