

Saved By Grace Lutheran Church

Sermon by Pastor Tim Bartels

Trinity 21, 2014

Romans 11:13-24¹

Part I

If you have ever taken Highway 26 to Seaside, you have passed by one of Oregon's largest and oldest trees. A sign along the roadside marks the tree, a Sitka Spruce. It is two hundred feet high and seven hundred fifty years old. That means it was already two hundred fifty years old by the time of the Lutheran Reformation; and five hundred years old by the time of the American Revolutionary War. That makes for a pretty old tree.

If you think a seven hundred fifty year old Sitka Spruce is old, olive trees have even longer lives. Many of them in the Mediterranean world are at least twice as old as Oregon's Sitka spruce. A number of them are fifteen hundred years old; and some are more than two thousand years old. They were saplings way back at the time of Christ.

Since we are not particularly familiar with olive trees and, since they form an important part of our text, let's learn a bit about them. Olive trees are actually *cousins* to the Oregon's Sitka spruce. That is, olive trees are evergreen trees. They are not near as tall and narrow as Sitka spruce. They are short and wide. Their limbs are graceful and billowing. Older olive trees have big gnarly knots in their trunks. The gnarls add a lot of character.

There is a curious thing about olive trees that our text hints at. Gardeners do a lot of *grafting* of olive trees. They will take a branch from *one* variety. Then they will graft it into an *existing* olive tree. They do that, because the grafted branch may produce more and bigger olives than the host tree. Yet, the host tree may have a better root system. The graft, then, gives you the best of both worlds.

One more thing; *wild* olive trees can develop quite a root system. That root system can make for a healthy tree. So rather than cut out the wild

olive tree, the gardener uses it. He leaves it where it is. Then he grafts branches from *cultivated* olive trees into it. Connected to the wild olive tree, a good crop is produced.

Part II

Our text *turns* all of this on its head. Instead of grafting *cultivated* branches into a *wild* olive tree, God does just the *opposite*. He grafts *wild* branches into a *cultivated* Olive Tree.

This cultivated Olive Tree is a *picture* of God's chosen people, the *Jews*. They were the Old Testament Church. Their long history was *gnarled* with character. It was gnarled with the deliverance through the Red Sea; the conquest of the land of Canaan; the exile of the Jews into the land of Babylon. All of this history was *rooted* in God's Word with Jesus at the center of it all. Jesus, the Savior, was to be born of the Jewish people. The wild grafts, on the other hand, are a *picture* of the *Gentiles*. The Gentiles are everyone who is not a Jew. They are people who have been part of wild trees. They are the wild trees of false worship, self-righteous religion, man-centered philosophy. To be sure, these wild trees and their followers look good. They have wide reaching branches, providing a home for many.

Though they do, they are diseased; diseased at the root. They are, because they are a part of the family tree of Adam. It was Adam who listened to the devil. The devil came to Adam at the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. There he tempted Adam to eat from its forbidden fruit. Adam did. He ate from the forbidden fruit and sinned. Sin left him diseased and dying, and everyone in his family tree.

The root disease of sin reminds us of the Ebola virus that has come to the US. Once it gets in the body, it takes over. It causes the body to have fever, vomiting and bleeding. It attacks the organs. Within a matter of days, the disease claims the life of the host. It is deadly. That's what the root disease of the sin does to mankind. It leaves him for dead on the family tree of Adam.

So, God took the grafting knife of the law. With it he cut off branches from these wild trees and diseased root systems. Then he took that knife and made a slice in the bark of his cultivated Olive Tree. He bent the limb with the slice in it, inserted the cut off wild branch into the slice, wrapped it, and the graft took. In other words, God brought many Gentiles out of unbelief to join them to Jesus by faith. Joined to Jesus by faith, they are a part of God's Olive Tree, the Church.

That's what God did for you and me, sitting here. He took you and me, rooted in the tree of our old Adam. As a part of his family tree we were dying. So he used the law to cut you off from your sinful ways. The cut hurt. You bled. At the same time, he made a slice in his Olive Tree and inserted you in it. That is, by means of his Word he comforted you in Jesus. He took away your sin. He bound you to Jesus by faith. The graft took. You are a part of his Church; one of its many branches.

