

The Second Sunday in Advent

Romans 15:4-13: "The Lord Has Mercy, So We Have Hope."

December 7/8, 2019 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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O Almighty God, who knitted together Your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of Your Son, grant us Your Holy Spirit, we humbly ask, that through patience and comfort of the Scriptures we may abound in hope, being filled with all joy and peace in believing; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, now and forever. Amen. (*The Lutheran Liturgy*, p.51)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the fifteenth chapter of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. / Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will praise You among the Gentiles, and sing to Your name." And again it is said, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people." And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol Him." And again Isaiah says, "The Root of Jesse will come, even He who arises to rule the Gentiles; in Him will the Gentiles hope." / May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, on whose blood and righteousness our hope of eternal life is built, dear fellow redeemed:

If God let you see who in your community would be going to heaven, how do you think you would react? Maybe He would reveal crowns on their heads visible only to your eyes. I think what you saw would surprise you. "You mean *that person* is going to be saved? This can't be right!" "But what about *them*? Where are *their* crowns? There must be some mistake!" It may well be that some of the good and kind people you know will not be counted among the believers on the last day. And some of those who seem especially wicked now may be standing next to you praising the Lord.

The Israelites in the Old Testament could hardly imagine that the unbelieving peoples around them might ever join them in worshiping the true God. These pagans worshiped false gods and ignored God's moral law. The Scriptures refer to them as belonging to the "nations," a word

that is also translated “Gentiles” like it is in today’s Epistle. A “Gentile” was a non-Israelite, one who did not know the Scriptures.

The Israelites had strict instructions to stay away from the Gentiles, so they would not be tempted to sin like they did. The Israelites did not always listen to this warning. As we know from Old Testament history, they often joined the Gentiles in their wickedness and worshiped other gods. At the same time, we also have examples of Gentiles who repented of their former ways and joined the Israelites. Rahab was one of these. She left her life of prostitution, married an Israelite man, and was part of the ancestral line of Jesus (Mat. 1:5).

In other words, nationality or family background were not the determining factors for whether or not a person believed. If these were the only factors, faith would not matter. As long as you had the right bloodline, the right family tree, you wouldn’t have to think much about your behavior or your actions. This could only lead to entitlement thinking and racism to the highest degree. There’s enough of that in the world; we don’t need it in the church too.

In the world, one group rejects another because of the color of their skin, the language they use, or where they came from. None of those factors should make a bit of difference to the members of Christ’s church. If you and I were to exclude others because of their family origins or background, don’t we see that we should exclude ourselves as well? I think most if not all of us descended from those pagan nations, from the Gentiles. These were the peoples the LORD carefully guarded the Israelites from.

Why did He do that? The LORD wanted the Israelites to be separate in order to preserve the promise, *His* promise. He said to Abraham, “*in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed*” (Gen. 22:18). “*All the nations*” would be blessed through Abraham, because the Savior would come through Abraham. So God had to preserve a remnant who would know this promise and hand it down through the generations. This was done through the teaching of the Scriptures. The Scriptures were sometimes tucked away in a closet and forgotten about, but they were never lost.

We still have the Old Testament Scriptures today. That was by God’s design. In today’s Epistle, St. Paul states, “*For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.*” Then Paul goes on to quote the Scriptures. He quotes from the inspired words of David in Psalm 18(:49), then from Moses (Deu. 32:43), then from another Psalm (117:1), then from Isaiah (11:10). What do all these say? They tell us that God planned salvation not only for His chosen people, but for the Gentiles too.

This is good news for us! It means it is possible for anyone to be saved. We tell our kids that it is possible they could be the president of the United States one day. But that possibility does not apply to everyone. It only applies to those who were born as citizens of this country, who have lived here at least fourteen years, and are at least thirty-five years old.

The Gospel promise is for all people in all places. Jesus came to atone for everyone’s sins. Each person’s sin was counted against the Lord, not just the sins of those who would enter heaven

someday. Jesus died in the place of both Jews and Gentiles, both males and females, both the outwardly good and the outwardly bad.

This shows us how great the mercy of the Lord is. It's one thing to have mercy on someone you like, who displays humility and respect, and who showers thanks upon you for your kindness. But what about someone who curses your name, spits in your face, and casts your gifts aside? This is how we and the rest of the world were toward Jesus. Collectively we sinners sent Him to the cross. We sent Him there as though *He* were the wrongdoer, as though *He* were the law-breaker, as though *He* were the worst sinner – much worse than we are.

Jesus endured all this for us. That's how merciful He is! That's how much He loves us. Earlier in his Epistle to the Romans, Paul writes, *"For one will scarcely die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die – but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us"* (5:7-8). Christ died for sinners. That means He died for you.

When you pray for His mercy, you don't have to wonder if He will give it. He has, He does, and He will. He is merciful even when we are not. Maybe we look at some members of our community as "second class." Or we pick on people because of how they look. Or we love to remind others of the mistakes they have made. Or we treat those who disagree with us as less than human. Or we refuse to forgive someone because we want them to suffer like we have.

Mercy is not a natural component of human nature. Our sinful nature directs us toward selfishness, revenge, and a judgmental attitude. God had to teach us what mercy is, and He taught it through His Son. He did not give us what we deserved, which is eternal torment in hell for our sins. He gave us grace and forgiveness. He did this because His Son willingly took our place. His perfect Son was willing to bear the holy wrath of God, so we would have His mercy. God will not punish you for your sins, either now or in eternity. He punished His Son in your place instead.

Jesus died for you, but not just for you. He died for everyone around you too. Instead of imagining the people of our community as likely or not likely to join us in heaven based on their background, their circumstances, or their outward appearance, we should look at them as God does. God looks upon them with mercy. They are still living and breathing. Their fate – as far as we know – is not sealed. They need grace and forgiveness and hope just as much as we do. *"Therefore welcome one another,"* writes Paul, *"as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."*

The Roman congregation to which Paul first addressed his letter was not perfectly united. It consisted of both Jewish and Gentile converts. Their backgrounds and customs were very different. One was a background of strict obedience to God's law. The other was a background of license and freedom. How could the two ever come together? Their common ground was Christ, who fulfilled the Commandments for both, and who shed His holy blood for them all.

This is what has brought us together here as well. We do not all think the same. We do not see everything the same way. Sometimes our personalities clash, and we find it difficult to get along. But we are drawn together and kept together by the blood of Jesus. None of us is above another. None of us has more to boast about than another. None of us is more treasured in

God's sight than another. Each of us is equally forgiven of our sins, and each is clothed in the spotless garment of Jesus' righteousness.

This, dear friends in Christ, is our hope. It is not an uncertain hope, a desperate hanging-on-by-our-fingertips kind of hope. Our hope is securely rooted in Jesus. It is a sure hope. This is the hope Paul writes about, which is planted and grows in us by the power of the Holy Spirit through the Word. Where this hope is, there is faith toward God and love toward our neighbor, and there is a joyful anticipation of Christ's return.

Do not let the devil, the world, and your own sinful weakness lead you to despair. The Lord looks upon you with mercy, and He will soon come again to free you from this world of trouble. *"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."*

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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