

GOD'S MERCY IS SHOCKING!

Text: Romans 11:13-15, 28-32

I hope I never have to make a “Sophie’s Choice.” There was a book and a movie by the same name in which the main character had to choose which of her two children would live. And if she refused to choose, both would die. It’s not a purely hypothetical situation. In the madness that accompanies war and famine, a parent might decide to give one child’s food to another so that they both don’t starve. Or, let’s say that twins are born with a defect and both need the same organ transplant, but only one organ is available. Or, what if your house was on fire? You rush into your children’s bedroom, but one child is missing. Do you grab the one you find and escape with him to safety, or do you leave him there and go looking for the other child? How could any of us make such a terrible decision? How could we live with ourselves?

You and I may never to choose between our children, isn’t that what God did? God loved the Jewish people, for thousands of years he showered his blessings on them, and he sent his own Son to them. But as he says, “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.” (Rom. 10:21) So God made a shocking decision. Because the Jews rejected Christ, God rejected the Jews. God passed over his own people and gave his blessings, his peace and his salvation to “those who did not seek him, to those who did not ask for him.” (Rom. 10:20) God showed mercy to the Gentiles, he showed his mercy to you and to me.

1. Because he passed over his own people for us

God is like a parent who saves his adopted child, but lets his own flesh and blood child die. But God’s not the one to blame. In Romans Chapter 10 Paul writes, “[The Jews] are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness.” (10:2-3) The Jews had a special relationship with God that no other nation in the world did. God gave them his Commandments, he embedded a deep sense of morality within their culture. While every other nation indulged their flesh, the Jews were straitlaced, prim and proper.

But there’s a difference between knowing what’s right and actually doing it. The Jews thought they had launched themselves into God’s heart with their good behavior, but they fell far short of the target. They lusted after each other’s wives, they grumbled against their government’s taxes, they engaged in dishonest business practices. Their bodies were in worship, but their minds were at their workplace. Not even the Pharisees, the Holy Rollers of the day – not even they measured up. That’s why Jesus preached to the Jews, “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Mt. 5:20)

There is only one way to do that. Paul calls it “righteousness by faith.” Faith in Jesus Christ and his holy life, relying on his accomplishments alone, trusting that Jesus’ sacrifice counts for the sins of the world. Talking to Gentiles Paul says, “You who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy.” God’s mercy doesn’t care what your race or record is, because it’s not about you. It’s all about Jesus, who opened heaven’s door wide enough for the whole world to pass through. Even though we may never have spoken a word of Hebrew or ate kosher our entire lives, we get to call ourselves “Israel” – through faith in Christ, we have become God’s chosen people.

God’s mercy is shocking – it was shocking to the Jews. The more mercy God showed the Gentiles, the harder the Jews shoved God away. The Apostle Paul made glowing reports to the Jews about his success in preaching Christ among the Gentiles. He tried to get his fellow Jews excited, but he only succeeded in stirring up trouble for himself. The Jews became enemies of the Gospel, and enemies of Christ. They couldn’t accept that they were like every other nation in the world, that they needed God’s mercy just as badly as those “dirty” Gentiles. So what was God supposed to do? In spite of thousands of years of history, God abandoned the Jews and gave his spiritual blessings to us, so that we might live with him in heaven – it’s shocking, isn’t it?

And it’s something we always need to keep in our minds, because we forget what a privileged position we are in. When’s the last time 100% of our members were here for a church service? Did the police stop any of you on your way here this morning and ask where you were going? Have you ever woken up on a Sunday

morning and missed church because there weren't any around? Dear friends, we don't deserve any of this. And I'm not talking about this building – I'm talking about the reason we are here. Jesus was Jewish – I'm not, are any of you? Jesus was perfect too – I know I'm not, and I'm pretty sure you aren't either. Just because God passed over his own people, you and I have no reason to gloat or be proud. We can only thank God for his mercy, thank him that he has not abandoned us in spite of our disobedience. We thank him that because of Christ, he has chosen us for eternal life in heaven.

2. Because he can always change his mind

And we can also pray that God will change his mind about the Jews. They are still enemies of the Gospel to this day. If you are Jewish you can eat pork, you can deny God exists, you could be willing to give up the state of Israel, and still be considered a Jew. But there is nothing considered more traitorous for a Jew than to become a Christian and recognize Jesus as the Messiah. In an extreme example, a couple of months ago a letter bomb was sent to the home of Jewish Christians living in Jerusalem – their teenage boy may never play basketball again.

But by no means does this justify anti-Semitic behavior. The Jews may be enemies of the Gospel, but that does not give anyone the right to persecute Jews, to wreck their synagogues, to send them to concentration camps, to burn crosses in their front yards. In our lesson the Apostle Paul says, "If their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?" If your mother chose to let your brother die so that you could live, you might feel more than a little guilty. You might wish she had let you die so that he could live. But what if there was a way your dead sibling could come back to life – wouldn't you be ecstatic?

That's what Paul was hoping for. Paul says, "God's gifts and his call are irrevocable" or as it literally says, "not to be sorry for." Even though the Jews rejected Christ, God wasn't sorry he chose them as his people. God didn't wish he could take back all those privileges he gave them. And even though most Jews today still reject Christ, God hasn't given up on them completely. In v31 Paul says, "[The Jews] have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you [Gentiles]." God can always change his mind about the Jews – he can always show them mercy. How can we be sure? Look at the mercy he keeps showing you and me every day.

Some Christians believe a day is coming when the Jewish people will convert to Christianity in mass numbers. They base this teaching on a faulty interpretation of Paul's words in Romans 11:26, "all Israel will be saved." "All Israel," however doesn't refer to all people who are Jewish by birth. In verse 14 he says his goal is to save "some of them [the Jews]" – not "all of them." The phrase "all Israel" refers to all people who are Jews by conviction, people who like Abraham throw themselves at God's feet for mercy and find it in his Son, Jesus Christ. Even though the majority of those people are Gentile by extraction, there are also some who are Jewish by birth.

Why is that important for us today? Because the political correctness crowd tells Christians to keep their hands off the Jewish people. And we fall for it. We ignore our responsibility to witness to Jewish people. When's the last time we prayed for Jewish people? We owe the Jews a great debt. God used this race of people in very special way, not only to pass down to us the Old Testament promises, but also to fulfill them by bringing our Savior Jesus into the world.

It's never too late for God to change his mind – not about the Jews, not about anyone. Whether you were raised Catholic or Protestant, whether Jesus has been your very best friend since you can remember or if you've been dodging him your whole life, whether you feel comfortable in church or you feel like getting out of here as fast as you can, God's mercy is for all. We may be living in a prison of sin right now, but Jesus is the EXIT. No one who passes through him will be denied entry into heaven. AMEN.