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Romans 11:25–36

²⁵ I want you to understand this mystery, dear brothers and sisters, so that you will not feel proud about yourselves. Some of the people of Israel have hard hearts, but this will last only until the full number of Gentiles comes to Christ. ²⁶ And so all Israel will be saved. As the Scriptures say,

*“The one who rescues will come from Jerusalem,
and he will turn Israel away from ungodliness.*

*²⁷ And this is my covenant with them,
that I will take away their sins.”*

²⁸ Many of the people of Israel are now enemies of the Good News, and this benefits you Gentiles. Yet they are still the people he loves because he chose their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. ²⁹ For God’s gifts and his call can never be withdrawn. ³⁰ Once, you Gentiles were rebels against God, but when the people of Israel rebelled against him, God was merciful to you instead. ³¹ Now they are the rebels, and God’s mercy has come to you so that they, too, will share in God’s mercy. ³² For God has imprisoned everyone in disobedience so he could have mercy on everyone.

³³ Oh, how great are God’s riches and wisdom and knowledge! How impossible it is for us to understand his decisions and his ways!

*³⁴ For who can know the LORD’s thoughts?
Who knows enough to give him advice?*

*³⁵ And who has given him so much
that he needs to pay it back?*

³⁶ For everything comes from him and exists by his power and is intended for his glory. All glory to him forever! Amen.

Romans 12:1–5

And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him. ²Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.

³Because of the privilege and authority God has given me, I give each of you this warning: Don't think you are better than you really are. Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us. ⁴Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, ⁵so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other.

The baton of faith in the new global church.

The Christian church started in the Middle East, in Jerusalem, among Jews. These Jews did not see themselves as joining a new faith. At least not at first. Indeed, the split between Judaism and Christianity took about a hundred years. This was how long it took for people to decide that the followers of Jesus were no longer part of the Jewish world. But during this period, the emerging Christian church was spreading rapidly among Gentiles, i.e., among people who were not Jewish.

Christianity spread from Jerusalem, north along the shore of the Mediterranean Sea, and along a narrower band along the southern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. By the 300's, it had made its way to what is now Spain and France via the famous roads of the Roman Empire: they supported the flow of

goods, the movement of the Roman army – and the spread of the Christian faith. That is our cultural heritage, the Empire of the Christian Latin speakers. In the ninth century – this was almost a millennium later – Christianity spread to Russia, to the east, through the work of Greek missionaries. By about 1100 A.D., the Christian faith covered territory from north Africa up to Great Britain, and from Spain east to the Caucasus.

I grew up in a largely Christian country. I biked to school each day, from my parents' ranch style stucco home to my ornate, Gothic style Catholic church that was built in 1904 – *about the same time this church was built*. It had high, sweeping ceilings trimmed with gold, and an altar with perhaps ten huge, colorful statues of Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and various saints. On my way to school I passed other churches, Protestant churches, but had never been in one of them.

But one day, partway to school, I slid in some green slime in a gutter and crashed my bike. I wasn't hurt badly, but my knee was skinned and bloodied, and my handlebars were twisted sideways. I was wearing my distinctive Catholic school uniform. I dragged my bike up onto the sidewalk and stood there, upset that my salt-and-pepper Catholic school corduroys were torn at the knee. And I was wondering how I was going to get to school. It would have taken me hours to walk my bike there. But the worst was that my uniform was damaged!

Then, a man in a suit and tie came jogging out of a Protestant Church - I don't remember what denomination. "*Are you okay?*" he asked me. "*Yes,*" I said. He looked at my bike and said that he could fix my handlebars. Back then, people were very trusting, and so I followed him into his church. I felt very strange, rolling a bike with filthy wheels into a church, but he told me to just wait right there, inside the door, and he would go get his tools.

While I waited, I looked around the sanctuary. I wondered if I was really in a church. There were pews, but the place was horribly simple. The altar was bare. Had they sent all their statues out for cleaning?

He came back with a woman whom he introduced as his wife. She noticed my bloody knee and said she would get the first aid kit. So, while the Reverend fixed my handlebars, she rolled up my pant leg and cleaned my cut. I sat on the floor, gazing around the church. I noticed that the huge cross above the altar didn't have a Jesus on it. What I didn't realize was that this was the true picture of Christianity in the U.S. Back then, most Americans identified as being Christian, and they were largely Protestants.

I'd like to shift and talk about our passages today, which are from Romans, Paul's longest surviving letter. Romans is the Book of the New Testament that has historically been considered the best treatise on Christian doctrine. Paul wrote

this letter to a church he had not yet visited; it lays out carefully what it means to be a Christian. The famous theologian Saint Augustine, who lived from about 350 A.D. to 430 A.D., as well as John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, who lived in the 1700's, were both spiritually transformed by reading Romans.

In our first passage, Paul is telling Gentile Christians, like those in Rome, not to be conceited about being followers of Jesus. The problem is that because most Jews had rejected the teachings of Jesus and did not believe he was the Messiah, Gentile Christians thought they were better than Jewish Christians. Ironically, of course, Christianity had started with this handful of Jews in Jerusalem.

