

Sermon from August 19, 2012

"The Mystery and Majesty of the Church"

Romans 11:17-18

Several times the past few weeks, I have referred to BVBC as a congregation of the elect. That does not mean that BVBC stands alone or stands above other Christian congregations. Neither does it mean that the people here are an elite few that other human beings can never measure up to and never join. That's not how election works. Election is not God's unfair way of excluding people. It is God's way of bringing ever-widening circles of humanity within reach of His mercy.

It is also God's way of rescuing the Church from the perception that it is nothing more than a religious institution. Election recovers the divine character of the Church as the flesh and blood organism, which embodies and carries forward God's purpose in the world in irresistible and surprising ways.

This doctrine of election has Jewish roots. God chose Abraham instead of anyone else on earth. He chose Abraham's son, Isaac, instead of Abraham's son, Ishmael. He chose Isaac's son, Jacob, instead of Isaac's son, Esau. After that, God chose the descendants of Jacob, Israel, and no other to carry forward God's purpose in the world. That's why people call the Jews God's chosen people.

That's also why the Apostle Paul had **great sorrow and unceasing anguish in his heart**. Not all but many of his fellow Jews had rejected the love of God in Christ Jesus. Paul was not just disappointed; he faced a theological problem so big that it shook him to his core. How could God's elect turn away from the eternal purpose of their election? Paul had to ask the unthinkable: had God's eternal purpose failed, because the majority of his Jewish brothers didn't believe in Jesus? That's the question that drives Romans 9-11. His thoughtful answer comes to a climax in Romans 11.

The Remnant

Paul rephrased the unthinkable possibility that God's purpose had failed. Romans 11:1: **I ask then, Did God reject his people?** Did God unchoose His chosen people? As was Paul's habit, he first answered the question by leaving no doubt about the answer to come. **Did God reject his people? By no means!**

He told a brief story to make his point. It is a story about the great Hebrew prophet, Elijah. The Old Testament book of 1 Kings 19 tells the story of the time Elijah ran for his life from the wicked Queen Jezebel. He fled deep into the Sinai Desert, to a mountain there, and hid in a cave in the mountain. And there he had a conversation with God. Paul in verse 3 picks up the story where Elijah made this self-pitying plea to God: "**Lord, they (King Ahab and Queen Jezebel) have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me.**"

Our Heavenly Father, who pities all His children, showed pity to Elijah by administering to him a bracing shock of hard information. Verse 4: **And what was God's answer to him? "I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to (the pagan god) Baal,** whose worship Ahab and Jezebel had made all the rage in Israel. "Buck up, Elijah, my man! You're not alone. I have reserves, and you have friends you either forgot about in your self-pity or didn't know about."

That story was the first answer to the great sorrow and unceasing anguish in Paul's question. **Did God reject his people? Of course not!** Just as there were 7000 who joined Elijah in refusing idol worship, there were plenty of Jews in Paul's day who joined Paul in worshiping Jesus as the Messiah. Here's how Paul stated that fact in verse 5: **So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace.**

Chosen by grace! A literal translation of this verse would read: *according to election by grace*. Just as God chose Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to carry forward His purpose in the world, so in Paul's day God chose – elected – a sizeable body of Jews who believed in Jesus to carry forward God's purpose in the world. And don't forget: Paul was one of them. God is in control. He has a merciful purpose. He is going to achieve His purpose in every nation on earth, and the human mess will not thwart it, not even when some of God's chosen people refuse the eternal purpose of their election.

The Olive Tree

Paul had another question. He wanted to know if the widespread Jewish rejection of Jesus had meaning? Here's the way he asked that question in verse 11: **Again I ask, Did they** (my Jewish brothers) **stumble so as to fall?** Was their refusal of the eternal purpose of their election a meaningless, tragic failure? And once again, as was his habit, he first answered the question by leaving no doubt about the answer to come. **Did they stumble so as to fall?** Not at all!

He explained himself in the next words of verse 11: **because of their transgression** (in refusing Jesus), **salvation has come to the Gentiles**. He said the same at the beginning of verse 12: **their transgression means** (spiritual) **riches for the world**. He did it again in verse 15: **their rejection** (of Jesus) **is the reconciliation of the world**. Widespread, Jewish refusal of Jesus was not a meaningless, tragic failure, because it had an unexpected consequence: it brought Jesus to the Gentiles; it brought salvation to the whole world. That's the second answer to the apostle's sorrow and anguish. It is worth taking a moment to show you why Paul could say that.

The New Testament book of Acts traces the story of how Christianity began as a small, exclusive, Jewish sect, and within three decades it had become a faith for all humanity. Acts 13-14 tell a decisive turn of events in that story. Paul and Barnabas had landed on the southern shore of what is today Turkey. In the city of Antioch, modern day Antakya, they followed Paul's strategic plan for spreading Christianity when they came to a new city. Verse 14: On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and saw down.

They were invited to speak. Paul spoke. He summarized 2000 years of Jewish history in about 200 words. He then spoke at length about the death and resurrection of Jesus. Verses 37 & 39 are the heart of Paul's message. "But the one whom God raised from the dead did not undergo decay . . . Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you."

