Today we must begin by thinking about Paul’s letter to the Romans. I feel as if I have let you down. We have been reading portions of this letter each Sunday for the past 12 weeks, and yet this is the first time I have looked at this letter with you. Paul’s letter to the Romans is very powerful, but it can be very confusing. Poor interpretations of Paul’s words have led to centuries of misunderstanding and exacerbated feelings of division between Christians and Jews.

The letter to the Romans is the last letter we have from Paul. It has been argued that Paul is speaking to a mixed group of Jews and Gentiles in the letter to the Romans, but the evidence found in the letter itself proves that Paul is speaking to Gentiles, and only to Gentiles, in this letter. Paul is not lecturing Jews about the real or imagined inadequacies of the Jewish faith. During Paul’s life one of the main questions for followers of Christ had to do with the relationship between the Jewish faith and the new work of salvation accomplished in the words and actions of Christ. This is still a fundamental question for us today. The relationship between Jesus and the faith of Jesus’ parents and grandparents and great-grandparents is at the center of what it means to follow Jesus. Jesus was Jewish and the Jewish scriptures were his scriptures. Many of Jesus’ actions and teachings come straight from the Jewish faith. Yet some of the words and work of Christ bring completely new truths and meaning to our lives and to our faith.

Some have used verses from Romans to argue that the faith of the people of Israel is dead and must be replaced by something completely new. Yet Paul announces in chapter 1: I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. In Paul’s language the world is divided into neat halves. Men and women, slaves and free, Jews and Greeks. According to St. Paul, God intends salvation for all, for the Jews first and then to those who are not Jews.

In today’s reading from chapter 11 Paul returns to this theme: I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! The suggestion that God might somehow break the covenant relationship with the Jewish people is a ridiculous idea. Paul has raised this outrageous question precisely because some Gentile followers of Christ have suggested that God has rejected the Jewish people. Paul reminds the members of the church in Rome I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. What is the relationship between the faith of the Jewish people and the new work of salvation embodied in Christ? Paul made a first attempt to answer this question in his letter to the Galatians. In Galatians Paul made some statements that led some people to think that the faith of Christ brought with it a rejection of the faith of the people of Israel. So in Romans Paul realizes he must be perfectly clear: By no means! God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

Nothing has changed. The people of Israel were God’s people before and they will continue to be God’s people. In most ways nothing has changed. Yet, in some way, for Paul and for the other followers of Christ, everything has changed. There is a new revelation of God’s redeeming love, a new revelation of truth in the person of Christ. For Paul, both things are true: everything has changed and nothing has changed.

This is true for us in our time. This is true for us in our nation. Everything has changed and nothing has changed. On November 8th of last year we elected a new president. For the first time in the history of the United States, the people elected a candidate who had no experience serving the people as a public servant, no experience serving as an elected official and no experience serving in the armed forces of the United States of America.

In many ways, since that day it seems as if everything has changed in terms of the leadership of our nation. This has never been more apparent than in the past week. One week ago several hundred people organized by racist groups gathered in Charlottesville, Virginia. Their violent intentions were apparent in
their vicious language and in the loaded semi-automatic weapons they carried. We are all too familiar with the results of their efforts.

This sort of racist violence has been common in America for much of our history. Two years ago a young man motivated by racist anger walked into a church in Charlestown, South Carolina and shot 10 people during a prayer service. Fifty three years ago four men motivated by racist anger detonated 15 sticks of dynamite in a church in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four children. One hundred fifty six years ago thousands of men were willing to give up their lives for the right to enslave other human beings and took up arms against the United States government. By the time the rebels stopped shooting their guns at the army of the United States more than one million Americans had died.

This sort of tragedy is not new. What has changed is that during our lifetimes our presidents have almost always provided moral leadership in times of crisis and tragedy. During the past week our president has not provided moral leadership for our nation in our time of crisis.

Everything has changed, and yet nothing has changed. Nothing has changed for you and for me because regardless of whether or not our president provides moral leadership, we are called by God to provide moral leadership. Regardless of whether or not our president shows concern for those who are in greatest need and for those who have been oppressed, we will demonstrate our concern for those who are in greatest need and for those who have been oppressed. Regardless of whether or not our president demonstrates any willingness to follow Jesus’ commandment to love one another, we will live with Jesus’ commandment to love one another in the center of our lives. In our nation everything has changed, but for us, for we who are followers of Christ, nothing has changed.

This is true for us in our personal lives as well. Almost every person in this place has experienced some sort of event which seemed to change everything. Some of us have experienced a positive event like the birth of a child or a positive change in our work. The enormous change for the better might have made it seem like everything had changed in our lives.

Since all of us are ultimately weak, since all of us and all of our friends and family members are mortal, at some point each one of us will experience some sort tragedy, some sort of enormous loss. After the tragedy, after the battle with the terrible disease, after the death of a loved one, after the abuse is over we may feel that in a certain way everything has changed. We no longer look at the world the same way. After the enormous loss we may feel like everything has changed, yet in the most important ways, nothing has changed.

After the abuse is over we may feel like everything has changed. We may feel like we can never trust another person again, but we can trust again. We cannot do it on our own. Trust is something we do with others; trust is a relationship with other people and a relationship with God. If we keep ourselves close to God and to the people God has given us, we can trust again. In a very certain way, nothing has changed.

After the battle with the terrible illness or the injury we may feel like everything has changed. We may feel like we will never be strong again. But there are many kinds of strength. All of these kinds of strength are gifts from God. If we are ready to receive a different sort of strength then, in the most important way, nothing has changed.

After the death of someone we love we may feel like everything has changed. We may feel like we will never again be truly known and loved for who we are. But St. Paul helps us understand love never ends. Love is the gift God continues to offer to us each and every day, even after the death of the one who seemed to know us best.

We may feel like everything has changed, but in the most important way, nothing has changed. We were created out of love. We were created for the purposes of love. Love is our past and the way and the work of love will be our future. Everything has changed. Nothing has changed.