

St. Timothy's Lutheran Church
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November 4, 2018
Romans 11:13 – 32

A Promised Graft

The morning of Saturday, October 27th, a man walked into a Jewish synagogue and ended the lives of 11 people. His concern was to eliminate “invaders,” who would *bring* violence because they had *left* countries of violence.¹ *His* solution was violence and death.

Our world is *so broken*. We want to *prevent* violence, so we *commit* violence. We hate the haters. And use violent rhetoric against those who do not think or believe like us. We believe that the world needs to be like *us* – only tolerant or only with conservative morals. All others ought to be done away with, because they are dangerous to the world. Those who disagree need to be shut down or shut out – eliminated. We have become the judge of our neighbor, determining if they are worthy of life...or of death.

In 2016, the FBI stated that more than 1 in 5 hate crimes were prompted by religious bias. Out of those 1,500 offenses, more than *half* were anti-Jewish. *More than half of the religious hate crimes in the U.S. were anti-Jewish in 2016*. This number was more than hate crimes against Muslims, Catholics, or any other religious group. And in 2017, there was a 57% increase in anti-Semitic incidents. “Saturday’s attack in Pittsburgh comes after a year that has seen a sharp uptick in bomb threats, anti-Semitic rallies, social media threats and spray painted swastikas on synagogues targeted at Jewish-Americans.”²

How our world groans, *cries*, for the end of this hatred and violence, and looks toward the day when God will redeem all things.³

At the time Paul wrote to the church in Rome, local attitudes toward the Jews were antagonistic. In Acts 18:2, we read about the Jews being expelled from Rome under Emperor Claudius.

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/27/us/synagogue-attack-suspect-robert-bowers-profile/index.html>

² <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/pittsburgh-shooting-highlights-rise-hate-crimes-united-states/>

³ Romans 8:22.

At the time of Paul's letter, the Jews had been recently let back into Rome. And "many ordinary people in Rome distrusted and disliked the Jews and sneered at them."⁴

The church in Rome consisted of both converted Jews *and* Gentiles, and Paul wants to make something *very clear* to the Christian Gentiles in chapter 11. The Christian Gentiles are *not* better than the Jews. Yes, it is true that Paul has become an apostle to the Gentiles, but this does *not* mean that Paul does not care about his own people nor that God has neglected His covenant people, the Jews.

Paul provides an example of an olive tree. Common farming practice of the day was to graft a shoot of a cultivated olive tree onto a wild tree. The *wild* tree had been strong, but not producing good fruit, so "the gardener [would] take that energy and harness it, by grafting shoots cuts from a proper, cultivated olive tree into the trunk of the wild olive tree...combining the *energy* of the wild tree and the *fruitfulness* of the cultivated one."⁵ *Cultivated shoots were grafted onto wild trees.*

And Paul reverses this common analogy. He says that instead of the cultivated tree being grafted onto the wild tree, the wild tree has been grafted onto the cultivated tree. Meaning, the Gentiles, the wild tree, are not the beginning, the host. The Gentiles are *not* the beginning of something entirely new. The Church in which they are a part, is rooted in God's promise to the Jews from long ago.

In verse 14, Paul writes that he makes much of his ministry to the Gentiles in the hope that he may somehow arouse his own people to *envy* and to save some of them. Perhaps for some of you parents or teachers, this may sound like a reverse psychology tactic. "I know you *really* don't want to be nice to your brother. That would mean that you are ready to grow up and be a big boy." "I know you *really don't* want that broccoli. That would mean that you will be strong and healthy." This is similar to what Paul is doing here! Some of the Jews did not accept Jesus as the Savior and Son of God. But, if the *Gentiles* believe that he is, maybe the *Jews* will become jealous and come to faith.

⁴ N.T. Wright, *Romans Part 2*, 56.

⁵ Wright, 54.

We see this jealousy *often* in Scripture, with siblings. Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob, Joseph and his ten brothers – each of these stories shows a younger brother who receives God’s blessing. “Israel as a whole is now in the position of the older brother; the Gentile Christians (joining the minority of Jews who have accepted the gospel) are in the position of the younger brother. This is *bound* to cause jealousy...But...this jealousy...can become a motive which will propel...more Jews into faith and salvation. And [Paul claims] that this was the reason God allowed it to happen in the first place.”⁶

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

God made a promise, a covenant, with Abraham through the line of his son Isaac. This covenant would be an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.⁷ God would make them into a great nation and would bless them. He would make their name great and they would be a blessing. He would bless those who blessed them, and curse whoever cursed them; and all peoples on earth would be blessed *through them*.⁸ This everlasting covenant God did not break. God did *not* reject His people.⁹

Paul uses himself as an example of the promise – an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin.¹⁰ Martin Luther wrote, “If God had cast away his people, then above all he would have cast away the apostle Paul who fought against him with all his strength.”¹¹ Paul writes in verse 5, that “at the present time there is a remnant (of Israel) chosen by grace.” The remnant remained on the

⁶ Wright, 47 – 48.

