

Fifth Sunday in Lent; April 3, 2022
Romans 11:11-22
"Branch Out"

So I ask, "Did they stumble in order to fall permanently?" Absolutely not! Rather, by their trespasses, salvation came to the Gentiles to make the Israelites jealous. Now if their trespass meant riches for the world, and their failure meant riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fullness mean!

I am speaking to you Gentiles. For as long as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I am going to speak highly of my ministry. Perhaps I may make my own people jealous, and so save some of them. For if their rejection meant the reconciliation of the world, what does their acceptance mean other than the dead coming to life?

If the part offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole branch. And if the root is holy, so are the branches. But if some of the branches were broken off, and you – a wild olive branch – were grafted in among them and share in the rich sap from the root of the olive tree, do not boast that you are better than the branches. If you do boast, remember that you are not supporting the root, but the root is supporting you. Then you will say: "Branches were broken off so that I am grafted in." That is true – but remember that they were broken off because of unbelief, and you remain in place by faith. Do not be conceited, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you. So take note of God's kindness and his severity: severity on those who have fallen, but God's kindness on you – if you remain in his kindness; otherwise, you also will be cut off.

The section we heard from St. Paul's letter to the Romans is twelve of the more intricate and complicated passages in all of God's Word. It is a challenging portion of Scripture to understand. And it can be very easy to lose sight of the forest for the trees when dealing with a section of Scripture like this. I'm afraid that if we focus on all the trees in these twelve verses – and don't get me wrong, the trees *are* important – but if we focus on all those trees we will miss the forest. And you will miss your branch as I continue talking into the afternoon. The main point is this: we are branches. And branches need to branch out.

In these verses, Paul specifically says we are olive branches. The point of that picture may be easily lost on people who live in a place where olive trees are not all over. But the picture is important to understand if we are going to get why we branches need to branch out in the Spirit.

Olive trees were big business in the Roman Empire at the time of St. Paul. Almost everyone did their cooking with olive oil. They considered cooking with anything other than olive oil barbaric. So in the Roman Empire there were olive trees everywhere. Most people were rural, and a large chunk of those rural folks made their living cultivating olives. These trees and the fruit they produced were so important that it was illegal to cut them down in many parts of the Empire.

Needless to say, it was very important for the people to know how to take care of these trees and get the most possible fruit from them. One trick they knew to get the most out of their olive trees was ingrafting branches. Whenever an olive tree had a dead branch on it, the gardener would cut that dead, useless branch off and replace it by grafting a healthy branch into the tree in place of the dead one. But ingrafting branches is traumatic for both tree and branch. So the Romans didn't use just any new branch when they grafted one in. They went out to the fields to the wild olive trees – the trees that didn't bear such good fruit – and they took a wild branch because those branches were hardier, more likely to survive the process of being grafted into a new tree. Then they brought that wild branch back to their good tree and

grafted the wild branch in. To do that they peeled back the bark where the dead branch had been cut off, and slotted in that new wild branch.

But it wasn't quite that easy. Because even after grafting a wild branch into an olive tree, the work isn't over; that new wild branch will easily die if the gardener does not tend to it very carefully. It will wither away and die, just like the branch it replaced, unless the gardener gives it special care. After all, the branch wasn't there naturally – so it needs special attention to survive.

Now, according to these verses, you and I are wild olive branches who are connected to a Tree that gives us spiritual life. We are connected by faith to the tree of Christ that gives us life. And because we are connected to Christ by faith, we live and produce good fruit.

We need to remember, however, that we were not naturally connected to that life-giving tree, Jesus Christ. No, by nature we were wild branches, producing ugly fruit, disconnected from Jesus. Only after the gardener, the Holy Spirit, connected us to Christ, did we truly come to life and begin to bear good fruit. We are wild branches, grafted into Christ by the Holy Spirit. So we also need to remember this: wild branches require special care from the gardener. If wild, ingrafted branches don't receive that special care, they will not bear fruit. Instead, they will die.

And yes, that is a threat. It is a threat that God makes to us, the wild branches. He reminds us that in the past there were other branches connected to the Tree of Life. But those branches died. And what happened to them is what happens to every dead branch. They were cut off and turned into firewood. The same thing will happen to us if we, as newly ingrafted branches, refuse the Gardener's care. We too can – and will – die and be broken off from Christ if we turn away the Holy Spirit's care.