Verse 42 reports the encouraging response. **As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath**. Verse 44 reports a response beyond their wildest imaginations. On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.

And then things went south in a flash. Verse 45: **When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying**. Paul's immediate response would reverberate in synagogues all over the Roman Empire. Verse 46: **Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles."**

You, my Jewish brothers, **reject it. We now turn to the Gentiles**. You see that pattern again in Acts 14:1-2. **At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed. But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers**.

You'll see this pattern for the rest of Paul's career. **You**, my Jewish brothers, **reject it**, the gospel. **We now turn to the Gentiles**. Their rejection gave rise to the apostle's great sorrow and unceasing anguish of heart. That's why he could write: **I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel**.

But their rejection also made Christianity a worldwide faith that shows no signs of slowing down. Paul's Jewish brothers who didn't believe in Jesus pushed him away, and they pushed Him right into the arms of Gentiles all over the northern and eastern cities of the Mediterranean. That's why Paul could write: **because of their transgression** (in refusing Jesus), **salvation has come to the Gentiles**.

Now, let's go back to Romans 11:17 and a memorable figure of speech. **If some of the** (Jewish) **branches have been broken off, and you** (Gentile believers in Jesus), **though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap of the olive tree, do not boast over those branches**, which were broken off.

Paul compared Israel, the community of faith that began with Abraham, to an olive tree; and he compared the failure of many of his Jewish brothers to believe in Jesus to branches being broken from that olive tree.

Here's what Paul's figure of speech means. The olive tree stands for those who carry forward God's purpose of blessing all nations on earth in Jesus Christ. Only Jews did that for 2000 years until Jesus was born. Jews who refused Jesus were broken off the olive tree. Gentiles, who confess that Jesus is Lord and believe in their hearts that God raised Him from the dead, are now grafted into the olive tree.

The really radical idea in this figure of speech is that the first Christian leaders, all Jews, included Gentiles in the community of faith that began with Abraham. Jesus brought the Church into Israel's election.

I want you to hear how the Apostle Paul expressed the same idea in plain language. Ephesians 3:6: **This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body** (of one olive tree?), **and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.**

Here's what I want you to take away from this. You who have been baptized into Jesus Christ by faith and by water have been joined to the community of faith that began with Abraham 3000 years ago. That community has outlived Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek and Roman Empires. It has outlived the Holy Roman Empire of Europe. It will outlive the dying nations of secular Europe, and it will outlive the American Republic, if our nation goes the way of Europe. Your life has been caught up in God's irresistible purpose to extend mercy to every nation on the face of the earth. Your life has been caught up in God's irresistible purpose to extend mercy to the people of the Brandywine Valley one household at a time.

Continuing in His Kindness

That take-away comes with a cautionary tale that the apostle tells in Romans 11:22. **Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness.** Those last seven words should give us pause. The apostle is going to lay out for us in chapters 12-15 how we can continue in the kindness of God. In this cautionary tale I want to call attention to the forces that can divert us away from the kindness of God.

First, a sadness about the Brandywine Valley, the home I love, falls upon my heart from time to time. Thousands of people in this valley, a few minutes' drive from here will not darken the door of a church. They have Sunday school, Christian and Parochial school, CCD classes, and maybe years of worshipping in a local church as their heritage. They claim not to be hostile to Christ, but they stay away in droves.

Some left in an explosion of anger, but most like a boat that has lost power, have simply drifted away from the Church. They are not passing their heritage on to their children, and they have no idea how close they are to the white water and waterfall ahead. They drift into a hardness of heart that rejects Christ. They no longer continue in the kindness of God. That's how branches are broken off the olive tree today.

Second, the apostle will call upon the Church in Romans 12:2 not to conform to the pattern of this world. I asked you last week whether you feel yourself to be a new minority within American culture. Almost nothing encourages the Christian faith in mass media, entertainment, public education, and elite and not-so-elite universities. We are bombarded everyday with non-Christian ways of thinking and living. If you were born after 1972, you may find it harder and harder to refuse this cultural pattern.

It is evidence of the power of God that you and millions of other American Christians still refuse to conform to the pattern of this world that we face everyday. Let us all guard our hearts. **We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to the kindness of God, who has included us in the community of faith that began with Abraham, so that we do not drift away.** If we do, **how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?** – Hebrews 2:1-3.

Discipleship Path

Our church's vision is to move people from the margins of the Christian faith to Christian maturity. We are gearing up to be intentional and persistent about that. We can now articulate a rough path to spiritual maturity. We want to take more and more of you down this path in the years to come. You'll hear more about our vision and our plans in the weeks, months, and years to come.

If you have a hunger to know God, come and talk to us. We can help you evaluate where you are and how you can move further along the path toward Christian maturity. If we approach you and ask you to step on to the path with us, accept our invitation. Either way, make it your goal and passion to continue in the kindness of God and grow in your ability to lead lives that are worthy of Christ.