

Romans 11:1-2a, 13-14, and 28-32 “People who Live by God’s Proclamation”

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. ² God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew...

¹³ Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry ¹⁴ in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them...

²⁸ As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. ²⁹ For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. ³⁰ For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹ so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. ³² For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.

In American Christianity, Romans 11 has often been torn apart. You can find bits and pieces of it scattered about on the Internet, on various websites speaking about the end times and the restoration of Israel. These verses are joined to prophecies from Daniel, visions from Ezekiel, and images from Revelation. They are joined to doomsday predictions and headlines from newspapers, wars and rumors of wars in the Holy Land. With strong language and even stronger fervor, various Christian organizations fight for the nation of Israel. They claim that once Israel is restored our Lord will return. And usually in the background, scattered among the Bible verses and visions, are verses from Paul’s letter to Romans, chapter 11.

How fitting it is, then, that today the lectionary does not read through the entire chapter but rather selects bits and pieces, various verses, and sets them before us! This is how this chapter of Romans is most frequently read – a verse here and a verse there in the midst of arguments about politics and power and the Christian role in ruling the nations of this world . . . all in the name of Christ and for the sake of His return.

Is this what the apostle Paul desired, however? Is this how confused he wanted the church to be? This morning, we will consider Paul’s vision, a vision of God’s greater work for all people, Jews and Gentiles, in Christ, with the goal that this vision will inspire us, as it inspired Paul, to live as one people united in God’s mission.

I. A Confusing Vision:

Have you ever noticed how some art museums post guards near the paintings? If they don’t post a guard, they put a red velvet rope in place to prevent people from coming too close to the paintings. The curators have told patrons, “You can come this close and no closer.” If you reach out your hand to point to a detail, a guard may correct you and ask you step back. Art has a way of drawing us in. We find ourselves moving closer and closer to the painting, examining small details of things that are there.

The only problem with this way of viewing art is that sometimes you can be so close to the painting that you lose sight of what it is really about. We have an old saying that describes this experience – “you can’t see the forest for the trees.” Because a person is so immersed in the trees, they can’t step back and see the forest. Being immersed in the details sometimes prevents you from seeing the larger picture.

Consider a piece of art created by Willem Vrelant, a manuscript illuminator living in the 14th century. At first glance, his work is confusing. It is a picture of King David in an open-air

chapel, surrounded by a proliferation of vines and flowers. You know you should look at David but your eyes are drawn to the flowers. Some flowers are deep blue. Others are leaved in brilliant gold. The leaves literally sparkle upon the page. Upon closer glance, you see two birds and, above them, what look like strawberries. There is so much to see that for a moment your eyes get lost in confusion. You are tracing a maze of vines and flowers, catching a bird here and a berry there.

Something like this can happen in reading this chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans. One is drawn in by the strangeness of Paul's words. Paul is discussing the status of Israel in God's plan of salvation. At some points, Paul speaks of the hardening of Israel. He voices claims that God has rejected His people, hardened their hearts. At other points, Paul speaks of the salvation of Israel, their election and being beloved for the sake of their forefathers. When read up close and out of context, his words can become confusing.

They have led some theologians to argue that Paul here lays the foundation for anti-Jewish sentiment in the Christian church. Since God has rejected Israel and chosen the Gentile nations, the church now lives the same way. After the Jews were expelled from Rome, the Gentile church survived and now would have little reason to welcome back their brothers and sisters in the faith. Other theologians have used these verses to argue for a future day when God will restore the Jewish people and to fight for that restoration as a prelude to the return of Christ. This concern for Israel gets expressed in political action and becomes a way in which the church can hasten the return of Christ.

Has God rejected Israel or not? Will God save Israel or not? These are the questions arising from the text. Even more troubling, however, is the picture these verses can give you of God. God seems unfaithful – one time calling a people to be His own and then rejecting them only to call another. What is to keep God from rejecting the Gentile church? Can God be trusted when he makes promises . . . when He claims people . . . any people . . . Gentile or Jew?

II. A Clearer Picture:

Paul is aware of how confusing this is and so he is quite clear about the points that he makes. First, Paul wants all to know that God remains faithful to his promises. God has not rejected Israel, for Paul himself is an Israelite. If God rejected Israel, then Paul would be condemned. Instead, God brought Paul to faith in Jesus Christ and uses him to reach out to the Gentile nations. In doing this, God is remaining faithful to his plan. From one nation, Israel, God promised a Savior for all nations and now, Paul, a Jew, believes in Jesus as Messiah and reaches out to Gentile nations with this good news from God.

Does this mission to the Gentile nations mean that the church should forget about Israel? By no means. And this is Paul's second point. The church is part of God's mission to his chosen people. Paul uses himself again as an example. His ministry to the Gentiles is a ministry that seeks to lead Israel back to God's grace. And here is where Paul asks us to take a step back from the art piece and to see the larger picture. Paul sees himself and his ministry as part of the larger working of God.

If you stand up close and look at Willem Vrelant's art work, you will be captivated by vines and flowers. A swirling maze of figures that you struggle to follow. If you step back, however, the picture becomes clearer. When you step back, all of these vines and flowers blend together to form the frame of a picture. A picture of King David at prayer. Below him are the words of Psalm 6. A prayer for mercy. Above Psalm 6, you see what that prayer looks like in

real life. David is on his knees. Behind him is a throne. A throne that is empty. On the floor is a harp. A harp that is not being played. David, both king and psalmist, is neither ruling nor singing. Instead, he comes before God in prayer. David knows of his sin and he trusts in God's mercy as he tries to serve God's people in this world. If you follow David's eyes, you will see God, above him, in the air. God's right hand is raised in blessing. God's left hand holds the world. In a sense, we see a picture of the mystery of salvation. God who establishes kings and opens the mouths of prophets is the only One who truly rules the world. He has called David to the throne of His people and promised David a descendent who will rule without end. For years, God's people have held on to that promise. And now, in Christ, Paul sees that promise becoming flesh. God's promises, heard by Paul in the Old Testament Scriptures, are no longer a confusing maze. Instead, they have become real in the flesh and blood of Jesus.

