

As we walk with our God by faith in this life, the road we walk is perpetually narrow. One of the reasons we as Lutherans value Christian Education so much, one of the reasons we teach that the study and learning of Scripture is a life-long pursuit, is because of these narrow passages. So many of the things that our God wants to teach us cut a narrow path down the middle of two principles. Both are true simultaneously, and keeping both in mind is what allows us to properly walk in the middle. But it's never enough to just learn what God teaches and say, "I know it," because that is not how our sinful minds function. Satan and the world and our own selfish hearts push from the inside, trying to tip us into one ditch or the other on either side of that road. In short, left to our own devices, we will invariably drift to one side or the other and forget the opposite side that balances us out.

This is why we study Scripture as a whole, because many times in his Word, God is speaking to people who have already lapsed into one of the many ditches that we can stumble into. He highlights only the opposite side, to call people from those traps and bring them back to the center. But if we don't understand the balance, the temptation is to be pulled all the way across the road into the opposing ditch. It's a life-long struggle as a Christian, to constantly refresh ourselves with what our God teaches us in his Word so that we can stay on that narrow path.

Now, if all that was a little too theoretical and you'd like a more concrete example of what I'm talking about, we are fortunate today in our selection from Romans to have a section where our Lord through the apostle Paul highlights both sides of a path we frequently struggle to stay in the middle of: our very life of faith. <Read text: Romans 11:11-21>.

The letter to the Romans was written, surprisingly enough, to Christians living in Rome. Paul had never met these people, though he would eventually get the chance. Perhaps the biggest thing to remember through reading his letter is that he is speaking to Gentiles. In other words, people who weren't Jews. They didn't have the educational or cultural background of God's chosen people from Abraham. They were relatively new to the true God, but they had come to know Jesus Christ as their Savior by his death and resurrection.

The section we just read falls in the middle of a longer discussion Paul has discussing the place of the Jews and the Gentiles in the overall course of history and God's plan of salvation. He had just wrapped up talking about how the Jews sadly had by and large rejected Jesus as the Messiah and were still waiting for a fulfillment that had actually already come. They had rejected their heritage as God's people, in short, because God did not come to them how they had wanted.

Paul does bring out here that not all hope is lost. They had fallen. God chose them, groomed them, disciplined them and gave them every advantage and still they fell. But it was not too late. By whatever means possible, he hoped to save as many of them as he could. Any branch attached to the root of Christ is holy, he says. Anyone attached to the living God by Christ will live.

It is here that Paul begins a metaphor for us regarding olive trees and branches. And this is the point where we see the two balancing principles of faith come into play. The first principle, perhaps the most important, comes out in a slightly more subtle way here, if only because were we reading the entire letter, Paul has already covered the topic quite in-depth. That being the confidence you have in the salvation of your God. The book of Romans is one we could all stand to study over and over again if only because it does such a wonderful job of reminding us exactly what we are on our own and exactly what it is God has done for us.

And what is that we are on our own? Well, to use the language Paul uses here, we are the wild olive shoots. And wild is right. We are out there on our own, we want to live our own way. We are uncooperative to God, unhelpful and in fact we are outright antagonistic to him by nature. We have no place in the grove of our Lord. Consider it more literally from the divine perspective. God created this reality. All that exists owes itself to him. He sets the standards and the rules. And his rules are far from unfair, in fact the only real rule he has could be summed up in one word, "love". Show compassion for each other and make the Lord your priority. Not only does he deserve it, but he also knows the best way to care for you and protect you.

And into this mix steps you. God brings you to life, gives you this world and says, "Love." Then he sets you loose. And the first thing you do with that freedom? Scream when you don't get your way. Scream when that toy is taken away. Scream when you have to go to bed early. Mope when you have to do your chores or clean your room. Complain about schoolwork. Talk behind people's backs. Ridicule them to their faces. Complain about our jobs or our health or the weather that God in his love has sent you. That and more is what we have done to the God who so blessed you and asked you to be nice to each other.

