

Romans 11:11-21
Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 21, 2010

Romans 11:11-21 (New International Version)

Ingrafted Branches

¹¹Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. ¹²But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring!

¹³I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry ¹⁴in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. ¹⁵For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? ¹⁶If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches.

¹⁷If 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, ¹⁸do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. ¹⁹You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in." ²⁰Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. ²¹For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.

What's your faith story? Who has influenced your spiritual life in a significant way? What challenges have you encountered in your walk of faith? Sharing answers to these questions could yield some interesting discussions. While the details would vary, some themes would surely stand out that are in line with the text before us.

IT'S ALL ABOUT JESUS AND HIS GRACE
I. Look how much God did to bring you in
II. Pray for the conversion of more
III. Remain in Christ

When we think about matters of God's kingdom we realize it's all about Jesus and His grace. Look how much God did to bring you into His family. It took Jesus' entire earthly ministry. God's amazing efforts began with the miracle that we celebrate at Christmas: Jesus became a human being. How the divine and human can be combined into one person is something that we can't fathom, but that's exactly what happened when God sent His Son into our world as the child born to Mary. He is unique in His person but designed exactly as needed to be the Savior of the world.

In this season of Lent we are highly conscious of the suffering and death of the God-man Jesus. He was innocent but served as the substitute for the entire human race in enduring God's anger over sin and the punishment we deserved.

The whole time between His coming in the flesh and that death Jesus was living a sinless life in obedience to God's law. Never once did He commit a wrong in thought or word or action. Nor did He ever fail to do the good that God requires. He achieved the righteousness that God's law demands of us and has given us full credit. God looks at us as holy, just as if we had done it all ourselves. Removing sin and providing holiness makes us welcome in God's heaven eternally. That's what Jesus has done in His grace.

The message of His ministry brings its benefit to you personally. The Holy Spirit works by His divine power in your heart through that message. He overcomes the natural rejection we all have and

grants us the spiritual sight to see Jesus as our Savior, a greater miracle each time it happens than having vision granted as we heard about last week. In this way the blind truly see.

The Lord saw that the message of the Savior got to you. God's people share the good news of Jesus. It didn't always happen but His intent, even in the Old Testament times, was that Israel would influence the world around them. In fact, many of those very people that were to be His chosen ones rejected Jesus when He came. The opening verse stated that they stumbled. It was more than a slight hiccup in their step. They crashed on the Rock that was Christ. The parable that Jesus told in today's gospel reading portrayed their rejection vividly. They even killed the Son of God. Although it creates controversy when a reenactment or movie is made, the crowd told Pilate as he washed his hands of the matter and gave in to their murderous desire for Jesus, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!"

Such rejection continued during Paul's preaching. He routinely started in the Jewish synagogue when he entered a city. Repeatedly he met opposition so he moved on to the Gentiles. God used their rejection for the spread of His Word. The Gospel went out to wider areas, reached many people, and still is doing so, all over the world.

Global good does not always touch each individual, just as signs of economic recovery are of no benefit to you if you are still unemployed. God has brought His message to you or is doing so today. Jesus lived and died for you. He is your Savior. It is all about grace. Each one of us was born lost in sin, with no interest in God. For many of us, God's gracious plan had us born into a Christian family who brought us to baptism at an early age. He planted faith in our hearts then and has nurtured it ever since. We are thankful that we do not even remember being lost. Some of those who were thus brought to Jesus later spent time straying from Him. You know the lack of God's peace and the meaningless existence of wallowing in the depths of sin. You are glad that He used someone or something to wake you up and call you back to faith. Others came to know Jesus later in life. The Lord directed the right people into your path who shared the good news of Jesus with you. You were "lost but now are found." Whatever the path of your past, it was all grace and all Jesus that you were brought into His family.

II.