God does not tell us this because he hates us. He tells us this because he cares about us, and does not want us to become like those first branches that died and broken off. Through St. Paul, God tells us: **Do not be conceited, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you.**

He also reminds us: **You remain in place by faith.** So here's the truth to take to heart: we are connected to Christ by faith, which the Holy Spirit creates and preserves in us. If we turn away his care, we doom our own faith. Then we, the wild branches, will die. And if we do, God will not spare us.

We hear this warning as a recurring theme in the season of Lent. We must make use of those things that the Holy Spirit uses to keep us branches alive. We must remain in God's Word and remember our baptisms and use his Holy Supper to keep us connected to our Savior. Or else we, the branches, endanger our own spiritual existence. There is a reason that this theme is hit on again and again and again and again in Scripture. Because it's important. And it's true. Turning away the work of the Holy Spirit is deadly.

But I wonder just how seriously we take the warnings. Do they have any effect on us any longer? God is serious about this. We need to be, too. Remember, God says: **For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you.** Every time we hear a warning like that and shrug it off, we the branches begin to creak and groan and crack away from the tree.

Why do we Christian branches so often simply shake off those warnings? Why is it that we are not genuinely afraid of losing our Christian faith? Why don't we realize that our faith in Christ is the easier to lose than our car keys that we must not take it for granted? Paul used a word that nails the problem exactly: conceit, or arrogance.

Maybe somewhere inside we think that just because we are official members of a Christian church we could never break off the tree of Christ. God tells us: **Do not be conceited.** A church directory is not the same thing as the Book of Life. Just because we are members of a church doesn't mean we can't lose our faith.

Or maybe somewhere inside we think that because we were baptized as little babies and we've been going to church for seventy or eighty or ninety years that we could never lose our faith, no matter how little seriousness or attention we actually give to God's Word. God tells us: **Do not be conceited.**

Or perhaps somewhere inside we think that because we give big with our time or money, or because we sit on committees or because we are a pastor or a teacher that we are somehow doing God some kind of a favor with our lives, and certainly God would never break off such influential and important branches. God tells even the human pillars of his church: **Do not be conceited.** God does not need you or me to work for his church any more than a shark needs more teeth. He doesn't need us. We need him. He's the tree; we're the branches. Not the other way around.

God will not spare anyone who goes so far in their arrogance that they spurn Gardener, the Holy Spirit, and his tools, the Word and Sacrament. The only thing separating us from the pile of firewood is faith, maintained by the Holy Spirit and his tools – not membership, or seniority, or volunteer hours, or alma maters.

Yet God does not tell us any of this so that fear overtakes us and leads us to despair. He gives us this warning because he loves us dearly, and more than anything else he does want us to remain in that Tree of Christ. He loves every branch. He loves those that are strong and vibrant; and he still cares deeply about those that are weak and crackling. He wants nothing more than to see us all grow and branch out as far as possible in his love.

His Son wants that, too. To make it possible for you to be a part of this life-giving Tree, God's own dear Son spread out his arms on another tree and suffered so that we could be grafted into the tree of salvation. As he bowed his head there and gave up his life for our sins, our forgiveness was won. And Jesus has not stopped caring for you. When God chases away the conceit in our hearts, then Jesus, our source of life, comes to us and says, **"No one can snatch you out of my hand."** And in that promise we find ourselves firmly attached to our Savior, from whom we draw forgiveness and eternal life.

In that promise, branches stop shaking and trembling like twigs in a tornado. It was the Holy Spirit who grafted you into God's tree in the first place. It is the Holy Spirit who this very day comes to strengthen your faith, using the body and blood of our Savior. He comes to us with that message over and over to strengthen us, so that we never lose our connection to Christ, so that we continue to grow and branch out in the power of the Spirit. He connected you in the first place, and he wants to keep you strong and connected.

In the love of God, there is nothing left to do but get stronger and bigger as the Holy Spirit tends to our souls. We branch out, strong in faith, as he tends to us and keeps us grafted in. Amen.