

# Merciful to All

## Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

<sup>1</sup> I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. <sup>2</sup> God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew, ...

<sup>29</sup> for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. <sup>30</sup> Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, <sup>31</sup> so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. <sup>32</sup> For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

Last week we heard about a woman celebrating her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday by inviting her church members, neighbors and the folks served by the local soup kitchen to her birthday bash, there they all heard about the love of God in Christ Jesus, encouraging all of us to share the good news. Today Mary shares about her father-in-law Dean who recently died at the age of eighty-nine within twenty miles of the place of his birth. At his funeral the congregation sang a nineteenth-century hymn that he and his wife of sixty-three years had chosen for the occasion, "O Love that Wilt Not Let Me Go."

O Love that wilt not let me go,  
I rest my weary soul in thee;  
I give thee back the life I owe,  
that in thine ocean depths its flow may richer, fuller be.

Dean, like many of you, lived through the Great Depression, taught school in a one-room schoolhouse when he was sixteen, briefly played minor league baseball for the Brooklyn Dodgers, flew for the Navy in World War II, and during the war married the love of his life. With her, he buried their firstborn child, worked and raised a family of two children, sang at pie suppers, churches, and community events with his siblings, all of whom he outlived and mourned.

Throughout those eighty-nine years of a life well lived, Dean never forgot the Love that would not let him go. He lived out his Love and shared it with his family and neighbors, only rarely leaving the small Kansas town that was his home. Dean understood the nature and character of God: faithful, gracious, and merciful. He knew true Love in the love of his Savior.

God does not let any of us go. In Romans, Paul struggles to understand why his brother and sister Jews have failed to turn to Christ as he has. In Jesus he has found redemption and reconciliation with his creator. Why not they? If they have not followed Christ, what is to become of the chosen people? Will God reject God's own?

In chapter 11, Paul concludes that it is impossible for God to reject God's own beloved, those whom God has created and called, "for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (v. 29b). God did not let Paul go, God did not let the Gentiles go, and neither will God let God's chosen people go.

It is difficult for Paul to comprehend fully the love, plans, and purposes of God. Paul's comprehension is limited by the scope of his humanity. God's plans and ways are often beyond human discernment and understanding. As the prophet Isaiah wrote, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:8-9). Paul himself quotes Isaiah at the end of chapter 11 when he asserts that God's ways are just even if God does not disclose God's mind to us (vv. 33-34). What Paul knows for sure is that *the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable*. He may not understand why everything is unfolding as it is with his Jewish brothers and sisters, but he trusts God with their present and with their future. **Mary Beth Anton**

One of the treasured tenets of American life is the conviction that, if you work hard, you will be rewarded; effort will pay off. Similarly, those who are lazy and

ineffective will find themselves at the bottom of the heap or out the door. Either way, people get what they deserve, and they deserve what they get.

Some convert this view into their own good news and insist that God wants us to be well-to-do. All we have to do is believe, attend church on Sunday, and pony up when the plate is passed. Then, so this version of the good news goes, God will be pleased with us and will reward us with our own riches. Unfortunately, there is little, if anything, in Christian Scripture to support this view. The gospel truth is much more complex.

Our relationship with God is not transactional, based on our being rewarded for our goodness. In the scandal of grace, we receive God's good gifts in spite of ourselves. Even disobedience to God's way becomes an avenue of mercy. We never get what we really deserve; we would perish if we did. We can never deserve what we do get, because God seems to love us, no matter what.

God has a long history of this irrational love. From "in the beginning," humans have been determined to go our own way, rather than following God's way. The biblical record is full of accounts of God's willful children and God's never-ending mercy, what the Hebrew Scripture calls *hesed*, often translated as "steadfast love" or mercy, as the Greek translation. This is where it gets hard for a lot of us Christians, especially those of us who work hard to be independent and self-sufficient. Many of us, part of the "pray, pay, and obey" generation, are more used to giving charity than receiving it. It is very difficult for us to feel indebted to anyone.

