

Romans 11:25-36

“The Rest of the Story”

When I first started dating Danny Schaaf, he used to often say, “So now you know the rest of the story.” I could tell that I was supposed to know what this meant but I was only 16 and I already thought he was sort of weird, so I just attributed it to that. As our relationship continued, I found that his father had gotten him addicted to a radio broadcaster named Paul Harvey. I also found out that, at the time, he was the most listened to broadcaster in the world. But I was only interested in Carly Simon, Michael Jackson and Kool and the Gang at age 16.

For those of you who are younger than I and who may not know him, Harvey was a master storyteller. His show would offer long forgotten mysteries or pieces of interest such as how Coca-Cola was born or tales about Elvis Presley’s childhood or other long forgotten facts and then end by saying, “And now you know the rest of the story.”

In a way, the verses we just heard can be seen as “the rest of the story.” As I have said often in my preaching, the early church was made up of lifelong Jews who became followers of Christ AND Gentiles who did the same. The melting pot of traditions, personalities and even beliefs in the new church, which was then called “The Way”, were much like our globalized culture today.

At issue in this part of Paul’s letter is this: Christians were wondering what was going to happen to God’s so-called “Chosen People” since they had rejected Jesus. It was their understanding from hearing Paul preach that believing in Jesus was the way to get to Heaven. Even Christ said to his disciples shortly before his death, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

So, to hear Paul preach about all the believers in Christ joining him in the Kingdom of God was confusing to them. What did this mean? If it meant that Abraham and Rahab and Ruth and Moses were not going to be in Heaven, then God had gone back on his promises. But if they WERE in Heaven, then it meant Jesus was a liar. Of course, neither option is good.

The Apostle Paul does an admirable job in his letter to the Romans of telling what Paul Harvey would call “the rest of the story”, especially if you take the time to read chapters 9, 10 and 11 all in one sitting. Because when one does this, one is able to understand that God always had a plan for the redemption of humankind that included the salvation of the Jews. But in the interest of beating the Baptists to lunch, I have chosen to highlight the verses in this passage which also contain some of the most hopeful words in all of Scripture.

In this part of Paul’s letter, he explains not only what missteps the Gentiles are making in their assumptions about the Jews but also God’s plan for inclusion of the Chosen People. The first sentence in the words you just heard tackled the arrogance of the Gentiles right off the bat. Paul begins: “So that you may not claim to be wiser than you are. . .” This lets the Gentile disciples of The Way know that they have gotten a little too big for their britches. Evidently, they had adopted a superior air to those members who were lifelong Jews because of the rejection of Jesus by their people. Paul wants them and us to know that not only does God USE this rejection, it was actually God’s plan all along.

I saw a guest on Good Morning America interviewed Friday morning who has written a book that she is promoting. It is entitled Didn’t See That Coming: Putting Life Back Together When Your World Falls Apart, an appropriate tagline for all of us in 2020. I don’t know the author, Rachel Hollis, and am neither promoting nor slamming her book. I have not read it. But in the interview, she makes the point that we are all in control of our own destiny. Everything

that happens is up to us. I felt so sorry for her, when she said that. To think that everything rests on you alone, with no help! As Reformed Christians, we DO believe in free will and the power to choose but we also believe in the sovereignty of God. A God who is in control. And that is where our hope comes from.

Thank God, LITERALLY, that I did not have to come up with a plan for your salvation or mine or Paul's or the Jews. Because friends, to give up my child so that you can live is a thought that would never enter my mind. But it entered God mind. In fact, it was God's design all along. And that is the hope of this passage.

As he addresses their arrogance, Paul reminds the Gentiles that if the Jews had accepted everything Jesus said and did as THE GOOD NEWS, then the disciples would never have been given the Great Commission. They would have had their own little clan of believers right in Jerusalem. But the premier verse of our beliefs, the ONE that we hang our hats on the most often says, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have eternal life."

That's what the man said! GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD! And if the Pharisees and Roman soldiers and Herod and Pontius Pilate and everyone in Jerusalem HAD believed, then there would be no need to go "teach and preach and baptize to the ends of the earth." And as I said earlier, that was God's plan all along.

Let me explain this using a visual. THE symbol of our faith is the cross. The one that Jesus was crucified on so that you and I could live! The one like the one behind me in this church. So everyone on our side of the cross, those who look BACK on the cross, let's say Peter and Mary Magdalene and Stephen and Kim and Diane and Dean, who believe that Jesus is the savior, will get to Heaven.

By the same token, everyone on THAT side of the cross, who looked FORWARD to the cross, believing in a Messiah that WOULD come to save them, let's say Esther and David and Isaiah and Malachi would also get to Heaven. Because we are all looking at the same cross. And the cross is the picture of grace.

So these words of Paul's about the Jews and you and me remind us that the course and destiny of the Chosen people are a matter of God's election. (1) Everyone's destiny remains in GOD'S hands. And Paul emphasizes that salvation and the place of the people named Israel, with regards to salvation, is a mystery. This does not mean that it is mysterious, it means that we cannot figure it out. And it also means that we don't have to! It just ain't up to us!

