

Just Who Runs the Show?

by Linda Rex

August 20, 2023, Proper 15 | After Pentecost—I was watching a BibleProject video this week on the kingdom of God, and it struck me how we go about our everyday lives without realizing the significance of what it means to be real participants in God's life and love. In fact, we often act as though we are in charge—in charge of our lives, our belongings, our communities, our world—but do not ever give much thought to the reality that none of it belongs to us. In the real scheme of things, all that we have and all that we are is a gift from God, a God who loves to share what he has with others, specifically with all of us.

Even a cursory glance at the cosmos in which we live and the earth on which we reside shows us the magnitude of what God made us responsible for when he created human beings and said to them, "Here, take care of this, flourish within it, and spread out in every direction to fill it." This earth and this cosmos were never meant to be ours to use and abuse, but rather were a stewardship responsibility and gift, to be administered under the leadership and guidance of our heavenly Father through his Son and in the Spirit.

In other words, from the beginning, it was always about relationship. And when we stubbornly turned away from God, insisting on doing everything our way, according to our own determination of what was right or wrong, we found ourselves endlessly with our back against the wall, needing delivered by the Lord of all. God chose out a people through whom he would send his Son to take on our human flesh—the ancient Israelites. Through them came Jesus, the Savior of all and Lord of all, who was the way in which God once and for all established his rule and reign within our human sphere in the manner he always intended it to be expressed. In his Son, Jesus Christ, God's will was, is and will be fulfilled here on earth as it is in heaven.

And that is the issue for us. We don't want God dictating to us how to do things. And even if it is up to God, his kingdom and his will doesn't seem to be being fulfilled right now. What we forget is that God always meant for his kingdom life to be expressed in and through us as human beings, those made in his image and after his likeness. And we stubbornly insist on doing it our way. We go about trying to figure it out on our own, when we were always meant to do everything in union and communion with the God who made us and gifted us with the responsibility to care for what he had made.

In Romans 11:1–2a, 29–32, our passage for this Sunday, the apostle Paul explains that even though his own people, the ancient Jews, had rejected God, God never rejected them. God had made a commitment to the ancient nation of Israel, and in spite of their constant rejection and disobedience to the covenant, God was faithful. And when Jesus came, he was rejected and crucified, even though it was evident that he was not guilty but was the Anointed One sent by God. In spite of Paul's people rejecting Jesus in this way, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ made possible the acceptance and deliverance of every human being, Jew and non-Jew. The point Paul was making, and this is central to the book of Romans, was that every human being is guilty of sin and of turning away from God. But God, in Christ, has brought every one of us back to himself, and in the gift of the Spirit, unites us with himself in such a way that none of us can be separated from the love of God in Christ. It is a beautiful and glorious thing which God has done!

So, even though people from both sides of the aisle—Jews and non-Jews—have turned from God and are guilty of sin, both are set free in and through Jesus in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, and by receiving the gift of the Spirit are included in the body of Christ. The body of Christ, the Church, is meant to be a pointer to or witness to the kingdom of God in this world today. In other words, when believers live out the truth of our inclusion in God's love and life,

living in other-centered love, they are a real expression of what it looks like to participate in the kingdom of God right now in the Spirit. We are citizens of this world in one sense, while we are even more so, citizens of the kingdom of God in another. As citizens of the kingdom of God, in right relationship with Father, Son, and Spirit, we live out our existence on this earth as stewards of all God has made, bearing witness to God and his love as his adopted, beloved children, living together in unity, equality, and those who uniquely bear the image and likeness of Jesus Christ, just as we were always meant to.

Heavenly God, thank you for never giving up on us, but always being good and being faithful. Thank you, Jesus, for coming to bring us home to the Father, and for sending the Spirit so even now we can share life with you. May we live even now in the true reality of your heavenly kingdom, through Jesus our Lord and by your Spirit. Amen.

“I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew. ... for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, so these also now have been disobedient, that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy. For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all.” Romans 11:1–2a, 29–32 NASB

“Jesus went away from there, and withdrew into the district of Tyre and Sidon. And a Canaanite woman from that region came out and began to cry out, saying, ‘Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed.’ But He did not answer her a word. And His disciples came and implored Him, saying, ‘Send her away, because she keeps shouting at us.’ But He answered and said, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ But she came and began to bow down before Him, saying, ‘Lord, help me!’ And He answered and said, ‘It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.’ But she said, ‘Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.’ Then Jesus said to her, ‘O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed at once.” Matthew 15:21–28 NASB