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Pentecost XII & Proper 15
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Text: Romans 11:1-2a, 13-14, & 28-32
Title: People Who Live By God's Proclamation

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. In American Christianity, Romans 11 is often torn apart. You can find bits and pieces of it scattered about on the Internet speaking about the end times and the restoration of Israel. These verses are joined to prophecies from Daniel and Ezekiel, and images from Revelation. They are joined to apocalyptic predictions and news headlines about wars and rumors of wars in the Holy Land and anywhere else. With strong language and even stronger fervor, various Christian organizations fight for the nation of Israel. They claim that once Israel is restored the Lord will return, and usually in the background, scattered among the bible verses and visions, are verses from Romans 11. It seems fitting, then, that today's text doesn't look at the entire chapter but just certain verses. This is how Romans 11 is most frequently read – a verse here and a verse there in the midst of arguments about politics and power and the Christian supposed role in ruling the nations of this world...all in the name of Christ and for the sake of His return.

Is this what St. Paul intended, though? Is this how confused he wanted the church to be? Not likely. This morning, we'll consider Paul's vision of God's greater work for all people, Jews and Gentiles who are in Christ. St. Paul sees God's Will for us to live as one people united in God's mission for His creation.

I'm sure you've heard the old saying of a person who "can't see the forest for the trees." It describes a person who is so immersed in the trees, they can't step back and see the entire forest they are a part of. Being immersed in the details of a situation or an argument sometimes prevents you from seeing the larger picture.

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, Paul's words can become confusing.

Some theologians argue that Paul's writing lays the foundation for anti-Jewish sentiment. 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. They have little reason to welcome back their brothers and sisters in the faith. Other theologians have used these verses to argue that God will restore the Jewish people and that that restoration will be a prelude to the return of Christ. This concern for Israel gets expressed in political action and becomes a way in which Christians can speed up the return of Christ by their own work.

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 for other people. 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?

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 plans and promises. From one

nation, Israel, God promised a Savior for all nations. Now, Paul, a Jew, understands Jesus as this Savior 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? Of course not! And this is Paul's second point. The church is part of God's mission to His chosen people. Again, Paul uses himself as an example. His ministry to the Gentiles is a part of leading Israel back to God's grace. And here is where Paul asks us to take a step back to see the bigger picture. Paul sees himself and his ministry as part of the larger working of God.

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 when his work with the Gentiles might lead Israel, his brothers and sisters in the flesh, into the Church, his brothers and sisters in the Christian 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. So, Paul lives by hope with a vision of God's salvation gathering Jews and Gentiles together into 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 God's infinite mercy. As God comes into this world, He finds disobedience among all nations,

but God remains faithful to His promises and works His mercy for all peoples, Jews and Gentiles, who are in Christ. Though the world will be disobedient, God will remain merciful to all people who believe in His Son, Jesus Christ.

To live by this vision, however, calls for strength and courage. This world is no friend to Christ or to Christians, just look at the reaction the world has against someone like Charlie Kirk who publicly spoke out about his Christ faith. God's people are called to live by a completely different story in this world. Our nation prides itself on freedom of religion. People are able to believe what they want to believe or so we say. You might see a bumper sticker that encourages attendance at the church of your choice. You've seen the bumper stickers that spell out the word, "Coexist." These bumper stickers say there are many paths to God, and we need to respect and appreciate each one. If all the religions would just get along, there would be peace. To practice your own faith is one thing. But to speak about your faith in public, as if it might matter to someone else, well that's a different matter. You can worship God and speak to God however you want. You can believe God to be whatever you want God to be. But to speak to others about God or to say your faith is right, well that is considered argumentative, disrespectful, and in some cases even considered hate speech. While our culture will protect your right to worship God as you please, it also protects the rights of others, and cautions you about bringing God to them.

In such a culture, it would be easy to let everyone practice his or her own faith. 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 and for His people.

God has a greater story for this world. It is not a story of peace by toleration of various religions. It is a 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 are brought to faith by the power of God in Christ and 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 to bring salvation to the ends of the earth.

God is in mission to save the world and He does so through His Son. Jesus was made known in the Old Testament through His words of promise. He is made known in the New Testament as the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ who died and rose for our salvation. And He is made known through God’s people as they share with others the words that bring faith. God’s Word brings people to life, people like St. Paul, and people like you and me. 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, or it may be small, like a brief conversation with a stranger. 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 the sharing of salvation in Jesus. God is here, today, for you, forgiving your sins. And God is here, for others, seeking to bring them to faith in Him. He will not stop. He will not remain silent. He will continue to work through His people. He will work through you, through moments with individual people, to fulfill His vision of bringing all nations into one body, His Church, His new Israel, in Christ. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.