

Romans 11:13-24, 28-32

13 I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry 14 in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. 15 For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? 16 If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches. 17 If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, 18 do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. 19 You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in." 20 Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. 21 For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. 22 Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. 23 And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. 24 After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree! 28 As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, 29 for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable. 30 Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, 31 so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you. 32 For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.

The Book of Romans:***The Basics of Christianity, One Word at a Time: Grafted***

Sam Van Aken, an art professor at Syracuse University Professor, has used the technique of grafting to produce a tree that bears 40 different kinds of fruit on one tree. This endeavor has produced a number of trees throughout the country that are able to produce different kinds of pitted fruit at the same time. These trees are striking. Think of a tree with white and purple and pink blossoms all on the same tree. Think of a tree with peaches, plums, pears, and nectarines all on the same branch. The professor made this possible through the age-old technique of grafting. You may or may not be familiar with this technique of grafting. A very simple explanation of grafting is: to cut the branches or buds off of one tree and have them connect and heal and grow in connection with another tree. The branch and the tree are sliced, paired, and connected in a way that promotes a bonding of their inner tissues in order to promote new growth. The bond is made through

carefully crafted slices and kept in place by some sort of bonding agent, something as simple as a piece of tape. A botanist, a farmer, or in this case an art professor, carefully and expertly creates this bond that brings forth new life.

This illustration of grafting is something that Paul uses when describing the new life that God had granted to Gentile believers. But Paul's description went beyond the typical graft of an olive tree. When Paul speaks of the Gentiles as a wild olive shoot being grafted into among the others and now share in the nourish sap from the olive root, he is speaking of God's grace being formally extended to people of all nations, and God creating a lasting, saving, life giving bond of faith in Christ Jesus. And as Paul describes this gift to the Gentiles, he is speaking of people from all different backgrounds and races, from all different places with different native languages and heritages being brought into the family of God. Consider the beautiful variety that the spreading of the gospel brings to the tree of life that is God's Church. To God be praised that we are a part of this beautiful creation. And may God continue to bring new life to people of all nations.

Last week we talked about how God gave his Old Testament people of Israel every advantage in holding on to and believing the promises of God that were fulfilled in Christ. However, many did not believe, and instead they rejected Christ. But this gospel was too good to be squandered by the widespread rejection of one nation and so God would see to it that this good news of Jesus Christ would be spread to the world. Before Jesus ascended into heaven he gave his disciples the directive to go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. He told them to go out from Jerusalem into Samaria and out into the ends of the world with this message of salvation. The apostle Paul would, of course, become a large part of this mission as well. Paul would be called by the Savior to be the apostle to the Gentiles. The message of salvation through Christ Jesus is for all people. The Church is for all people.

We have a wonderful example of this in the gospel lesson. A Canaanite woman, a Gentile from the region of Tyre and Sidon, believed that Jesus was the promised Son of David, the Son of God who had come and who could help her demon-possessed daughter. Somehow, she had come in contact with the Old Testament promises of God and believed they were fulfilled in Jesus. She, therefore, came to Jesus with this incredible faith and Jesus put the faith of this Gentile on display so that we would know that His Church would be made up of people from all nations. Jesus had come to save the lost sheep of Israel, but his mercy extends to people of all nations. Jesus tested this woman so that all could see her faith. Jesus said to the woman, "***It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs,***" (Matthew 15:26). He was not rejecting her or insulting her, but he was only setting her up for this beautiful expression of her faith. ²⁷ "***Yes, Lord,***" *she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."* ²⁸ ***Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith!*** This Gentile woman believed in Jesus and Jesus commended and rewarded her faith. In a way she admitted that she was indeed a dog, that is a sinner who stood in the presence of God's Son, and yet God who is rich in mercy would have compassion on her. The message of salvation, the Church of God, is for people of all nations, and we see that in this Gentile woman.

Gentiles is one of those catch-all words. From common use, we know that Gentile means anyone who is not a Jew. The word in the Greek is *ethnos*, the word from which we derive our English term ethnicity, it can be translated as nations. Paul, had been given this special calling from God to take the message of salvation to the people of all nations. This man of Jewish descent, this Hebrews of Hebrews, would go out and reach out to people from many different nations. He would make journeys and send letters to Greece, and Macedonia, Asia Minor, and Rome. And from their it would go out into the ends of the world. The Church of God was for all nations.

