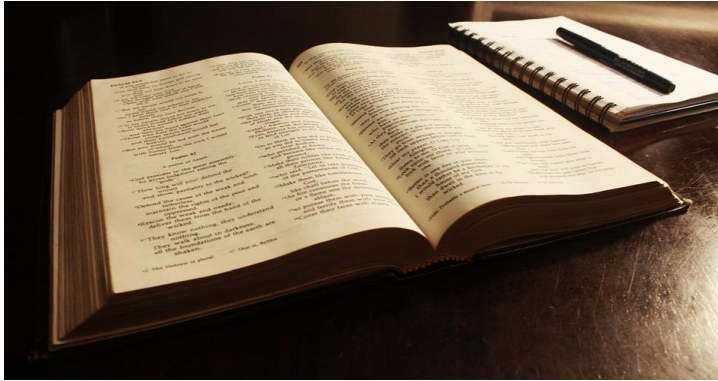


God's Grace and Wisdom know no limits

Sermon for the 10th Sunday after Trinity

Sermon Text: Romans 11:25-32



²⁵ Lest you be wise in your own sight, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. ²⁶ And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, "The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob"; ²⁷ "and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins." ²⁸ As regards the

gospel, they are enemies of God for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. ²⁹ For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. ³⁰ For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹ so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. ³² For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.

For decades, we haven't seen so much suffering, bitterness, and brutality as we now see. You can see this in places of war and in many disasters. Just recently, the city of Beirut in Lebanon was hit with a giant explosion. Lebanon, which was already heavily affected by political unrest and the Corona virus, where more than half of the population must live in poverty, had to experience this as well. The question is why? Did God punish these people? The question here can also be asked in other situations. In some countries, there are not enough beds in the Intensive Care Units to care for the sick. Decisions must be made: who do we save and who do we let die? Is it fair that some get better and others don't? Perhaps those who made it as refugees to Europe could ask the same question. Why am I safe while my brothers and sisters must continue to suffer? No, not only refugees can ask this. We all can! Why was I born in a country where I can live safely? Why am I allowed to enjoy a good education and others can't? Why must I never have to go hungry while for others, famine is a part of everyday life? Why do I get to enjoy a loving family and a good upbringing while others grow up in a family where they are abused and neglected? Why have I heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ and have been baptized while others cannot believe and have no understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Is that fair?

In our sermon text for today, Paul addresses these questions. His writing applies to Gentile Christians, who had come to faith. "But what about the Jews?" some have asked. We shouldn't consider ourselves wise, is the apostle Paul's quick response. No one can pat themselves on the back for the things that God, out of grace, has given us! Likewise, no one may look down on people who are less fortunate than we are. Looking at the Jewish people, Paul even argues that the Israelites were stubborn for a time so that the Gentile Christians could come to believe. The word stubborn means that

something has become hard and impervious. One might often think of a stone. Figuratively, it means that people's hearts are like stones. They are not receptive to God's Word. They also don't understand how to differentiate between good and bad or right and wrong. Time and again, the biblical narrative tells us of people who were hardened in this way. The best-known example from the Old Testament is the example of Pharaoh. Even after ten plagues, which God clearly sent as a warning, Pharaoh still won't listen to Moses and God. Likewise, the prophets in the Old Testament talk about this again and again. The people of Israel who had heard God's Word and so clearly experienced His miracles in their midst, remained distant from God and did not want to keep God's Commandments. Jesus also speaks about people that are blinded so that they neither recognize God nor hear His Word. The Bible is actually full of examples of people whose hearts are hardened. If we are being precise, these examples are even already in the first pages of the Bible! At that time Adam and Eve were deceitfully misled by the snake so that they turned away from God's Word and listened to the snake. Yes, actually people's stubbornness has been part of human nature from the beginning. How often does God's Word bounce off of my hard heart. It doesn't penetrate my heart or move me, and it certainly doesn't guide me into a new way of life. How often is it rather that God's Word is quickly forgotten or pushed aside by the worries of the times so that it brings about no change in my life at all. How often do I pray to God that He would forgive me of a sin and immediately thereafter fall back into this same sin? When someone does believe, then it is the bright light of the Gospel and the love of our Lord Jesus that shines in our hearts. In the first chapters of Romans, Paul explains this clearly and in great detail. The Gospel is the great liberation of people from the powers of sin and death. Both salvation and new life are grace alone!

At the same time, Paul experiences the great pain that of all people, his fellow Jews won't or can't believe the Gospel. Doesn't this grace apply to the Jews? This fact hung about Paul his whole life long and deeply moved him. He would rather be damned himself so that his people would be saved, he writes a few lines earlier. Amazingly, Paul doesn't come to the conclusion that these Jews must be worse than everyone else. He doesn't complain about their unbelief but is convinced that God's grace will also eventually be theirs. In adoration, he sees how God asserts Himself against the disobedience of the Jews. The Gentile Christians certainly shouldn't exalt themselves over the Jews. In doing so, they would be excluding God's grace and mercy. They would be boasting in themselves and failing to see that they themselves were saved by grace.

So "God has consigned all to disobedience, that He may have mercy on all." This is how Paul ends his remarks. He understands that salvation is entirely from God. This applies to us all.

But the story of our world is not over yet. Most Jews still don't believe that Jesus is the Messiah. There is still an awful lot of suffering in our world. We still see how people commit terrible atrocities. How easy is it to follow in the wake of hate and revenge? How logical do the calls for vengeance and condemnation appear against those who do something like this in the name of God? But the moment I judge these people or evaluate their unworthiness of receiving the Gospel, I judge myself. Because then it would mean that we earned God's grace more than the others.

World events will take their course. There will be wars till the bitter end. God invites us in faith to recognize God's open arms, even for worst evildoer. The invitation to repentance applies to Judas, the Jews who crucified Christ, those who persecute Christians today and cause infinite suffering in our world and shed blood. Instead of hating people, with Paul we can recognize the grace of God that is there for us:

“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgements and how inscrutable His ways.... for from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever. Amen”