



St. Paul Lutheran Church

“Your Refuge from the Storm”

LifeGroup

February 18, 2024

Romans 11:13-24

Community

Welcome each other and spend some time catching up.

SERIES SUMMARY

As we enter the season of Lent, this series will take us through Jesus’ early ministry – teachings, healings, miracles, parables – and into the drama of Holy Week. In John 15, Jesus tells us that he is the true vine and we are the branches. We are grafted into Christ, and he is our source of life and nourishment. Because we are grafted into Christ, this Lenten journey is our journey and his death is our death. His life is our life; life “on the vine.”

TODAY’S THEME

How do you turn a wild olive tree into one that bears fruit? We are grafted into the historic, cultivated root of God’s first people in order that we would bear fruit for God’s kingdom.

WHAT DO WE WANT OUR SMALL GROUP TO KNOW?

Paul tells us that, while the mystery of God is much bigger than our understanding, what is known is that faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ grafts us into the vine of God’s promise. Holy roots make holy branches, not the other way around. One cannot become holy apart from the root. It is the root’s work to make the branches holy. So what do holy branches do? They bear fruit.

WHAT DO WE WANT OUR SMALL GROUP TO DO?

We want our small group participants to bear fruit in the kingdom of God. We need to help one another identify specific ways in which we can bear fruit.

ICEBREAKER

Have you ever toured a vineyard or winery? Describe your experience.

PRAY TOGETHER

God, from the beginning of time you called your people in mercy to serve your purposes. This calling is not because of our ancestry, birthright, or any human worthiness on our part. We are grafted into you in order that we would bear fruit in your kingdom. You are the source of life and love. You are holy. All good things flow from you and we are connected to your vine of promise. We give you thanks and praise. Amen.

Content *(Ideas from this section were taken from The Letters of Paul by Charles B. Cousar, Abingdon Press.)*

God has always called people in the same way – in mercy – to serve God’s purposes. Ancestry, birthright and human worthiness have not been the deciding factor. God calls the Gentiles (Romans 9:6-29) just as he called the Israelites. How is it that, in general, the Gentiles were the ones responding to the gospel instead of the Jews? In Paul’s opinion, the Jews didn’t see that the scriptures pointed to a message of faith, making salvation accessible to everyone. Israel has mistaken God’s faithfulness for

partiality (Romans 9:30 – 10:21).

Had God rejected Israel? No, Israel remained God's people. But the fact that some Jews temporarily stumbled had a positive function. The stumbling opened up the potential for reaching the Gentile world, and the subsequent inclusion of the Gentiles.

In the end, all of Israel will be saved (Romans 11:1-32). Paul's echo of Old Testament texts underscores Paul's deliberate connection with God's promise to Israel. Paul is not calling for a displacement of Judaism. The inclusion of the Gentiles confirms the intentions of God. The church is not the church apart from the people of Israel. Israel remains the object of God's love and retains a place in God's saving purposes. (*Read Romans 11:13-24.*)

DISCUSSION

As 21st-century Christians, what is our relationship to the people of Israel? In the vineyard metaphor, who is the root? Who is the vine? Who are the branches? Discuss how faith grafts us into the vine of God's promise. What does this mean for everyday living?

Read this song by Handt Hanson, called *I Don't Belong to Me Anymore*.

I don't belong to me anymore

I don't belong to the things I did before

Water held the promise; the Spirit's open door

And since that Word was given I don't belong to me anymore. Belonging; grafted to the vine

Embracing this water-death of mine

For I share his death and he gives me life.

DISCUSSION

What are some ways in which we are nourished by the holy root? Name some ways that we can bear fruit as God's people.

GOING DEEPER

The concept of election: Romans 9-11

Paul's view of the destiny of the Jewish people seems complicated. He begins in chapter 9 with much anguish for his Jewish family and community, but qualifies his anguish by reminding everyone that God chose Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau. God's election has been consistent and constant over human history, and now Paul says the final election has come.

Paul is trying to do two very delicate things. He is trying to explain two different elections. One is the election of Israel, an election that has long been established, and, without its validation, Jesus cannot be the Messiah. The second is the election of all of those who are not the legitimate descendants of Abraham. How can an illegitimate person come to faith in the legitimate Messiah? How can a legitimate person deny the Messiah? How will this election work? God elects Israel, and remains faithful to the covenant. However, faith in Jesus "grafts" those who are not descendants of Abraham into the promise. Faith in that promise, as faith in Jesus Christ, is valid for a Gentile. Adherence to the law as works, or to the holiness codes, is not the determining factor. Faith as a response to God's call is how election happens.

Paul ultimately works it out by determining that there is a new order of election. The election of the Gentiles merely precedes that of the Israelites. God, in God's mercy and mystery, will remain faithful to God's people, but only after the full measure of Gentiles have come into the community. This election is God's prerogative and God's timing.

– *Paul's Gospel and Mission*, Arland Hultgren, Augsburg Fortress.

As the three chapters unfold, for the most part, it appears that the Jewish people are headed toward condemnation. At Romans 11:25, however, there is a 180-degree turn. Paul speaks of a “mystery.” There would be no mystery if Jews converted, but there would be a mystery if they were saved apart from conversion, by the hidden purposes of God. All of that flies in the face of conventional church piety. But, according to Paul, the Jewish people were not saved by their works, or the law, but by grace alone. They were saved by the unconditional love and promise of God. We need to reflect on this: if God breaks his covenant with Israel, who is next? The thought is sobering.

DISCUSSION

Why is it so hard for us to understand that we are not saved by anything we do? What is your understanding of grace?

Here is the basic Lutheran understanding of election, according to *Paul’s Gospel and Mission* by Arland Hultgren, Augsburg Fortress.

- It must be distinguished from God’s foreknowledge. This is something that God does as a cause of salvation that God brings about.
- The true meaning of election cannot be learned from reason or the law, only from the gospel. It is not to be sought in the secret counsel of God, but rather in the revealed Word.
- It embraces the entire saving work of God.
- The promise of the Gospel is universal.
- God has resolved to save no one apart from faith in Christ.
- Election is God’s unmerited grace.

Application

It’s critical that we see ourselves, and others, as part of the whole tree. Our tendency is to isolate, segment, and label others (and ourselves), and this is opposite of what Romans is teaching us. We bear fruit when we live out our faith and share the story of Christ’s good news through acts of mercy and words of proclamation.

This week, widen your circle of influence by one person. Identify that person, and seek to establish a new relationship that grows the branches of God’s vineyard.

PRAY TOGETHER

Father God, we belong to you. We are grafted into you as the source of our life. Your love is much higher and deeper than we can ever comprehend. Your love searches for us and finds us, even when we’re not wanting to be found. Your love heals us and gives us peace, even when we can’t recognize our need for you. Jesus Christ, you are all in all to us. Your life, death, and resurrection forgives our sin and changes everything. By the power of your Holy Spirit, we can respond to your call to bear fruit in your kingdom. Be with us in the coming week and show us where we can bear fruit in your world. Amen.