But as we saw last week and as we see again today, he would always have a place in his heart for the salvation of his own people. ***I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry ¹⁴ in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. ¹⁵ For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?*** Although many of his own Jewish race would reject this message of salvation through Christ Jesus, the promised Messiah, Paul would also have the wonderful privilege of bringing some of his own ethnicity into the Church of Christ. In Acts chapter 6 we hear that the number of disciples in Jerusalem grew rapidly, in Acts chapter 17 we hear that some of the Jews as well as many Greek men and women believed, and in Acts chapter 13 we hear of how many Jews and devout converts to Judaism heard the word of God and many people both Jew and Gentile believed. This message was indeed for people of all nations. God, who is rich in grace and mercy, reaches out with his love to all people to bring them into his Church, into his Kingdom of Grace; Jew and Gentile alike.

However, because of such was the rejection of the gospel by many Jewish people Paul would anticipate that his Gentile audience might hold something against their Jewish counterparts. Paul warns of such an unneeded divide. Do not boast over them, he says. Practical thought might lead some to think that these branches had to be broken off so that they could be grafted in. Paul points them instead in the direction of God's abundant grace and mercy, that even those who often were standing in the way of the spread of the gospel, and who were in this sense enemies of the gospel of Christ, were loved by God. The gospel was for Jew and Gentile alike. No matter your ethnicity, your heritage, your origin, if you are human being you are sinner who needs the mercy of God. And God desires to reach out with his arms of mercy, reach out with the saving gospel of Jesus Christ, and bind you to himself, connect you to new life, eternal life in Christ. Dead and broken branches grafted to the vine and the nourishing sap that is found in his redeeming promises. The gospel is for all people.

That is a simple message that bears repeating, especially in the world that we live in. The gospel is for all people. In the last few days we have seen people working together in the wake a terrible disaster, but within the last few weeks we have seen how deeply divided our world our nation can be for we live a world that often draws lines and barriers that do not need to be drawn. And steeped in such a divisive culture it can happen that this can affect the way we carry out our faith. It could even happen that we take this message of salvation, this good news that has been given to us in Christ, and we might act as if this mercy is just for me... only for people like me. For whatever reason, whether it is

pride, our selfishness, or fear of those who are different, we take this message that is meant for all, and we may try to limit the extent of God's mercy and his love. We might not say it, but we may certainly act in ways that sets limits on the mercy of God. We might let things like race, family history, personal history, exclude certain people from the mercy of God. It can happen that we make these wooden pews into ivory towers and when a person of different race or background or personal history comes in we look down on them. Again we might not say it out loud or in public, but we are shocked or offended that such a person would come into *my* church building, or come to my pastor or my God looking for forgiveness and mercy. We must guard that it doesn't happen that we think he has done it **just** for me, only for me, and people like me. Let us never put a limit on the mercy and the grace of God. God tells us that his Church is for all nations, that he would have mercy on all people, even those who have in the past blatantly rejected the gospel. How great is the love of God! May God teach us this simple, wonderful, and beautiful, truth over and over again. May he instill in our hearts by faith and in our lives by practice, that God's Church is for all people. That God would send his grace even for me and for my neighbor and for people all across the globe and social status. What a marvelous and merciful God we have! That he would save a sinner like me! That he would save and give new life to human beings who are by nature dead in sin; nothing but broken and lifeless branches that deserve to be burned up in the fire. But God is rich and mercy! May God be praised, that he would graft such sinners into his life-giving kingdom!

In Romans chapter 10 Paul reminds us of the simple yet wonderful way in which he goes about this saving work of bringing his salvation to people of all nations. ***11 As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame." 12 For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, 13 for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." 14 How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? 15 And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" 16 But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" 17 Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.***

What a miracle that God would reach out with his mercy and grace to the people of the world! What a marvelous miracle, what kindness and love, that God would reach out all the way to this nation, through time and space, and would touch my heart, and would bring me into his Church! What a beautiful saving work that God would reach out even to me, a sinner dead in and transgressions and sins, a broken lifeless branch, and that he would wrap his arms around me through Word and Sacrament and give me this new life in Christ! And he does this not only for me, but he does this for people from every tribe, nation, and language! How vast the love of God, extensive his mercy, how beautiful the kindness and grace of God that he skillfully grafts into his Church people from every nation as he connects them to Christ now and forever! Amen.