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Pentecost XI & Proper 14
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Text: Romans 10:5 – 17
Title: People With A Purpose

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. The famous artist, Salvador Dali, painted a depiction of the crucifixion called Christ of Saint John of the Cross. You might have seen it before. You see Jesus, hanging on the cross, over the world, and you are situated above the cross, looking down upon Jesus, who Himself is looking down upon the world. The artist attempts to give you God's view as He looks down upon the fallen world and He sees it through the eyes of His Son Jesus, dying on the cross, for all people.

This vision is hard, even for Christians to see. As we look at the world, we see the fabric of God's creation tearing apart at the seams. Same sex marriage, divorce, and couples living together before marriage have altered God's plan of one man and one woman for one lifetime. The killing of children in the womb for convenience and yet the ardent fight to preserve endangered species speaks of a world that has lost its moral compass. Rather than valuing all life, our world only values some of life, particularly if it isn't human. Seeing the poor look for shelter while others have multiple houses makes one want to leave this world, wait for the Last Day.

How easy it is for us to enter church and turn our eyes upward to the cross and leave the world behind. But Jesus invites us to see the world through His cross, living in God's mission of Love. This is the vision the apostle Paul was inviting Christians in Rome and Christians today to see. God has called us to be part of His people for His purpose of reaching out to the ends of the earth with Christ's saving Love. This morning, as we reflect on today's text from Romans, we will consider two details of Paul's vision of the people of God. We are people saved by grace, and we are people involved in God's mission.

One of the odd things about Dali's depiction of the crucifixion is the body of Jesus. If you look closely at his painting, you will notice that Jesus hangs on the cross without any nails piercing His hands or feet. His body is on the cross, but there is nothing visible holding Him to it. For some it looks like the artist denies the pain and suffering of Jesus. But for others there is a deep spiritual insight in that painting.

When Jesus was crucified, we nailed Him to the cross. His own people tried Him, found Him guilty of blasphemy, and rejected their God. And we would do the same if He came today. There is no doubt that God Himself was rejected by His people and hung upon the cross to die. But that is not the only reason Jesus hung upon the cross. He could have delivered Himself, if He wanted to. Remember in Gethsemane how Peter drew his sword to try to protect Jesus? He told Peter, "Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?" When Jesus hung on the cross, the religious leaders taunted Him. They called for Him to come down from the cross and save Himself if He were truly God. But Jesus stayed on the cross, not because He *couldn't* get down, but because He *wouldn't* get down. Jesus stayed on the cross because He didn't come to save Himself. He came to save you. It was the pure love of God that led Jesus to that cross and held Him there – offering His sinless life for the sins of the whole world. Jesus hanging on the cross without nails is not a realistic picture of what happened at the crucifixion, but it is a true picture of what happened on that day. God, in Jesus Christ, willingly gave His life for you and for the whole world. St. Paul understands this. Salvation comes to us purely by grace. It is only by the love of God poured out for us in Jesus Christ that we are saved. We are part of God's greater people, saved by grace.

As Paul proclaims this truth to the Roman Christians, he does so by revisiting a familiar text for God's people. Paul turns to Deuteronomy 9, the record of covenant renewal among God's people. They are on the edge of the Promised Land, and after 40 years they are about to

enter it. But before they do, God renews His covenant with them. And God warns the people of Israel about how they should view this moment. Moses says, “Do not say in your heart... ‘It is because of my righteousness that the Lord has brought me in to possess this land’ ... Know...the Lord your God is not giving you this good land because of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people.” Here, Moses tells them to look at their past. They were a stubborn people and didn’t earn the Promised Land by their own righteousness. At the end of that account, God prophesies to the people of Israel of a time when they will depart from Him and be exiled from their land. Then God will come in His mercy. They will repent and God will bring about a restoration. Here, Moses asks them to see their future which lies only in the mercy of God.

It is the vision of this future that Paul quotes here. Only as Paul quotes this vision, he adds his own words for emphasis. He wants us to see the love of God, freely given for all people in Christ. St. Paul writes, “...the righteousness based on faith says, ‘Do not say in your heart “Who will ascend into heaven”’ (that is to bring Christ down) or “Who will descend into the abyss?”’ (that is to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart.”’ (that is the word of faith that we proclaim).” For Paul, the day of restoration had come to God’s people in Jesus Christ, and it had come purely by God’s grace. With these words, Paul reaches out to his fellow Jews and invites them to join with the Roman Gentile Christians in confessing salvation in Jesus Christ, by grace, through faith. At the heart of God’s covenant lies not what *we do* for salvation, but *what God does for us*. We are saved not because we are a mighty or particularly holy people. No, we are stubborn and rebellious sinners before God. But we are saved by God’s mercy made known for us in Jesus Christ. At the heart of God’s restoration of all things lies the work of God in Jesus. He came down from heaven; He died; and He rose again that we might be forgiven and be part of God’s people who live by grace through faith.

As Paul offers a vision of life in the Promised Land, he helps us see Jesus. But he also helps us see Jesus at work through his people in the world. Notice how Paul doesn't limit the Promised Land to a small piece of ground in Israel. No, the Promised Land includes the whole world. When Paul continues writing, he reveals this world-encompassing mission of God. "For the Scripture says, 'Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.' For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'" Paul emphasizes everyone. All people. Jew and Gentile. God brings His salvation to the ends of the earth.

For Paul, that mission of God is not something that merely hangs there in the sky. No, Paul brings that mission of God down to earth into the very mouths of God's people. Paul asks a series of questions to which the answers are obvious: "But how are they to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!'" God brings people into His kingdom through the word of faith that His people proclaim.

Paul understands that he is part of this mission. He knows this truth about God's greater story. When God brings people into His kingdom, He brings them into His mission that extends to the ends of the earth. God gives every person a confession of faith, a word of faith that when spoken touches others with the power of God. Paul writes that the gospel of God "is the power of salvation to all who believe." Paul wants all of God's people to know that you have a purpose, a purpose in God's kingdom. God uses you in His mission to share with others the good news.

Dali's painting reminds us of this work of God. There, in the heights of heaven, is the cross with Jesus offering His life for the world, and below Him is the world extending into the distance. This love of God will reach to the ends of the earth. The question is how will God make

His saving love known to the world? At the bottom of the picture, you see two men, going about their task of fishing near a boat. Nothing would set them apart from others as God's special instruments. But that is what happens in the ministry of Jesus. He comes and calls plain fishermen to follow Him. These men are not sent to learn from famous speakers but called to live with Jesus. To listen to Him, and to witness what He has done. Jesus then gathers these men together on Pentecost and sends His Holy Spirit to them and they are sent out to bring the Good News of salvation to the ends of the earth.

This work of Jesus, sending His Spirit to speak through His people, was not limited only to the apostles. As persecution arose in Jerusalem, believers were scattered, and they carried the Good News with them, even to Rome. They were probably simple statements of faith. But through their simple words, God's work of mission was done. And through your simple words, His work is done today. You don't need special training to speak of what God has done for you. As Paul writes, "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart." God has called and chosen you to be His people who live by His promise and live for His purpose, His mission to bring salvation to the ends of this earth.

Paul sees that in Christ God has fulfilled His promises to Abraham. Through this one nation, God has brought salvation to all the nations of the earth. Through His son Jesus Christ, God has offered a love that encompasses all people.

Today, Paul asks us to stand here, and see Jesus. But we don't just see Jesus. No, Paul changes our perspective so that we see Jesus at work through His people bringing salvation to the very ends of the earth. Paul's vision catches your breath and causes you to cry out with wonder: "how beautiful . . . how beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.