I'd like to bring this out in a rather stark way today. You'll forgive me for putting this on you, but it's the truth. I'd like you to think of the most vulgar, offensive expression or gesture that you know. Despite being Christians, I know you know

some. Now, God is literally our Father by creation. He is also our Father who has cared for, provided for and protected us out of nothing but love and concern for our well-being. And our attitudes and our actions to him are nothing short of shouting those vulgar words back at him.

As a parent, how would you react to a child who showed such contempt for you? God doesn't even have a decision to make here, the way he designed our world calls for justice. His reality, like himself, is holy. Anything unholy must be struck from it. It must be cast out to eternal death in the darkness beyond. Unlike human justice, there is no need for a trial by peers or any kind of appeal. God has perfect knowledge of our crimes and the penalty is black and white. So there we sit, wild shoots that offend God on every level, destined to rot out in the cold.

But God's own law of love would not allow that for us if it could be helped. On our own we would die, but if God, despite everything we had done, chose to help us, we could live. The Son of God himself came to go in your place. He lived a human life, but it was holy. He was condemned to death as a criminal, though perfectly innocent. The Father heaped on him all the wrath due to you for your sins and he willingly suffered it all. Your payment was made, and a life of righteousness belongs to you.

You have been plucked out of the wild and grafted in. You are connected by faith to the root of Christ. And here we find the promise, *"if the root is holy, so are the branches."* This is the promise. Connected to the root of Christ, you are holy in God's eyes. It is a promise of fact. It is something we should never doubt. We should never worry how God will receive us when we pass to him for judgment. In Christ, all our rebellion is gone and we are counted as perfect children. We live through the root. God wants you to have perfect and complete confidence and trust that you are saved.

A stirring truth. Something to be absolutely treasured and cherished. But the balance has yet to be struck. This is only one side of the road we walk in faith. The remainder of what Paul tells us here pulls us back to the middle with a warning. Consider the danger of the ditch on that side. If I were to stand here, week after week and announce to you that you will be saved by faith and leave it at that, how long before we start to take that as granted? How long before we think, well if that's there and set, now I can go off and live my life as I please? How many have we known who've already fallen into that ditch?

The balance is struck by Paul reminding us that complete confidence in our salvation by God should not turn into overconfidence or complacency. He warns about thinking yourself something special because you are connected to the root. That you have secured this position because God saw something special about you. That God needs to have you there. The fact that you are saved does not give you reason to boast about yourself, he tells us. Rather, he says, consider that if God was willing to break off the natural branches (the Jews) when they rebelled against him, he will not show you any special consideration either.

Do not be arrogant, but afraid, he tells us. Not scared. Not doubting, not worrying. But with a healthy understanding that your position as a grafted branch stands only by grace alone. You did not make this happen. You do not support the tree. You absolutely depend on the root to stay alive. If you think you can get by without him, if you think yourself more important than the root, if you think that the root needs you; in short if you reject the root, God will not hesitate to break you off.

To speak plainly, faith can be lost. It cannot be taken from you by force. But through complacency and arrogance and neglect, it can weaken and fade and be lost. And without that connection to the life that Christ offers, we too will be lost. Stay humble and remember what you are. You are a wild branch grafted on by grace alone. You need the root of Christ. There is, quite literally, nothing else you truly need. There is nothing in this world that is worth risking that connection. Take every opportunity to strengthen your bond to the root. Study the word whenever you can. Rejoice in the forgiveness God offers through his sacraments. Walk the narrow road that leads to eternal life.

Brothers and sisters leave here today with both these truths firmly in your mind. Understand that your faith is a gift of grace. You have been grafted on purely by the mercy of our Lord. Do not take that for granted. Do not neglect your connection to the root of Christ and risk being broken off. And yet at the same time, leave here completely confident that it is God himself who works that connection and by that connection it is God himself who has paid the price, forgiven your sins and brought you to eternal life. Take your faith seriously but never doubt that you are saved. Amen.