**Romans 11:13a,17-22** August 23, 2020

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*Romans 11:13I am talking to you Gentiles… 17If 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, 18do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. 19You will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.” 20Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. 21For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.*

*22Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

Cawker City, Kansas; population 469. Cawker City, Kansas, as you surely know, is home to the world’s largest ball of twine. Didn’t know that? How could you not? I mean, it’s the world’s largest ball of twine! (BTW, Twine is that generic brown rough stuff they used to use to tie up hay bales; stronger than string, not as hefty as actual rope.) Cawker City has bragging rights to the world’s largest ball of the stuff. You could say, “That’s not much to brag about,” but you can also imagine simpler times, when news of the outside world was harder to come by. Maybe back then, someone could have felt that the world’s largest ball of twine down the street from your home gave you reason to hold your head high in a crowd of ordinary people. You can imagine a farm kid making his first trip to the big city, bragging to his older distant cousins about what makes his town great—and them snickering at their country bumpkin cousin. These days, I’m sure the good citizens of that fair town would admit, with a chuckle, that their bragging right is more good fun than world renowned accomplishment. Just good clean fun.

But, you know, this does bring something up. We all have our little vanities. Human nature just loves to take really silly little things and get uppity and proud over them. Like that time my high school football team won the championship (even though my biggest contribution to the team was as a living, breathing tackling dummy.) We get a little bit proud about our looks (what finely shaped earlobes, I have). We feel that modest accomplishments of long ago are a sign that we are far more than the world gives us credit for (Hey, back in 1967 I came in second in our school’s academic quiz). Our human nature can turn just about anything into a reason to brag.

I think—I think what is going on in bragging rights of the humbler sort is simply a search for identity. We are just figuring out who we are and where we fit in. But it is shorter journey than we realize from figuring out what makes us unique, to looking down our noses at other people. There are few things uglier than a good looking person who is not humble about it; there are few more foolish than a very learned person who is sure he is the smartest guy in the room. Pride ruins blessings.

This can happen in spiritual matters. In fact, that is the very heart of today’s challenging reading.

Here is the setting. God’s apostle, Paul, was writing to Christians in the ancient city of Rome. This Christian group was made up of Jews and Gentiles. Which raises the first question: What’s a Jew? And what’s a Gentile? Both are racial designations but, I must add, not an insult. Jews are a specific race: the descendants of Abram through Isaac and Jacob. “Gentile” is also a racial designation: Gentiles are all people who are not Jews, which means all of us, unless one of you out there has Jewish parents. Earlier in the letter to the Romans, Paul had taken the Jews to task for their own spiritual pride (2:17-29). And now, in chapter 11, verse 13, he says, ***“[Now] I am talking to you Gentiles…”*** They too have a spiritual pride problem.

He put his finger on their problem when he says, ***“You Gentiles… 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, [then] do not boast over those branches.”*** Olives? Wild olives? Roots? Branches? Broken branches? Sap? What in the world is Paul talking about?

Paul is using the olive tree as an image, a parallel for what is going on in that congregation. We miss the comparison because we know almost nothing about olives. When *we* think of olives you think of the small jar of green or black olives in your refrigerator door. Once a decade or so you buy a jar and they seem to last forever! Some of you, when you think of olives, might think of olive oil. Olive oil is great for cooking, but it is also very expensive compared to other cooking oils.. To us, olives are a curiosity and olive oil almost a luxury.

But in the ancient Mediterranean world—in Israel, in Rome—olives were indispensable for civilized life. For those people, olives were food, not just part of the *hors d'oeuvres*. Nealy all their cooking oil was olive oil. Their lamps, in their pre-electric day, burned olive oil. Olive oil was used for cosmetics. It had medicinal uses. In Israelite worship, olive oil was part of most of their sacrifices (Numbers 15). The list could go on. The olive was a vivid and familiar picture to these Christians in Rome.

In Romans 11, the olive tree is a picture of God’s people. God’s family is like a productive, fruitful, beneficial tree. Here the parable takes on meaning. This lush, fruitful olive tree is the Jews. But you know what happened when Jesus came to Israel. Some of them, many of them, rejected Jesus as the Savior. And so, because of their rejection they were, as Paul puts it, ***“broken off.”*** Not all Jews, but ***“some.”*** They fell under God’s condemnation.

