

God's Greater Story - Living by God's Proclamation

11th Sun. after Pent. – 08/16/20 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Romans 11:1-2a, 13-15, 28-32 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 31 – [Paul, speaking of Jews and their relationship with God in comparison to the Gentiles to whom he is writing in Rome, says,] **“so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy”**.

Introduction

✘ This morning, we consider Paul's vision; a vision of God's greater Story as it applies to all people, Jews and Gentiles alike with the goal that this vision of salvation for all through faith in Jesus alone will inspire us 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 really important paintings? Or at least how they put a rope in place to prevent people from coming too close to the paintings?

→ It is curator's way of saying to us, “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.

→ But the problem is; art has a way of drawing us in. We find ourselves moving closer and closer to it, examining small details that catch our interest.

✘ The only problem with that approach though is that sometimes we can be too close to the painting so that we lose sight of what it's really about. We've all heard the saying that says, “You can't see the forest for the trees”.

→ Yes, at times we can end up so immersed in the details in the midst of the trees that we can't step back and see the forest; we are prevented from seeing and understanding what is intended – the full picture.

✘ Consider for example a piece of art created by Willem Vrelant, a manuscript illuminator that lived in the 14th century. We've placed it in black and white at the front of our bulletin today (or at the beginning of the Home Worship Materials if you're listening to this online).

→ At first glance, his work is confusing. It's 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 distracted by and drawn to the flowers.

→ Some flowers are deep blue; others are leaved in brilliant gold. In the original, the leaves literally sparkle upon the page. Looking closer, you see two birds and, above them, what look like strawberries. There's so much to see as you trace the maze of vines and flowers, catching a bird here and a berry there.

✘ Something like this can happen as you read this chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans. It's easy to be drawn in by the strangeness of Paul's words. He's discussing the status of Israel in God's plan of salvation.

→ At some points, Paul speaks of the hardening of Israel. He says that the result is 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. If we read just one or two verses up close and out of context, Paul's words can become confusing; can seem contradictory.

→ In fact they have led some theologians to argue that Paul lays a foundation here for anti-Jewish sentiment in the Christian church. Since God has rejected Israel and chosen the Gentile

nations, they think Paul is saying that the church should now live the same way today. Since the Jews had been expelled from Rome and the Gentile church survived, some argued that there was little reason to ever welcome the Jews back into the faith.

✘ Other theologians have used these verses to argue for a future day when God will restore the Jewish people. So they must fight to bring that restoration about before the return of Christ. This concern for Israel even gets expressed in political action today as a misguided belief that Christ cannot return until the Jews are finally brought to confess and believe that He truly is the promised Messiah.

→ So which is it? Has God rejected Israel or not? Will God save Israel or not? These are the questions that arise from the text.

→ Even more troubling, however, is the picture these verses can paint regarding God Himself. Some read them and conclude that God seems unfaithful – one time calling a people to be his own and then rejecting those people only to call another.

→ If God could reject the Jews whom He had “chosen”, what’s to keep Him from rejecting the Gentile church as well? Can God be trusted when He makes promises; when He claims people; whether they are Gentile or Jew or you or me?

II. A Clearer Picture

✘ But Paul knows how confusing this is. And so he works hard to make his main points very clear.

→ First, Paul wants us all to know that God is always faithful to His promises. He has not, nor will He ever, reject Israel. Paul points out that he is an Israelite, so if God rejected Israel, then Paul would be condemned.

→ And that can’t be so since God made such a point of bringing Paul to faith in Jesus Christ and using Paul as His instrument to reach out to the Gentile nations. All of this is God, remaining faithful to His plan. Remember, from one nation – Israel – God promised a Savior for all nations.

→ And now this Jewish guy named Paul believes in Jesus as the Messiah and actively reaches out to spread this good news among the Gentile nations.

✘ But Paul puts the obvious question out in front of us all. Does this mission to the Gentile nations mean that the church should forget about Israel? By no means! This is Paul’s second point: the Christian church today is intended to be a crucial part of God’s mission to His chosen people – the Jews.

→ Paul uses himself again as the example. His ministry to the Gentiles is intended to include efforts that seek to lead Israel back into God’s grace. This is where Paul asks you and me to take a step back from the piece of art so that we can see the larger picture. We too; yes we are part of the larger working of God.

✘ If you stand close and look at Willem Vrelant’s art work, you’ll be captivated by the vines and flowers. If you step back, however, the picture becomes more clear. You see that all of the vines and flowers blend together to form a frame for the picture of King David at prayer.

→ Below him are the words of Psalm 6 – a prayer for mercy. Above Psalm 6, is a picture of what that prayer looks like in real life. David is on his knees; behind him is a throne; an empty throne. On the floor is a harp that is not being played.

→ Here we see that David, both king and musician, is neither ruling nor singing. Instead, he comes before God in humble prayer. David knows well 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 see God, above him, in the air. God’s right hand is raised in blessing while His left hand holds the world.