Part II

...but there is trouble in God's Olive Tree. Some of the branches get *too full* of themselves. They are the newly grafted in branches. To put it another way, many of the Gentile Christians felt proud at the time of our text. They put confidence in the number and size of their good works. They compared themselves to the Jews, who had fallen away from Christ. Because they did, they *boasted* against the fallen away Jew.

That is *always* the temptation in God's Olive Tree. There is always the temptation to put pride in *who* we are. We, too, can feel that we are somehow *better than* those who have fallen away. After all, *we* haven't fallen away. We feel that we are *more deserving* than those cut off. We have given more time, more talent, more treasure. We feel *more meritorious*. It's that "merit badge" mentality the old Adam has before God.

It's all about feeling self-righteous. Our diseased old Adam *can't* shake it. He constantly is looking to feel better than the fallen away sinner. On the one hand, he doesn't do the sins the fallen sinner does. On the other hand, he does do a lot for God. As a result, he has swagger before God

and neighbor; thinks he can move to the head of the class; deserves the best seat.

This self-righteous pride is the sin to which the devil tempted Adam. "You will be like God."² God is keeping all the glory for himself. He does not want you to share in his glory. Go ahead and grab it. You deserve a little bit of credit for what you do. You are better than those who have fallen away."

Part IV

Yet, what does God have to say about this way of thinking? "Do not boast against the branches...Because of unbelief they were broken...Do not be haughty, but fear." The pruning of God's law cut off the dead branches. It cut them off *not* because they were worse than you; not because they merited less than you. No. They had plenty of "fruit" in their lives; they, too, have the veneer of being "good" people. They are cut off for one reason; and, for one reason only. They fell from faith. You are a part of God's Olive Tree for one reason. You "stand by faith." That is to say, God grafted you in by faith. The Olive Tree by its word and sacrament ministry, feeds your faith. Fed by word and sacrament, God brings forth the olives of good works in your life; God produces the giving of time, talent and treasure. They don't support the Root, Jesus. The Root supports you.

So, if you put confidence in the fruit, God's law will take the pruning shears to you. They will cut you off like a diseased branch. Cut off you will be good for nothing but the brush pile and to be cast into hell's fire.

Part V

In order to save you from the fires of hell, Jesus was cut off *for you*. He was cut off from another tree. It was a tree that stood on Mount Calvary. There Jesus was nailed to the dead tree trunk of the cross. There his

Father gave him all your sin; all your proud self-righteous sins. The Father gave Jesus hell for all your sins. Laden with your sin, Jesus shed his blood. As the blood poured out, his life ebbed out...the tree trunk of the cross was soaked with his blood. It was and Jesus was cut off from life; like a tree from its trunk.

Something miraculous, though, happened to that dead tree trunk. A green shoot sprouted with life in it. That is, Jesus rose from the dead. He defeated death and the devil. Now, from that once dead tree trunk, there is life. That is to say, triumphant over death, Jesus gives life. He is the Tree of Life; the Olive Tree that lives not two thousand years. He is the Olive Tree that lives forever and ever.

Now, you have been grafted into Jesus by means of your baptism. At the baptismal font, God joined you to Jesus' bloody wounds. That means, you are forgiven. The devil no longer has a hold on you. Neither does death have the last word. You are grafted into God's Olive Tree; and in that tree you have life eternal.

That's comforting to know, during this Ebola scare. It is, because grafted into Jesus' no deadly disease can cut you off from life eternal. It can't because Jesus is bigger than any disease; than any infirmity; bigger than death itself. Though it should claim lives -even yours or mine or your loved ones – you and they have eternal life in Jesus; and in the resurrection Jesus will give your and your loved one's bodies back, whole. This is the comfort you have, grafted into Jesus at the font.

Part VI

So, that is how it is. The root, Jesus, supports you, the branch. The Olive Tree, the church, feeds the graft of your faith. It does by word and sacrament ministry. As it does, God bears fruit in the branch of your life; some of it small; someone of it large. In any case, others find shade and refuge in the Olive Tree. That fruit, the yield, large or small is not the source of life. It is not something in which you take pride before God. It is the product of that life; that which God works in you.

It all gives you and me a new perspective on those who have fallen away. God wants them – Jew and Gentile, family and friends - in his Olive Tree *just as* he wants you and me. You and I have *nothing* to boast in before them or before God. It is *only* by grace that any one of us stand in God's Olive Tree. Amen!

1References to the text (NKJ) will not be cited in the sermon

2Genesis 3