Remember that the author of this letter, Paul, is himself a Jew. In our passage, he is telling Gentile Christians that God still loves the Jews, the Chosen People. At this point in time, there are two covenants between God and humans – the Old Covenant with the Jews, and the New Covenant with Gentile Christians. Paul is reminding Christians that the Jews still have their old, ancient covenant with God, but that Christians are blessed because they have accepted Christ. And if Christians have trouble understanding how God could still be loyal to the Jews, we are to keep in mind that we don't fully understand God's ways. One thing Paul is stressing is God's mercy and his lack of vindictiveness against his Chosen People. There is a suggestion as well, that Gentile Christians will themselves

spread the word further, helping to soften the hearts of other people who might have otherwise never turned toward God. Christians are, we are being told, evangelists. Their job is to spread the faith, not to judge.

Now, let's look at our second passage. It begins with "*And so,*". Other translations use the word "*therefore*". It's important to note that the Chapter and Verse divisions weren't added to the Bible until the 16th century. Yes, our first passage is the end of Romans 11 and the second is the beginning of Romans 12, but it is a continuous piece of writing embedded in a letter. After Paul tells us that we cannot understand God's ways, and that everything comes from God and exists for God's glory, Paul tells us that the way to honor God is by not honoring the ways of the world. Then Paul returns to this theme of us being careful about feeling better than others. We are to be modest and to measure ourselves only by the depth of our faith, and not with respect to any other person. All Christians should work together, each contributing his or her individual skills.

In fact, today, in this century, this is a time of great humility for American Christians. You see, this passage at the end of Romans 11 and the beginning of 12 is in some ways ironic. Because today, Christianity is declining in areas of the world that have traditionally been Christian – and it is spreading in many areas that were formerly non-Christian. Those of us who inherited the faith of the

Gentile people to the west, north, and east of Jerusalem are no longer the dominant force in Christianity. The people of Europe and North America are no longer the ones who have maintained their faith in God while others have turned away. We certainly can't consider our culture, here in the United States, as the face of Christianity in the world today. Many, many Americans have turned their backs on the faith. But from a global perspective, things aren't so bad.

Today we talk about the "Southern Church". This isn't in the southern part of the U.S. It refers to the southern part of the globe. The church in the southern hemisphere is growing rapidly, while it is declining here. In South America, Africa, and the Philippines (which is, considered part of the southern church even though it is not in the southern hemisphere) churches are popping up daily and church buildings are often overflowing. The United Methodist Church has been particularly successful spreading the faith in the Philippines and in Africa. In sum, if we look at a map of the world today, we see Christianity fading in North America, western and eastern Europe, Russia, and Australia. But it is growing in Africa and South America. In the relay race of Christianity, in the early days, the baton of faith was handed from Christianized Jews in Jerusalem to Gentile Christians in the Roman Empire. It was then passed to Europe and North America. Now, it has been passed again, to Christians in the Southern Church.

At the end of our second passage today, Paul writes: *Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, ⁵ so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other.* What he is saying is that we don't simply offer ourselves to God and leave it at that. We also offer ourselves to each other. Our job is to support each other in our faith. Each of us is a part of the whole, and each of us needs the others to survive.

That's why a church like this one is so important today. We are a small congregation, and I am sure that there was a time when there were far more people here on Sunday mornings. But there is one powerful benefit that has come of the shrinking of the church in the United States: We no longer see the divisions between denominations as massive walls that can never be breached. Today, our perspective isn't that Christians are hopelessly separated by variations in doctrine. Rather, our common faith binds us together. We are one global church – and the United Methodist Church has been a leader in this movement.

That day, as I got back on my bike to finish the ride to my Catholic school, a myriad of new thoughts was swirling in my head. The pastor of that Protestant church - the one with no statues and no Jesus on the cross, and that looked more like a Knights of Columbus hall than a proper church – was very nice to me. He fixed my bike. His wife – and yes, he actually had a wife – patched up my knee and

assured me that my mother should be able to mend my pants. (Actually, it was one of the sisters at school who eventually sewed the knee of my pant leg back together.) They were nice people. They were good to me. They weren't crazed infidels who had abandoned the one, true church. They were real Christians.

In fact, here's the reason why I picked this continuous passage from Romans 11 and 12 today. This is the day that we celebrate all of the faithful who have passed on - in this congregation, in this denomination - the United Methodists, and in the Christian church as a whole. As a Catholic boy in the 60's, we didn't read the Bible. It was interpreted for us. But Protestants did read it. And that pastor didn't know that I was unfamiliar with the Bible. He must have assumed that Catholic kids studied the Bible like Protestant kids did. You see, just before I rode away, I thanked these people for helping me. He smiled and said that they were happy to help a Catholic kid – because, after all, *we were all parts of the same body*. It was many years later when I realized that he was quoting the Bible when he said this.

Today, we celebrate the lives of all Christians who have gone before us. First, believers passed the baton to our ancestors, and then our ancestors kept the faith alive for us. Today, we are passing the baton on to an emerging global church. Perhaps with the support of Southern Christians, there will be a revival in the U.S., and the baton will be passed back here - to a new generation of Christians in the U.S.