- This gives us 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 He promised David a descendent who will rule without end. For years, God's people held on to that promise.
- ✘ Now, in Jesus Christ, Paul sees that promise in the 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 He would bring salvation through Israel; through a descendent of David to reach the ends of the earth.
- ✘ Yet all nations were disobedient to God. Verse 32, "God has consigned all to disobedience". So He chose one nation by His mercy and grace – the people of Israel – to be His conduit to bring His message of salvation to earth. But what happened when the majority of Israel rejected their Messiah, the descendent of David? Did God just reject His plan?
 - No. God continued according to His merciful nature. He reached out to all nations, that's what the word "Gentile" means, "the Nations". He granted them faith to believe in Jesus Christ and receive forgiveness of their sins. Now, as He is faced with Israel's disobedience, will God forget His mercy? No. Paul says that he hopes for a greater day; a day when his work among the Gentiles might actually lead his Jewish brothers and sisters into faith in Christ.
- ✘ Paul's premise is founded upon God's unchanging nature. Just as the Gentiles were once disobedient and now have received mercy, Paul looks to a day when the Jews, who are now disobedient in their rejection of Jesus, might be led to repentance and receive God's mercy as well. The entire text of verse 32 says, that "God has consigned all to disobedience", (both Gentiles and Jews) why?... "that He might have mercy upon all, (both Gentiles and Jews).
 - This is the vision of God's greater story, where He desires to gather Jews and Gentiles together into one body; one church; one new Israel with one faith in one God where Jesus forgives all people of their sins.
- ✘ This is where Paul draws us back from the details to show us the picture of our merciful God who comes into this world in His Son. And even as He finds disobedience among the nations, God remains faithful to His promises of mercy for all peoples, Jew and Gentile alike; for all who believe in Jesus Christ.

III. Living by God's Promises in Christ

- ✘ For us Christians here to live by this vision though, requires strength and courage in our world. As an example, in St. Louis, the Roman Catholic archbishop has participated each year in a Passover Seder meal that is hosted by the Association of Hebrew Catholics. These are Jews who now believe Jesus is the Messiah.
 - Every year however, this action of Christian unity angers Jewish leaders and even some Christian churches in the area. They think that the Catholic church is overstepping its bounds and seeking to convert Jews to Christ.
- ✘ But we who are God's people in America are called to live by a different story. Yes, our American culture prides itself on freedom of religion, where people are free to believe what they want to believe.
 - You've all seen the bumper stickers that use the symbols of various faiths to spell out the word, "Coexist" or "Tolerance", right? The intended message of these stickers is to spread the belief that there are many paths leading to the same God and we should not only respect, but actually support all of these various views.

- Well, to practice your own faith is one thing and our American culture is set up to support that. But if you or I speak about our faith, as if it should actually matter to someone else, well that's crossing a line that our culture struggles to accept.
- They say, "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 more important than others; that makes you argumentative; disrespectful of others; stirring up conflict; and in some cases should be labeled as hate speech." So while our culture protects our right to worship God as we please, it also protects the rights of others and cautions us to be careful about trying to bring our God to them.
- ✘ This kind of culture makes it easy for us to just let everyone practice his/her own faith; saying that your faith is just between "you and Jesus".
 - But Paul tells us – that way of thinking is not actually okay with God. To be joined to Christ is to be joined to Christ's mission. And God chooses His people – that's you and me – to be the ones that bring the truth of Jesus as the only way to salvation to all people everywhere.
- ✘ You see, God's greater story is not a story of peace by tolerating all religions as equal ways to God. No, it's the story of peace found in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for salvation from sin.
 - Paul says, all have been disobedient. In Romans 3:23 he says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God". And yet, God is faithful to His promise of mercy for all. As the next verse says, All "are justified freely by God's grace through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ" (3:24).
 - To come near to Jesus through faith in His Word and saving power is to be sent near to those who need that same Jesus; Jews and Gentiles; neighbors and family and friends and co-workers alike.

Conclusion

- ✘ I mentioned the art of Willem Vrelant that we placed in the bulletin today. But I didn't tell you the nature of the work. That painting is part of a Book of Hours, a personal prayer book. It is designed for the individual Christian to guide him/her in prayer.
 - Turning to Psalm 6, the reader sees King David, kneeling before God in penitential prayer. The text of the psalm pictures King David just as we see him in this painting; on his knees before the LORD; confessing the depth of his struggle with sin and evil and calling on the merciful nature of the only true God; his God and Lord.
 - David cries out, "My soul also is greatly troubled. But you, O LORD – how long? Turn, O LORD, deliver my life; save me for the sake of Your steadfast love" (Ps. 6:3-4).
- ✘ And then, confident in God's mercy, not only for himself but for the people of all nations, David actively speaks to the LORD about those around him; about their faith; about their need for God's mercy and forgiveness as well.
 - That's the same conversation God desires to have with you today, my dear Christians. You know that He is at work in your life; forgiving you of your sin. But He also desires to work through you and me, as He did with Paul, to fulfill His vision of bringing all nations into one body; the Church; the new Israel; bringing all nations into Christ and His Greater Story of mercy and eternal salvation. Amen.