

Proper 15, Year A

Isaiah 56:1,6-8

Psalm 67

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28

All summer long
we have been making our way
through Paul's Letter to the Romans,
and we have been asking one question:
What does it mean to be the Church together?

How do we welcome one another,
belong to one another,
disagree with each other,
and do the good work God has given us to do . . .
together?

Because it turns out
our God is a God of togetherness,
so if we're not in this together,
or we're not really in this at all.

* * *

Paul drives that point home
in spectacular fashion today.

Right out the gate, he asks,
"Has God rejected his people?"

You see, Paul was convinced
that when Jesus came,
he had not come solely for the sake of the Jewish people,
he had come for everyone . . .
for you,
and for me,
and for the whole wide world.

Yes, Jesus was the Jewish Messiah,
but what he came to bring us
was not solely for the Jewish people alone.

But apparently, some people thought that meant
that maybe God was done with Israel,
as though God were saying,
“You’re now in, and they’re now out.
I’ve traded in for a new model.”

That is, of course, how people so often think.
To most people,
if there’s a winner, there has to be a loser.
If God has chosen us, then surely God has unchosen them.
If God’s going to do addition, there has to be subtraction.

But notice what Paul says
in that very second sentence:
He says, “**By no means!**”

And when he says, “By no means,”
the Greek there is unequivocal.

He doesn’t stroke his beard and say,
“Well maybe,” or
“Huh, that’s a good question.”

When he says, “By no means,”
he is saying,
“Heeeck no!
Absolutely not!
God forbid it!
Don’t even let the thought take shape in your head!”

God does not discard his people.
God does not break one promise to make another.
God does not play musical chairs with mercy.
There is room for everyone.

And then Paul gives us this wonderful word:
“The gifts and the calling of God,” he says,
“are **irrevocable**.”

God does not have buyer’s remorse.

God has never looked at his people and thought,
“Well, that seemed like a good idea at the time.”

God does not love as casually as we do.

God does not make promises provisionally.

God does not call people
and then pretend he never knew them.

It's like that old hymn
some of you may have grown up singing:
"Great is thy faithfulness, O God, my Father;
There is no shadow of turning with thee."

God's love does not shift with the season or his mood.
God's mercy is not here today and gone tomorrow.
What God gives, God does not snatch back.
Whom God calls, God does not abandon.

This is why, my friends, when you are baptized,
we don't just pour the water over you;
we also take the sacred oil
and draw a cross upon your forehead,
look you in the eye, and say,
"So-and-so,
you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism
and marked as Christ's own forever."

Forever.

That is not a statement
about how tightly we hold on to God.
It is a statement
about how tightly God holds on to us.

Once you belong to God,
it is irrevocable.
Indelible.
Indissoluble.

There is no return policy
when it comes to God's love for you.

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So what does all of this mean for us
and for “being Church together?”
What is the grace for us today?

Well, it’s pretty simple.
The grace for us today is that
in God’s mind, no one is disposable.

We do not secure our place with God
by pushing somebody else out.

God does not have to love anyone less
in order to love us more.

Our God is a God of addition and multiplication,
not a God of subtraction or division.

So if ever you are around other Christians
who ever make it sound like
in order to be in, someone else has to be out,
take a cue from an old pro and say,
“By no means!”

Because it turns out,
we aren’t the ones
who hold the Church together.

God does.

Not because our faithfulness is great,
but because God’s is.

The bond is indissoluble.
The calling is irrevocable.

Like it or not,
we are in this together,
and that is actually very good news.

Amen.