

## Fifth Sunday in Lent – April 7, 2019

### Romans 11:11-21

11 Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. 12 But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring! 13 I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry 14 in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. 15 For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? 16 If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches. 17 If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, 18 do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. 19 You will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.” 20 Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. 21 For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.

Have you heard of a pomato plant? It is plant that grows tomatoes on top and potatoes under the ground. Or how about a fruit salad tree? There are citrus fruit trees that can grow oranges, lemons, limes and grapefruits on the same tree. There are stone fruit trees that can do the same with peaches, plums, apricots and nectarines. These plants are not some April Fool’s joke that circulates this time of year, but they are real plants that are made possible through the process of grafting. Branches from different plants and trees can be grafted, added onto, the roots and stems of other plants. The branches have to produce similar fruits, you can’t have one tree that grows apples and bananas and oranges. The process doesn’t blend the types of fruits, they each retain their own characteristics. But grafting is often used to combine branches to stronger rootstocks or simply to reduce the space needed to grow whatever flower or fruit is needed. In our sermon text the apostle Paul used grafting as a picture for how God makes us a part of his church, calling us branches. We will see this morning how **As God’s Branches, we have a special privilege and we have a special warning.**

In his letter to the Romans, Paul spent three chapters, 9-11, talking about his concern for his fellow Jews, his “great sorrow and unceasing anguish in [his] heart” (9:2) because so many of them had rejected God. The Israelites had enjoyed a special place in history. They had the privilege of being God’s chosen people. They had received his written laws, they had enjoyed God’s presence in their tabernacle and temple worship. They had received his promises to send a Savior who would be born of their ancestry (9:4-5). But sadly many of them had rejected that and so as branches had been “broken off because of unbelief” (v. 20).

But God had brought good out of this sadness. Verse 11, “Because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles.” This was often Paul’s mission strategy. He would start out his preaching in a new town in the synagogue. But more often than not the Jews would reject the message and so he would turn to the Gentiles who would gladly receive that message. They were the wild olive shoots in verse 17 who had “been grafted in among the other branches and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root.” The Gentiles had not originally been God’s

chosen people, but now they shared in this special privilege of being a part of God's family and sharing in all the blessings that came from the gospel.

Paul still held out hope for his fellow Jews. He knew that they had not stumbled beyond recovery (v. 11) because he was living proof of that. As Saul the Pharisee he too at first had rejected Christianity and the gospel message of Jesus. But he had been called by Jesus himself and as a branch was now connected again to the root. His hope was "that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them" (v. 14). If they saw that Gentiles were able to be saved and added to the tree, there was the possibility that they could be added back as well.

The Israelites had enjoyed that special privilege—of all the nations in the world that time they had been chosen to be God's chosen people. Today we enjoy that same special privilege—we are God's chosen people, we are branches that have been grafted in. It is remarkable when we each consider our own stories. We did not sign up or apply for this privilege. Maybe it goes back to our birth. We could have been born to any family located anywhere in this world and yet by grace God placed us into a family that was already a part of his church. Maybe it goes back to whom we knew. Of all the people in this world, by grace God gave us a friend or neighbor or pastor or teacher who first talked to us about the gospel. God's plans are remarkable. We have the special privilege of being a part of the same story, the same tree that stretches back through all time, fellow branches who are there by God's grace.

And yet sometimes we forget. We forget our identity in Christ as his branches, we forget to see the bigger picture as we get lost in the details of our lives. We see our sin, we are overwhelmed with our guilt and do not feel worthy to be a branch. But in Christ our identity is that we are a forgiven child of God. "If the root is holy, so are the branches" (v. 16). Our worthiness comes from Christ. We see our troubles in life, whether in health or finances or relationships and wonder how we can hold on. A grafted branch is already weak and we feel like we could snap off at any moment. But with our identity in Christ, we remember that God will take care of us. He is the gardener who will tend us and take care of us so that we remain connected to the tree. We see ourselves and our differences—whether differences in our age or physical appearance, differences in our spiritual maturity or time in the faith, or differences in our interests and abilities. We tie our identity to such things so that we may end up feeling lonely and separate, like there is no one like us who can know our problems. But with our identity in Christ, we know that we are not alone. We have equal standing with our fellow branches and the unity that comes from being part of one tree, no matter what differences we may have. As God's branches, we have all the special privileges that come from finding our identity in Christ.

With this special privilege comes a special warning. There is warning throughout these verses and it is summarized at the end: "Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either" (vv. 20b-21). The Israelites had lost their special position as God's chosen people and had been broken off. But why? What had gotten them to that point? In a word—arrogance. Being chosen, they began to think that they were better than everyone else, that they were stronger than everyone else. God had warned them about intermarrying with the nations around them and adopting their culture and especially their worship practices. But in their arrogance they thought it wouldn't affect them. Sadly they did get drawn aside to worshipping other gods, the Baals and Asherahs of the land and so as verse 19 simply states, "they were broken off because of unbelief."

This warning holds true for us as well—if God did not spare the Israelites, then he will not spare us either. We too can fall into that trap of arrogance and think that as we adopt the

culture around us we will not be affected by it. While there are no Baals or Asherahs today for us to worship, there are plenty of other things that can become gods in their place. In our materialistic culture we can fall into the pursuit of money and possessions, having the best and latest of everything, so that our time and energies and passions are directed to following after those things rather than following our God. In our academic and scientific culture we can fall into the arrogance of our own wisdom, thinking that we know better than the Bible when it comes to the study of our world or even questions of morality, instead of listening to what our God has to say. In our entertainment culture we can get wrapped up into the time and expense of sports or video games or vacations or fishing or whatever our favorite activity is so that it takes away from time with God's Word at home and in worship. In all of these areas in our arrogance we think our faith will be safe because we are strong. But we do not support the root (v. 18) and as a grafted branch we can be broken off too.

When we see our arrogance getting the upper hand, when we feel that we're getting too lost into the culture of this world, when we are afraid, then we turn to God in repentance and receive forgiveness for these sins too. We remember that we do not support the root, but the root supports us (v. 18). We remember that we do not stand by our own strength, but we stand by faith (v. 20). As branches connected to the root, we receive that nourishing sap, God's Word and Sacraments. When we set those tools aside we risk becoming dried up, we risk being broken away. But when we are regular in our time with God's Word and our attendance at the Lord's Table and our remembrance of our baptisms, we will have all that we need to remain strong and healthy branches.

Grafting in the physical world is an amazing thing, that God has enabled different plants to be able to survive when they are attached to one another, joined together for that mutual support. It is no less amazing in the spiritual world. God has allowed us wild olive shoots to be grafted into the tree of his church. It is a special privilege that God has blessed us with and for that we give thanks. But like Paul, thinking about his fellow Jews who had fallen, we may know some broken branches in our own lives, those who have wandered off and fallen away. May God use us to make them envious of what we have so that they too can be grafted back in and join us as God's branches connected to him. Amen.