And to make his argument even stronger, Paul offers the verse that I have been alluding to all morning that I think is so hopeful, especially today. He writes: "I want you to understand this mystery: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved."

Now Biblical Scholars have picked this verse to pieces over the centuries. Does "all" literally mean ever single Jew or a remnant of the Jews or the Old Testament Jews or who. Again, that is God's decision. Just as the definition of "the full number" is God's number. And how they come to believe or how their eyes are opened and when is not our job. Because friends, all of these words are simply about grace.

And God is waiting and praying and working in the hearts of every living soul so that ALL will believe the good news and then that full number, including the Israelites, whoever or however many there are, will have Eternal Life with God. Friends, this is THE Good News.

This passage in Romans simply stresses the point that our relationship with God is not based on our being rewarded for good decisions or righteous behavior. It is only based on the

scandal of grace. This means that we receive God's good gifts of love and mercy and salvation in spite of ourselves! It means that no one will ever get what we deserve because God seems to love us no matter what. Nothing we can do or say or not do or not say will ever convince God to let go of us!

But I believe the reason that the Holy Spirit led me to this passage is not just to reassure us of God's love. I believe I was led to this passage in this time of COVID and fires and storms and politics and finger pointing and name calling because these words are the proof that God never goes back on his promises. And that is something we all need to hold on to in these chaotic times.

The cosmic plan of God includes the rejection of the Jews and the sins of overconfidence of the early Christians who were Gentiles. God's plan for redemption of humanity includes both sides of the political aisle and whatever good they bring to the world as well as whatever sins they commit. God's plan for the Kingdom of Heaven includes those who died by the gunfire of policemen AND the policemen. It includes those of us who are born into Christians homes and try to follow God's will all of our lives and the criminal who hung next to Jesus on the cross and never followed ONE rule but believed with his last breath. All of these examples are the radical grace of the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

I am hopeful that when things get back to normal, whenever and whatever that will be, I can teach a Bible study on these chapters of Romans because they are so rich. There is no way to even explain the eleven verses we heard this morning in a twenty-minute sermon. But there is one more point that needs to be clarified for all of us before we leave the serenity of worship and go into God's world.

These verses are NOT telling us that we can do whatever we wish because we are saved. When we understand God's love, even to the small extent that we are able, and know that God has called us God's own ONLY out of love for us, that does not mean that we have free reign to do anything we want to. Bonhoeffer called this cheap grace. Cheap grace is lying or committing adultery or being unkind to others or constantly judging others and thinking you can hang next to Jesus and with your last breath, repent. No friends, you and I have been called to live lives of costly grace.

Paul says, "As regards the gospel they are enemies of God for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of the ancestors; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." Again, this line of Paul's letter could be a lesson or sermon on its own, but for our purposes today it means that we have been called by grace and nothing will take that call away. But it also means that we have been given gifts and those gifts remain ours too. And we are to use these gifts to help bring that full number of Gentiles, of foreigners, into the Kingdom of God.

Perhaps a better way to explain this is to use Jesus' words. Costly grace means to pick up our own crosses and follow Christ. Costly grace confronts us with the gracious call to follow Christ. And we do this when our thoughts, words, and actions are Christlike.

To play off of the title of the book I spoke of earlier, we ALL are dealing with many things that we did not see coming. We have all felt sorry for ourselves at some time this year. We have all gotten angry while watching the news and turned it off. We are all saddened by the injustices that are surfacing in our society, by the loss of life and land and wildlife because of fires and storms. We have all lost someone we love. We have all felt forgotten.

But when we believe in the sovereignty of God and the grace of God through Jesus Christ, we know that, even when things have not turned out the way we planned or even hoped

for, we have not seen or heard the rest of the story. God is not finished with you or me or the world yet. And what God has planned is life of everlasting love that we can only imagine.

While studying this passage, I came across an old story that I would like to share with you now. A mother and her son had a troubled relationship that ended with the son leaving home. He lived a life of selfishness and sinfulness and wandered for years, doing only what he wanted, not caring if it was right or wrong.

One day, he realized how alone he was. How empty his life had become and how much he wanted to go home. But he was ashamed to ask his mother. Finally, he wrote her a letter that said, "Mother, I want to come home. I want you to forgive me and love me. But I am afraid to ask you, because I'm so ashamed of myself. Next Tuesday, I will be on the train that passes your house. If you will take me back, please hang a sheet on the clothesline so I will know I am welcome.

On Tuesday afternoon the son's heart was anxious as the train drew near to his childhood home. He looked eagerly out the window as they approached the little cottage. Tears came to his eyes when he saw his mother's clothesline. It was hung with sheets from one end of the line to the other. She had put out every sheet she owned.

Brothers and sister, this is a word picture of the radical plan for salvation that God has for everyone listening today. And that is the rest of the story. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf
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(1) Paul Achtemeier, Interpretation, John Knox Press, Louisville, 1985, pg. 187