“Have Mercy!”

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-36

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We are winding down our Roman Holiday. This summer we have touched on some highlights from Paul’s letter to the new Christians in Rome. We’ve seen the encouragement and teaching he has offered to these baby Christians, who are still trying to figure out their faith.

For the past three weeks we’ve been focusing on what seems to be a tangent in his letter. But as we’ll discover next week, it all fits together in one unified theme. Paul may be wordy, but it’s because he tries to pack in as much as he can into his letter.

Our lesson for this morning is quite brief, we only catch a few pieces of chapter 11, but those pieces contain a lot. In his letter to the Romans, Paul tries to work out the answers to a question regarding different groups of people. Many wonder if the Israelites have been rejected. Those who have been in God’s family for centuries all of a sudden seem to be left out now that Jesus has come. It seems they are unequal citizens in God’s kingdom now. Some speculate that they are not as worthy as those who now identify as Christians.

In chapter 11, Paul starts out by asking, “Has God rejected his people?” Here we find Paul completely circle back to the original question he asks in chapters 9 and 10.

He spends these two chapters pondering the fate of his nation, the Jewish people. Will God include them in the kingdom now that Jesus has come and rules have changed? He wrestles with this question, struggling to come up with a concise answer. He sort of meanders through a response, trying to work it out.

We spent two chapters watching Paul try to make sense of it. But now he comes back to that question. It is a question that is on the minds of everyone. Has God rejected his people? Has God’s mind changed? Are those who have long been in God’s family suddenly been kicked out? Are the people of Israel, God’s chosen people, now rejected? Kicked to the curb? Unwanted? Did God’s mind change?

It seems Paul has not been able to convince himself of a sure answer, and so he poses the question once more. Has God rejected his people?

Both Christians and Jews are curious. It’s easy to see their concern. Now that Jesus has come a lot of the rules have been overturned. Before, it was faithfulness to the law that brought salvation. Now it is faithfulness to God’s son. Before it was select group of people that was chosen by God. Now that door has swung wide open and anyone who desires may enter in.

These ancient Israelites wonder if they have been rejected. Forgotten. Forsaken. Or will God have mercy on them?

There are groups of people who still ask these questions. They wonder if they are equal members in the kingdom of God. It can be hard to tell when they are treated so unfairly here on earth.

The community of Ferguson, Mo is one such example. They have been plagued by chaos this week. This suburb of St. Louis has received worldwide attention for the events taking place there. It all started with the killing of an unarmed, black teenage boy, named Michael Brown. He was walking in a street when he was confronted by a white police officer. The details are still unclear at this point, but many witness say Brown was backing away with his hands up when the officer fired his gun and shot the boy dead.

This situation is similar to one in New York where Eric Garner died after being put in a stranglehold by police. And in L.A. where Ezell Ford was killed by police while lying down in the street. There are countless other examples. Each of these victims were black, unarmed, and none of them deserved to die.

The African-American community of Ferguson responded with protests. They started out peaceful. It was a gathering of lament in that town. The citizens were grieving, they were fearful for their community. But a handful of folks were angry and got out of control. The crowds found themselves confronted by police officers in riot gear and tear gas. Tanks and rifles. Several soldiers who served in Iraq compared the equipment of the Ferguson police to the equipment the army had overseas. It seems the police were armed for fighting insurgents, enemies of the U.S. Not the citizens they are called to protect.

All in response to a peaceful protest. A few folks got out of hand, but a majority were peaceful. The police response fueled the tension and escalated the emotions on the streets. The people of Ferguson simply want answers as to why one of their teenaged boys was killed by police. Why has the officer not been arrested, or at least questioned? Why is so much information being withheld?

That town has a history of violence and suffering. Much of the suffering stems from racial tension. It is a poor town, with few resources. About a third of the citizens live below the poverty line. It’s getting worse each year. Their school system is poorly funded. Unemployment is rampant.

Where is the justice in this? How can kids like Michael Brown have a fighting chance, when they are given such a dismal start?

The citizens of their community find themselves oppressed by racism that is still heated in our time. The Civil Rights era didn’t erase it, it still lingers. In our nation, the law claims that all are created equal and are offered equal protection. But in reality that just isn’t the case.

I find the situation in Ferguson appalling. Not because of the looting and riots that are the focal point on TV. But because of the injustice that its citizens face every day. Through the shouts and chants, even in the violence that has erupted this week, you can hear the people pleading for mercy. They are an ostracized people asking for an end to the racist system they live in.