God promised that He would bring salvation through Israel, through a descendent of David, and that this salvation would reach to the ends of the earth. Though all nations were disobedient to God, God chose one nation, the people of Israel, to be His people and to bring His message of salvation to earth. When some of those people rejected their Messiah, the descendent of David, did God then reject His plan? No. God continued to be merciful. He called forth all nations to believe in Jesus Christ and to receive the forgiveness of sins. Now, faced with Israel's disobedience, will God forget His mercy? No. Paul lives in hope of an even greater day. A day when his work among the Gentiles might lead Israel, his brothers and sisters in the flesh, into the Church, his brothers and sisters in faith.

Just as the Gentiles were once disobedient and now received mercy, Paul sees a day when the Jews who are now disobedient will be led to repentance and receive God's mercy. God has consigned all to disobedience, both Gentiles and Jews, that He might have mercy upon all, both Gentiles and Jews. Paul thus lives by hope, by a vision of God's salvation gathering Jews and Gentiles together in one body, one church, one new Israel, that holds one faith in one God – Jesus Christ who forgives all people of their sins.

As Paul steps back from the details, he is able to see the big picture and it is a vision of mercy on the part of God. As God comes into this world, He finds disobedience among all nations, but God remains faithful to His promises and works mercy, mercy for all peoples, Jews and Gentiles, in Christ. Though the world be disobedient, God will remain merciful. Merciful to all people who believe in Jesus Christ.

III. Living by God's Promises in Christ:

To live by this vision, however, calls for strength and courage in our world. For several years, in St. Louis, the Roman Catholic archbishop has been participating in a Passover Seder. It is hosted by the Association of Hebrew Catholics, Jews who believe in Jesus as their Messiah and participate in the Roman Catholic church. Each year, Hebrew Catholics and American Catholics gather together around the table and celebrate the Passover, with an eye toward how the promises of this meal were made flesh in Jesus Christ. Every year, however, this meal and table fellowship is greeted with conflict and consternation. Jewish leaders and even some other Christian churches are angered by the event. For them, the Catholic church is overstepping its bounds and seeking to bring about conversion among the Jews.

This is just one example of how God's people in America are called to live by a completely different story. Our American culture prides itself on freedom of religion. People are able to believe what they want to believe. You've seen the bumper stickers that encourage

attendance at the church or synagogue or mosque of your choice. You've seen the bumper stickers that use various symbols of various faiths to spell out the word, "Coexist." The larger vision of these bumper stickers is that there are many paths to God and there are many people and we need to respect and appreciate these various ways to God. If all of the religions would just get along, there would be peace in the land. To practice your own faith is one thing and our American culture will support that. But to speak about your faith, as if it might matter to someone else, well that is a different matter. You can worship God and speak to God however you want, believing God to be whatever you want him or her to be. But to speak to others about God or to act as if your God might have a word that is important to others, well that is considered argumentative, disrespectful of others, stirring up conflict, and in some cases even participating in hate speech. So while our culture will protect your right to worship God as you please, it also protects the rights of others and cautions you to be careful about bringing your God to them.

In such a culture, it would be easy to let everyone practice his or her own faith. They claim that your faith is a personal matter, something that is just between "you and Jesus." The apostle Paul, however, knows differently. To be joined to Christ is to be joined to His mission and God chooses to be at work through His people.

God has a greater story for this world. It is not a story of peace by toleration of various religions. It is story of peace found in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for salvation from sin. All have been disobedient. *"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* (3:23). And yet, God is faithful to His promise to have mercy on all. All *"are justified freely by God's grace through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ"* (3:24). When you come near to Jesus, when you are brought to faith by the power of God in His word, you are then sent near to those who are in need of Jesus, Jews and Gentiles, neighbors and family, as God continues to work out His story of bringing salvation to the ends of the earth.

Conclusion:

I've mentioned the manuscript illumination of Willem Vrelant. But I don't think I ever told you the nature of the work. This is part of a Book of Hours, a personal prayer book. It is designed for the individual Christian to guide him or her in prayer. When turning to Psalm 6, the reader suddenly sees, David. King David. Kneeling before God in penitential prayer. Seeing that picture invites one to start praying. It is a personal, intimate way of reflecting on the promises of God. In a sense, this prayer book mirrors the working of God.

God is in mission to save the world and He does so through intimacy. An intimacy made known in the Old Testament through His words of promise. An intimacy made known in the New Testament as the Word became flesh and Jesus Christ died and rose for our salvation. And an intimacy made known, even today, through God's people as they share with others the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

God's word brings people to life, people like the apostle Paul, and people like you and me. And God's word then reaches out to others through the lives of His people. Each person becomes one more revelation in the flesh of God's mission of mercy in this world.

What conversation is God calling you to have with others? What strange and difficult speech is God calling you to say? It may be bold or it may be quiet. It may be large, like a life-long conversation with your father, or it may be small, like a brief conversation with a stranger on an airplane. But it is God's word at work through His people in the world. Paul reveals to

us that we are a people who live by a proclamation – the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. God is here, today, for you. Forgiving you your sin. And God is here, today, for others, seeking to bring them to the faith. He will not stop. He will not remain silent. He will continue to work through His people. He will work through you, through intimate moments with individual people, to fulfill His vision of bringing all nations into one body, the Church, the new Israel, in Christ. In Jesus' saving name; Amen