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Pentecost XIII & Proper 16
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Text: Romans 11:33 – 12:8
Title: God's Greater Plan for You – Transformed for Service

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Today's Scripture readings invite us to be people who see the earth overflowing with heaven, to see how God in Christ has come down from heaven and touched the earth filling it with His Glory. In the Old Testament reading we have a vision from Isaiah. The prophet writes to a future people suffering in exile, and he reveals for them a world crammed full of heaven. "Look," he cries. And there, he reveals the wonder of God. One family, Abraham and Sarah, touched by God's grace and the source of God's blessing for all nations of the world. You see the Lord's Glory spread as He multiplies descendants for Abraham, extending His blessing from one family to all nations just as He promised that He would. Isaiah promises that the wasteland of Jerusalem, the city that is devastated, will experience rebirth and blossom like the Garden of Eden. Songs of sorrow will become shouts of joy. God's salvation will go forth and, though heaven and earth pass away, God's righteousness will remain. His salvation will endure forever.

Then in the Gospel reading, we find Caesarea Philippi overflowing with heaven. Jesus has led His disciples north, far above the Sea of Galilee to an ancient place that has served as a pagan worship site throughout history. Baal was worshipped by the Canaanites, and then the god, Pan by the Greeks. With the Romans, Caesar was worshipped. As cultures changed, so did the worship there. But now, Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God there. He knows that Jesus is the Creator of all things, who has promised to bring salvation to the ends of the earth, and He has now come to live and walk among His people. Peter confesses Jesus the Christ, the Son of the One true God.

What Isaiah prophesies in the Old Testament, what Peter confesses in the Gospel is what St. Paul celebrates as he writes to the Christians in Rome. Paul has seen earth filled with heaven, and in these few verses he shares with us that life-transforming vision. Today we'll look at Paul's vision and see how it transforms our lives for service in God's world. Paul has seen a brilliant vision, the glorious work of God, extending to all nations, and then, when Paul looks at the people of Rome, he sees them in a different way.

Listen to the wonder of Paul at the beginning of our text. He is in awe at God's story of salvation fulfilled in the world. He writes, "O the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are his judgments and inscrutable his ways!" (11:33). Paul has seen a vision of the end of the story. The restoration of all people in the church, God's New Israel. That vision is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy from today's Old Testament reading. The prophet Isaiah writes of "joy and gladness" of "thanksgiving and song." He promises that when "the ransomed of the Lord will return and come to Zion . . . everlasting joy shall be upon their heads" and "sorrow and sighing shall flee away." St. Paul sees the same day described by Isaiah, when God brings about a gathering of all nations, Jew and Gentile, into His church, and Paul's sorrow turns into singing and praise and thanksgiving for the Glory of God.

Then Paul turns his eyes to the church in Rome. Now, the Roman Christians would not have been glorious to the world around them. Not many of them were rich or powerful. They gathered together in small house churches. Their lives were a far cry from the glories of Rome much less the glories of heaven. Yet St. Paul looks at these people and he sees earth filled with heaven, and he writes so that they join him in celebrating the wonders of God.

Paul writes, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." The

sacrificial worship of God's people, that glory of the temple in Jerusalem, is transformed in Christ. God's people become living sacrifices, outside the temple, outside Jerusalem, hidden inside the small house churches gathering in the heart of the Roman Empire. These are God's people, transformed into sacrifices, living, holy, and acceptable to God. St. Paul knew that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ put an end to the temple sacrifices. Christ's death is the perfect sacrifice. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. By Christ's sacrifice, God's people were freed from offering animal sacrifices for sins. By Christ's sacrifice, we are freed to become living sacrifices of praise and service in the world.

As Paul looks at the people in Rome, he sees a reflection of God's glory. They are the body of Christ, at work in the world, and St. Paul sees the gifts of the Spirit in them – prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, contribution, leadership, and mercy. Not only does God freely forgive all sins but He also freely bestows all gifts, so that His people have a purpose and a place in the greater story. God has a greater plan for each faithful person in His salvation story, and this is the vision Paul sees. It stirs his heart and opens his mouth with praise. Earth is overflowing with heaven as God gathers His people and transforms them for service in the world. But the problem is that we so often fail to see this vision of God at work in our lives.

For the apostle Paul, there was some concern that the Roman Christians would take pride in their status and gifts for service. Paul warns them, "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone not to think of himself more highly than he ought." God's people, today, however, often have the opposite problem. Ask a fellow Christian how God works among His people, and see what they say. Often, we'll point to the service of others rather than confess God's work through our lives. Often, we'll point to moments set apart for worship, rather than confess God's work throughout the rest of the week.

For example, some will point to the pastor of the congregation. He is God's servant, the one the Holy Spirit has called through God's people to serve in their midst. That's right, but God's work is not limited to just the pastor. Give it some more thought and you may name a few other members who are older and faithful. We'll think about those who have gone before us. And soon our mind drifts from the present to the past and then we begin to speak of how God once worked among His people. Great figures of the faith come to mind. We talk about what God did through His servant Martin Luther or the rich music of Bach. We see and celebrate God's gifts to the church, how He calls, gathers, enlightens, and equips members for service in a particular time and place. But turn from the past to the present, and the vision changes. The glory fades until we only see a very small group of people serving God. Our vision is nowhere near the inclusive all-embracing celebration of Isaiah's prophecy or of St. Paul's writing.

Listen to the apostle Paul. He invites you...today...to trust in God's promises and to experience His greater plan for you. God has brought about your salvation in Jesus Christ. He has offered the perfect sacrifice that takes away your sin. It forgives your blindness and opens your eyes to see and your lives to celebrate the working of God. God does more than work in the lives of others. He works in your life...for others...in this world. This is why Paul starts to name gifts – actions such as teaching, service, leadership, mercy. The list is not complete, but Paul names these things so you can see how God is at work in your life. Paul invites you today to be transformed by the renewal of your mind, and he encourages you to test and discern God's good and gracious will in your life with God's Word.

You may devote your life to caring for cattle or tending the earth that brings food to the table. This stewardship of creation is a gift from God. Not all are called to such service, but God in Christ has called you and equipped you for this work. You may teach the faith to your kids.

Not in formal classes with tables and books, but in the car as you drive your son to practice and talk about the challenges to faith, or at the nursing home, as you visit their grandpa and you offer to pray with him. Parenting is a gift from God. Not all people are called to such service, but God in Christ, has called you and equipped you for this work.

Martin Luther taught us to see the marvelous expanse of the mercies of God, working through us in our different vocations. To live in God's mercy is to enter the world and discover God at work in our everyday lives. He transforms us for service.

St. Paul calls us to see the glory of God, hidden in the lives of His people, in self-sacrificial service on earth. Our world would have us conform to its ways. Seek glory and power by gaining things for ourselves. In the ways of our world, religion can become one more tool we use to make ourselves better. Claiming the power of God to gain glory on earth. But God's ways are different. Humble. Hidden. Sacrificial. Selfless. In a world attracted to glory and power, St. Paul asks you to see God's greater plan for you. You have been joined to the Body of Christ. You are made part of His people by the forgiveness of your sins. And Paul now invites you, in view of God's mercies, to no longer be conformed to this world but to be transformed for service. To live by giving rather than gaining. By service to all rather than selfishness.

In this way, the church is a reflection of the glory of Christ. It reveals the ways of God in the world. We are the Body of Christ, drawn into His public ministry. Our lives are monuments of His self-sacrificial love. Each life touched by the hand of God. Your life joined to the ministry of Christ. "A living sacrifice, holy, and acceptable to God." Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.