That God's mercy is integral to God's sovereignty, not linked to our good or bad behavior, is hard to accept. Paul struggles to understand how Israel, God's own chosen people, can remain in the circle of God's love after rejecting God's Messiah. He concludes that the people's rejection of God does not lead to God's rejection of

the people. We may violate our own integrity, but God's integrity, God's steadfast love and mercy, remains constant.

In the Hebrew Scripture is the story of Joseph and his brothers. After many years of separation and hardship Joseph explains to his brothers their own actions: "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today" (Gen. 50:20). Joseph, and Paul after him, have a clear sense of God's freedom to redeem any human sinfulness, and an understanding that God takes the long view, always working in human history toward the fulfillment of God's will and way.

It does not matter whether our ancestors were Jews or Christians. Paul's concern is for those people who reject Christ. This concern applies as much to us as it does to the ancient Jews, because we too have been disobedient. We too have not fully embraced God's new way of life in Christ. We too have received mercy. God's wide horizon puts our present failures to be God's people in context: If the people God created and chose for God's own can disobey and still be part of God's plan, then so can we.

In a sweeping declaration, Paul proclaims that "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (v. 29)—once given, forever ours. Nothing we do can convince God to let go of us (cf. Rom. 8:38-39). We are the beneficiaries of an eternal love and mercy—but so is everyone else God claims. We get no special treatment; rather, God extends the special treatment to all God's children.

We are all among the disobedient, even the best of us. To be "imprisoned ... in disobedience" (v. 32) is to claim the freedom to act as we will. God grants us that freedom so that we may choose to love as freely and gracefully as God does, but too often we convert our freedom into what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called cheap grace, "the grace we bestow upon ourselves."

Costly grace, by contrast, "confronts us with a gracious call to follow Jesus, it comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart." We cannot bless ourselves with God's grace, nor can we withhold blessing from others. God's gifts are freely given—by God who acts in sovereign love—not something we can give to, or even claim for, ourselves. Grace is God's alone to offer, and God offers it, it seems, to all people—the Jew and the Gentile, the ins and the outs, the faithful and the disobedient. **Martha C. Highsmith**

While we, with Paul, are unable to comprehend God's ways and plans, we may trust that God is faithful and good. God never lets us go. Who understands the way in which God has chosen to redeem the world? What kind of vehicles for divinity are a manger in Bethlehem, a cross, and an empty tomb on the outskirts of Jerusalem? A hymn text, perhaps by Thomas à Kempis, expresses not only the profound love of God, but God's mysterious way of offering salvation in Christ for all of humankind:

O love, how deep, how broad, how high, How passing thought and fantasy,  
That God, the Son of God, should take Our mortal form for mortal's sake.

Image with me the father of the prodigal in Luke 15. The father waits on his front porch, eyeing the road for a sign of his lost son. We are not told how long he waits. We know only that he faithfully watches for as long as it takes. When the prodigal returns, the father embraces the one who comes home, rejoices, and celebrates. The older brother is angry and refuses to attend the extravagant party underway for the prodigal. The older brother is not able to understand the Love that will not let the younger son go, or that the same Love embraces him. This Love is unconditional, not based upon our obedience, faith, or love. God offers this Love freely, now and always.

Three and a half months before his death, Dean's doctor told him that the cancer had spread throughout his body and nothing else could be done. He and his

wife listened to the news, spoke with the doctor for a while longer, and then drove home. Tired from the outing, Dean went into his room to rest. The pastor of their church arrived for one of his regular visits and went in to speak with him. Dean did not choose to say anything. Instead he sang all four stanzas of a hymn he had learned as a child that expressed his faith and trust in Christ. He followed this with the refrain of "God Will Take Care of You."

God will take care of you, Through every day, o'er all the way;  
He will take care of you, God will take care of you.

This man clearly understood, and wished to share with his pastor and family, that God is lovingly in charge of this world and all who are in it. "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen" (v.

**36**). **Mary Beth Anton**

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