⁷ Genesis 17:19b.

⁸ Genesis 12:2 – 3.

⁹ Romans 11:1a.

¹⁰ Romans 11:1b.

¹¹ James Edwards, *Romans*, 261.

trunk of the olive tree by grace and not by works. Others were hardened because of their unbelief and disobedience, and were cut off from the tree. Because these branches were cut off from the tree, others were able to be grafted in. These new, wild shoots have been grafted onto the cultivated tree, not because of anything *they* did to deserve this grafting. These new, wild shoots have been grafted in because of God's grace. The cultivated branches which have been cut off, if "they do not persist in unbelief...will be grafted in...After all, if [the wild shoots] 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!"¹² Believing Israel is the cultivated tree, and Gentiles have been grafted in. Other Jews who believe in Jesus as Lord, will be grafted back onto the tree.

This was God's plan all along. The plan was to choose a people, to then bless the world, and to choose *them*. Salvation would come *through* Israel to save the world. And in Jesus the *Jew*, salvation has come to all who believe.

It is all because of God's mercy. The Israelites were chosen because of God's mercy. Some were hardened so that the Gentiles could be grafted in. In God's mercy, Gentiles were grafted in. And in His mercy, "all Israel will be saved."¹³

But what does it mean, in verse 26, that "all Israel will be saved"? Does this mean all Jews, whether they believe in Jesus or not, the Jewish nation, or something else? In Romans chapter 9 verses 6 – 8, Paul writes that "not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children...In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the *promise* who are regarded as Abraham's offspring." *All Israel* "means all the family of Abraham – and that includes believing Gentiles as well as believing Jews."¹⁴

¹² Romans 11:23 – 24.

¹³ Romans 11:25b.

¹⁴ Wright, 60.

This is how *all Israel* will be saved. Some Jews have believed, and some have become hardened. Those hardened have been cut off, allowing for Gentiles to be grafted in. Unbelieving branches will be cut off and believing branches will be grafted in, Jew and Gentile. And this is God's grace. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works. So that no one can boast."¹⁵

You and I are nearly 2,000 years removed from Paul. We are far from the first century Church and her issues between Jew and Gentile Christians. But we are *not* far from her arrogance. It is *easy* to believe that the Church began 2,000 years ago and that God chose us because we are *not* Jews. But this is not so! You and I are *not* more special than any other group. You are a sinner, as I am, chosen and forgiven by God's grace. God will have mercy on *all* people, and will continue to soften hearts and graft others in. "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen."¹⁶

Rabbi Jonathan Miller wrote a poignant reflection after last Saturday's events in Pittsburgh. "The words we use define our reality. And hateful words lead to hateful actions...The words we use shape the reality of the world in which we live.

"The Bible tells us that God's very first action was the act of speech. God created light and darkness. All that followed came into being by the power of God's speech. Speech, our own uttered and intentional thoughts, define the way we see the world and react to it.

"People who say, 'I love you' act with love. People who say, 'I hate you' act with hate. Speech comes first. Speech *creates* reality.

¹⁵ Ephesians 2:8 – 9.

¹⁶ Romans 11:33 – 36.

“The Gospel of John in the Christian Bible echoes the book of Genesis. It opens by declaring that in the beginning was the word. The word was with God. The word was God. And then...the word [became] flesh.

“The Gospel writer was all too wise. Flesh grows around the words we use. And we are seeing the incarnation of hate in the hateful speech which permeates America...

“In the Jewish liturgy, when we come to our silent devotion, we begin by asking God to guard our speech and keep us from evil thoughts. The sages who came before me knew that our thoughts and our speech could become tangible in our lives, in our flesh, and in the way we see and treat others.”¹⁷

Dear Church, God has called you, not because of anything *you* have done, but because of *His* *grace*. God will continue to graft *others* into this olive tree. Your words have the power to bring life and to bring death. May God guard your speech and guide your thoughts. Amen.

¹⁷ Glenn McDonald, *Morning Reflection*, 10/29/18.