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Worship Theme: God's Mercy Promotes Human Reconciliation

***"Has God's Word Failed?"***

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, August 16, 2020

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**Scriptures: Isaiah 55:8-13; Romans 11: 1-2a, 29-36**

Isaiah 55:8-13

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.  
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts.  
For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,  
making it bring forth and sprout,  
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;  
it shall not return to me empty,  
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,  
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.  
For you shall go out in joy,  
and be led back in peace;  
the mountains and the hills before you  
shall burst into song,  
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.  
Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;  
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;  
and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial,  
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Romans 11: 1-2a

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected [the Lord's] people whom [God] foreknew.

Romans 11: 29-36

...for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that [God] may be merciful to all. O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are [God's] judgments and how inscrutable [God's] ways!

“For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?”

“Or who has given a gift to him to receive a gift in return?”

For from [God] and through [God] and to [God] are all things. To [God] be the glory forever. Amen.

### ***Has God's Word failed?***

This week is my brother David and his wife Theresa's 40<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary.

*Congratulations!*

A few weeks before Betty and I got married in 1985,

I flew south to visit them in their home in Mexico City.

One day I took a side trip to buy a guitar for Betty.

I went to a village where all they make is guitars.

There was a little two-room night club on the corner,

a comfortable place to get a cold refreshing beverage after a long workday.

Above the door was a hand-painted sign in Spanish,

which I'll translate into English:

*“For Members and Non-Members Only”*

### ***Has God's Word failed?***

We have a few things to learn about living into the fullness of life today,

how to foster healing, hope-filled relationships.

We might could get some pointers

from what the Apostle Paul witnessed

going on between Jews and Gentiles.

There are many reasons Hebrews are called the Chosen people, if you will.

God created, liberated, and delivered

the Hebrews from slavery into freedom,

from near death into abundant life,

from wandering about and wondering who they are

to embodying the Promised Land and the Promises of God.

Immediately after the death and resurrection of a Jew named Jesus of Nazareth,

Hebrews who followed Jesus, like the disciples and first apostles,

preached Christ born, crucified, resurrected.

Initially they preached the Gospel, healed the sick,

and served God's people in the temples and synagogues,  
seeking to convert Jews to the earliest forms of Christianity.  
Soon however, rejected by religious leaders,  
kicked out of synagogues, ecclesiologically homeless,  
the first fishers of people searched for other waters to cast their nets.  
So, they preached Christ to Gentiles,  
telling God's story to anyone who would listen  
from Northern Africa to Southern Europe.

Paul saw both sides, both perspectives.  
understanding no matter how thin you mix the batter,  
there's always two sides to a pancake.

Being a builder of the Beloved Community,  
Paul sought to help reconcile Greeks and Jews  
because they both followed the same God.  
Some folks accepted Christ as Lord and Savior;  
some folks still waited for the Messiah.

Paul said to the Jews,  
*"Does this mean, then,  
that God is so fed up with Israel that he'll have nothing more to do with them?  
Hardly.  
Remember that I, the one writing these things, am an Israelite,  
a descendant of Abraham out of the tribe of Benjamin.  
You can't get much more Semitic than that!  
So we're not talking about repudiation.  
God has been too long involved with Israel,  
has too much invested, to simply wash God's hands of them."*

(Romans 11: 1-2, The Message)

To the Greeks, Paul said  
*"From your point of view  
as you hear and embrace the good news of the Message,  
it looks like the Jews are God's enemies.  
But looked at from the long-range perspective of God's overall purpose,  
they remain God's oldest friends."* (Romans 11: 29, The Message)

*"...for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." (NRSV)*

*"God's gifts and God's call are under full warranty  
—never canceled, never rescinded.  
There was a time not so long ago when you were on the outs with God.  
But then the Jews slammed the door on [Christ]  
and things opened up for you.*

*Now they are on the outs.  
But with the door held wide open for you,  
they have a way back in.  
In one way or another,  
God makes sure that we all experience what it means to be outside  
so that [God] can personally open the door and welcome us back in.”*  
(Romans 11: 29-32, The Message)

If some of us think, believe, feel  
we have the inside track to God  
while others are meant to be kept out, outside,  
then ***has God's Word failed?***

What do you think:  
Is our salvation, which is possible only by the grace of God,  
 tied to our communal reconciliation,  
which is made possible only by the mercy of God?

A friend told me about the time his small daughter ran into the living room  
and gave him a great big hug.  
He could see in the mirror on the wall that while she was hugging him, her father,  
she was sticking out her tongue at her brother.  
The dad did not know what to do; the mom sure did.  
She said, *“Child, take your arms down from around your father's neck.  
He loves your brother as much as he loves you.  
You cannot love your father  
and stick your tongue out at your brother at the same time.”*

God – speaking the Word through the Scriptures -- is saying the same thing:  
*“As much as I love you, I love your neighbors.  
You cannot, you must not, you shall not  
love your Creator and hate your neighbor at the same time.”*

Lord, have mercy.  
God, whose mercy is extended to all of us,  
members and non-members alike,  
Jews and Greeks, all races and colors and creeds and gender identities,  
calls out a mighty Word  
for us to share this same mercy and goodness with one and all,  
the Chosen and the Unchosen alike.