We might watch this play out and convince ourselves that it isn’t our problem. We live far away. Let Ferguson work it out. But if we look closely, we see that this situation could have happened in our own community. Scratch the surface of any town in America and you’ll likely find a racial divide. You’ll find white people with privilege and power, while people of color suffer.

Communities around the world from Uganda to the West Bank have responded to images of Ferguson. They recognize the images. They’ve been through this situation. People in Kenya and Brazil have pointed out nearly identical situations in their communities. A young man of color, unarmed, is shot and killed by law enforcement. Racism and oppression abound worldwide. For minorities in these countries, they too have found themselves lacking resources, not given as much as the majority population. They too have found themselves at the mercy of their nation’s law enforcement. Those who are called to protect and serve the people. Instead of a calm response, the minority people are faced with brutality and unfair tactics.

What are these citizens of various nations supposed to think when they are treated in such a way? Especially here in America where we are supposedly one nation under God. All created equal. All deserving of the same treatment.

The residents of Ferguson wonder when they will receive mercy. When will they be considered equal citizens under the law. Until this week their plight went unnoticed. The poverty and ostracism went relatively under the radar. It seems they were a forgotten community. And then this week, with the world watching, their plight has become the center of attention. We now see what an unfair hand they’ve been dealt. We’re left to wonder: Have these citizens been rejected?

Events such as these lead us to question what the solution is. How do we fix this and prevent another black boy from being killed? Who is to blame? Where should we point fingers?

We might find ourselves talking in circles, trying to come up with a response. It is complicated and there’s no easy solution.

This isn’t too different from Paul’s quandary about the salvation of Israel. He tries to answer the question about God rejecting a group of people, but he cannot come up with a clear answer. He cannot explain how grace works.

Which is just the way it is. We don’t have all of the answers. The world is too broke and messy for us to come up with simple responses to these complex situations. For Paul it was the salvation of his people. For us this week, it is the reality of racism in our society. There’s no easy answer.

As a church we worship a God of mystery. We don’t understand everything about God. And that’s okay. Faith isn’t about having all of the answers, it’s about seeking understanding and trusting in God’s faithfulness.

This is what Paul eventually circles back to. Paul lists what he knows to be true.

He knows for certain that the people of Israel have not been rejected, because God is faithful.

First of all, he himself is an Israelite. He speaks from his experience that God is faithful. This he knows to be true.

Second, Paul mentions the prophet Elijah, who refused to worship Baal. God promised to save 7,000 of Elijah’s comrades, and did so. Paul looked to scripture to see evidence that God is faithful and keeps promises.

Paul couldn’t answer that question about rejection in an easy way. His only response was to point to the evidence of God’s faithfulness. That even when we don’t know all of the answers, we can trust that God is faithful to us. That God’s promises hold true. Paul concludes with the hope that the people of Israel will be saved in the end. Because their fate is in God’s hands, and God is merciful. God is love. God is compassion. God loves each and every human being, no matter what group they belong to.

For the people of Ferguson, Mo this week, there are no easy answers. No, Mike Brown did not deserve to die, even if he did steal a box of cigars or blocked traffic in the street. Those are not offenses deserving death. No, the people in protest did not deserve to be treated the way that they did. There was damage done.

But we did catch a glimpse of grace and mercy this week as Highway Patrol Captain Ronald Johnson stepped into command. He did away with the riot gear and aggression. Instead he walked with the people who were protesting. He heard their frustrations and he apologized on behalf of his peers. He encouraged them to continue gathering and lifting their voices together. He allowed them their right to peaceably assemble. He made space for a need in that community, which is to be heard and treated with dignity.

Other moments of grace have sprung up. Churches from all over St. Louis have responded with love and compassion, even though they don’t have answers to the problem. These kind souls have beautiful feet for showing God’s love to all of God’s children.

Love and compassion. These are the ways God responds to difficult situations. To those questions that we don’t have answers to. Trusting in God’s faithfulness, we boldly act in a way that Jesus would call us to. Loving our neighbor. Showing mercy. Reminding each other that we are all created in the image of God. That we are all equally loved by our creator. That we ought to treat each other as though we really believe that is true.

Paul ends this portion of his letter with a doxology. Giving praise to God in the midst of Paul’s inability to answer those tough questions. He shows us that when we don’t have the answers, when we can’t explain a situation, we put it in God’s hands and trust that the Spirit will guide our actions toward peace. Because God does not reject anyone.

Let us pray…