Then God did an amazing thing. For the centuries from Abraham to Jesus, the Jews had been God’s special people. After Jesus completed his work of dying for the sins of the world and rising from the dead, Jesus told his disciples, “Now this message is for everyone. Take it to the *ends* of the world, to all people, all races and tribes!” Many of the Jews, the natural people of faith, had been broken off because of their unbelief. God now took outsiders, ***“wild olive shoots”***—Gentiles, us—and grafted us into that tree of life and blessing! Unlike the Jew, we can’t say, “Hey, but at least we are children of Abraham.” Yet God saw fit to graft us into that tree, even though we were just wild olive shoots.

And now this illustration gets really interesting when we learn that wild olive trees do not produce useable olive oil [Witherington, 271]. So there is nothing in wild olives that would recommend you to graft them in. We bring nothing into the marriage, so to speak. But God did anyway! We certainly do not deserve eternal life because of anything we have done.

And now we start to appreciate the beauty of Paul’s words, ***“You [Gentiles], though a wild olive shoot… now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root.”*** God, in his grace, has given us spiritual life, and that spiritual life bears leaves and shade and fruit and blessing. We deserved none of it, but it is still ours. It is as if the keys to the mansion are placed in the servant’s hand, not so he can clean it, but so he can move in!

Apparently, feeling their God-given blessings, some of the Gentile Christians in Rome had taken on airs. “You Jews blew it. Ha! We are God’s people now!” Which seems really strange, until you realize that even in ancient Rome there was a well-documented anti-Semitic racism. And for some reason, it has persisted through the centuries, even finding a home among Christians sometimes—which I really have trouble understanding.

Over the centuries, even some Christians, who were otherwise very godly, have fallen for this. The reasoning goes something like, “They had Jesus right there in front of them and they rejected him. Whatever the get, they had it coming because they murdered the Son of God.” What ugliness. Paul reminds us, ***“Do not boast over those branches!”*** And then, if Christian love itself is not enough to get us over our spiritual pride, he adds, ***“They were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the naturel branches, he will not spare you either.”***

Now while that Anti-Semitism is not a clear and present danger, that same spiritual arrogance can be. It is not only an anti-Jewish sentiment. It can exemplify itself in racism of others forms, viewing other people as inferior, or as somehow more unworthy than ourselves of God’s grace. And it isn’t just racial, either. What is the saying? “Familiarity breeds contempt”? Spiritual arrogance can grow out of years of knowing other people. For a while we have patience with people. But the years go by, and people with their faults and foibles still have those faults and foibles. We get tired of it. We think, “I can’t believe he is still that way. I mean, I’ve known him for 35 years now, and he hasn’t changed one bit!” We think that we may not be perfect, but at least we’re not like them. We may have our faults, but it’s still better than what they are. And on it goes, often with a grain of truth in there somewhere, but without an ounce of the long-suffering patient love that our Savior has show us.

Oh, the sorrow of it all. It is distressing to the more sensitive of God’s people. It is the sorrow of pastors (who each have their own faults, too, I might add.) How much more sad it must be to our heavenly Father to look down on his children in their stubborn ways, some bragging on their little ball of twine, and others storming out of the room yelling, “I’m never coming back!”

Yes this is the result of pride, and especially spiritual pride. It is a denial of how badly each of us needs our Savior, day in and day out. It is just like that unmerciful servant Jesus spoke of. He had been forgiven his bad debts of millions. But that servant refused to forget the debt of his fellow servant who owed him pocket change. Spiritual pride leads us to think of ourselves as powerful, important masters rather than poor, miserable sinners.

This natural pride requires a check, a hard check on our sinful human love of ourselves. We forget that even if we can brag—and here I turn my mind to spiritual matters—if I can brag that my parents, and all of my grandparents, and all of their parents were church-going folks, I forget that somewhere way way back I come from a race of pagans who had to been shown the Gospel by someone else. We forget that all of us were born in sin, rebels against God, and only because somewhere, sometime in our lives the Holy Spirit reached into our lives through the Word of God and the waters of Baptism and made us his own. It is only because of God and his work that we are here worshiping God this morning.

When we remember that we are forgiven completely 100% because of God’s undeserved love and only by Jesus’ all-sufficient sacrifice—that we are nothing but worthless wild olive shoots grafted into the tree of life, God’s Church—we can find no reason for spiritual arrogance.

And when by God’s blessing we are emptied of that pride, do you know what happens? Peace returns. Apologies are spoken. Christian accepts Christian for who they are. We see people trapped by their own sins and instead of handing them an attitude we offer them forgiveness and hope.

Dear Christians, let us remember who we are, and what God has given us in Christ Jesus, so that we may make our ways through this life and enter the gates of paradise together. Amen.