Unchosen is not in my dictionary or in any dictionary yet it is an apt word.  
No need to consult a thesaurus  
to know what being unchosen feels like.

The Rev. Dr. Richard Hamm is the former General Minister and President  
of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the US & Canada,  
and currently is a Legacy Partner of The Columbia Partnership.

One of Dick Hamm's stories is that early on he was tall and athletic.

Whenever he found himself on the school playground  
and teams were being chosen by two captains,  
not only was he always picked to be a teammate,  
he was usually one of the first selected.

One day after Dick Hamm was chosen early in the process,  
instead of goofing around or practicing his baseball swing,  
he looked over and, for the first time,  
saw the outward responses and feelings of his friends and classmates  
who got picked later,  
the ones called last,  
those not even chosen...the unchosen.

He felt a painful something in his heart.

Later he identified the sensation as the birth pangs of compassion,  
that moment divine mercy took hold of him.

### ***There was no failure of God's Word that day!***

When we see people with the eyes of Christ, with hearts of love,  
intentionally connecting with the experiences of the unchosen,  
our hearts are unbound.

Our hearts go out to them,  
changing the language and attitude from "them" to "us",  
seeing the unchosen as an extension of our life, faith community, world.

Martin Buber would call this the spiritual formation of an "I – Thou" relationship.

Still, the question is ever before us:

### ***Has God's word failed?***

God's word is forever linked with reconciliation.

Paul's letter to the Romans brings to the forefront of our minds  
our wondering, our questioning, our prayers  
over whether God's efforts at reconciliation have fallen short.

So, to better grasp God's Word we turn to the Word.

In the beginning, from the genesis of creation,  
the One Who Created and Creates  
sought to reconcile divinity with humanity.

God reached out with love and mercy  
to yoke humanity with Godself and one another,  
that we might exhibit and embody the same,

the same love, the same mercy.

God spoke through Isaiah, saying:

*"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.  
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts.  
For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,  
making it bring forth and sprout,  
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;  
it shall not return to me empty,  
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,  
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."*

God spoke through Jeremiah, saying:

*"I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts;  
and I will be their God, and they shall be my people...  
says the Lord." (Jer. 31: 33)*

Habakkuk spoke of his dialogue with God's Word:

*"I will stand at my watch post, and station myself on the rampart.  
I will keep watch to see what [God] will say to me...  
<sup>2</sup> Then the Lord answered me and said:  
'Write the vision; make it plain on tablets,  
so that a runner may read it.'" (Habakkuk 2: 1-2)*

God used the voice of Jesus Christ, the Son of God:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because [God] has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.  
[God] has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."  
Then [Jesus Christ] began to say to them,  
"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

(Luke 4: 18-19, 21)

### ***Has God's Word failed?***

Today God's Word is fulfilled in your hearing.  
The Word of the Lord speaks to us of the way of the Lord.

The Way of God is unconditional.  
Unconditional love  
An unconditional, higher love,  
    one that showers us with grace and hope, sustenance and joy.  
God has been, is now, and always will be merciful,  
    gracious, slow to anger, sure to sustain and save all people.

The Word of God emits from a deep and abiding place of faith,  
    a faith that trusts in the capacity and audacity of humanity  
        to love one another,  
            to love unconditionally as we have been loved, are loved, to love.

God's word is irrevocable.  
The irrevocable Word of God means the way of being that God offers to one and all  
    is not going to change or reverse or taken away.  
God declares I love you, and that is final.  
God's Big Love is a last and lasting word of grace.  
God declares love, love for all people,  
    and that word never, ever returns empty.

"You carry the dreams of God in your daring bodies." [Walter Brueggemann]  
The Word of God planted within your daring body is irrevocable.  
Nothing, nobody – no how, no way -- can ever take it away.  
*Th-th-that's all, folks!*  
The power to reconcile is the gift that keeps on giving.  
God has always been gracious, giving, generous.  
Extravagant comes to mind.

*"God's gifts and God's call are under full warranty—never canceled, never rescinded.  
...In one way or another,  
    God makes sure that we all experience  
        what it means to be outside  
            so that [God] can personally open the door  
                and welcome us back in."*

From Genesis to Revelation, from Jesus Christ to Paul to the great cloud of witnesses,  
    we have heard God's Word,  
        that any reconciliation worth its salt  
            is preceded by reckoning and reparation,  
                by honest dialogue, open listening, & actionable plans

There is no cheap grace.  
Reconciliation requires honest, hard work.  
Address past and present harm.  
Seek justice.

Reduce damages.  
Contemplate a future together.  
Resolve disputes and jealousies.  
Do not let the sun go down on your anger.  
Words matter.  
Actions, too.  
Make God's mercy real, tangible, relatable.

Today God's Word is fulfilled in your hearing.  
Today God's will for reconciliation is at work, active, engaged.  
Today God's prayer, hope, dream  
    for binding the holy with humanity and us one to another  
    is a work in process.

One fine day we will get to the Promised Land,  
    together,  
        hand in hand, side by side,  
            so glad we sought to reconcile,  
                so glad the Word has been fulfilled in our hearing,  
delighted to discover above Heaven's Gate  
    a replica of a hand-painted sign from a nightclub in Mexico,  
        painted in every color and language and dialect,  
            "For Members and Non-Members Only"

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*