So we rejoice and thank God. Knowing that joy we pray for the conversion of more. That was the reason Paul made much of his ministry. He worked hard. You can follow his missionary journeys in the book of Acts or read in his epistles the recaps of what he suffered for the gospel. He labored zealously and tirelessly. He made personal sacrifices in order to win as many as possible for the Lord. He knew how God had rescued him from his past as a persecutor of Christians and wanted more people to share similar joy.

He mentioned another motive here for his hard work. "Salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious," and, "I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them." He wanted to win lots of Gentiles and trumpet those successes and their joy in the Savior to provoke in some Jews the desire to get in on the action. His countrymen were not all lost forever. God does not give up that easily. So keep working and praying for the conversion of more.

Salvation happens on an individual basis. No one can believe for you. The only way a person is saved is by believing in Jesus Christ. He died for all but not all will automatically be in heaven. Some people look for a mass conversion of the Jews. The Bible doesn't teach that. Paul was more realistic: he hoped to "save some of them." His reference to the fullness meant all of the elect ones.

If the strategy of arousing his fellow Jews worked, what a blessing it would be! Their rejection brought good for the Gentiles and amazing growth to the Christian Church. Visualize how tremendous it would be to bring former enemies of Christ into His fold.

There is no preference by nationality. The angels in heaven rejoice over the repentant sinner regardless of his or her ethnic background. Jesus came for everyone. In Him, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free." We are blended into one, all because of Jesus and His grace.

The way is the same for each one. So we need to get the message of Jesus and His grace out. Pray for the conversion of more people. Work to make it happen: be prepared to serve as God's mouthpiece in speaking to others. Support the work that is carried out in your name by our congregation in our community and by our church body in wider reaches of our nation and world. It is a privilege to be part of this exciting work and the saving of souls.

III.

Since He is the key it is important to remain in Christ as you were grafted in. Branches were broken off, Paul noted. They were unproductive. Those were his own people who rejected the Savior. They were not part of the true Israel. In their places wild olive shoots were grafted in. Are you familiar with the process of grafting? I'm not a horticulturist, but I remember learning that it is possible, with the right sizes and cuts, to bind two branches and they will grow together. That's what happened when God brought Gentiles to faith and into His family. Now the sap comes and nourishes all the branches, the remaining Jews and the Gentiles.

The Apostle sounded a warning as he spoke of these matters. The Gentiles should not consider themselves superior. Remember what you were: wild olive branches, not part of the tree. The roots of our faith are Jewish. Obviously our Savior Jesus was. Abraham, the father of believers, and the patriarchs Isaac and Jacob headed the family line from which Jesus came. There is no room for anti-Semitism among Christians. Know and appreciate Old Testament history. Your understanding of God's plan of salvation and of the New Testament will be enriched. The branches do not support the roots but just the opposite.

There's another warning here. What was the problem of the Jewish people? Unbelief. They rejected Jesus and His saving work. Some relied on their nationality rather than on the One promised to their nation. Many factors can cause the same stumbling in us: reliance on ourselves and our own perceived goodness, our heritage based on faithful family members or a church body that holds to God's truth, our great learning so we think we know more than God or that we at least know enough that we don't need any more instruction in the Word. Watch out for such tendencies in your thinking!

Instead, take in the Lord's nourishing sap, His gospel message. Worship the Savior regularly on weekends and in our midweek opportunities. Even if we are well-versed in Scripture, you and I daily sin. We need the constant reassurance of forgiveness God provides in His Word and sacraments to renew our hope and strengthen our faith. Study His Word daily at home and in groups with your fellow believers. You will grow in faith.

You will also be ready to battle the challenges that Satan brings to your faith. They occur daily and could pull you away. Be ever on guard, for the attacks come from a variety of angles. One day a certain temptation may not pose a problem. The next it can knock your feet out from under you. The Spirit works with divine power through the message of Jesus and His grace to keep you firm in faith.

Jesus saves. He saves completely. Find security in Him. Rejoice in His grace. Reach out with that grace and live in trust always.