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**Title: The Nourishing Sap**  
**Text: Romans 11:16-24**  
**Theme: Our Christian faith is grounded in Jewish history.**

I was recently helping my granddaughter, Shannon, build a snowman. She remembered exactly how we did it last year: the same carrot for a nose, the same hat, the same scarf. It was almost like repeating a ritual. In fact, all sorts of memories are so important in the life of this nine-year-old that they are part of her personality. I wonder if I ever treasured memories that much.

At my present age, however, I have a lot of memories of all sorts. You probably know what I mean. Many of us here today have deep memories. One of my projects right now is writing a history of the last fifty years at First Baptist, and I am seeing familiar names in documents from thirty and forty years ago. Our congregation has a rich history, and those of us who have only recently entered that history are being nourished by a great tradition. Whatever our memories are, they're what makes each of us the persons we are. Memories are central to our very identity.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes it seems that I have forgotten so much, and that makes the memories I do have all the more precious. I love learning about the past—not only the past I've been a part of, but the generations before I came along, the history in which I am but the latest chapter. The Bible is, of course, a book of history. The New Testament begins with a family tree tracing Jesus' ancestry all the way back to Abraham (Matt. 1:1-17). Time and time again in the Bible we are told that we should remember the past—most especially, perhaps, by Jesus himself in the familiar words of the Lord's Supper: "Do this in remembrance of me." (1 Cor. 11:24)

Christianity is based upon history. Take away the history and nothing of substance remains. That's what Paul meant when he said, "If Jesus Christ is not risen from the dead, then neither our preaching nor your faith has any meaning at all" (1 Cor 15:14). This emphasis on history is something we share with Judaism. In fact, Jews and Christians share a large part of our history. That's what Paul is thinking about in the middle of his Letter to the Romans when he agonizes over the Jewish rejection of Jesus. He hopes he can make his own people so jealous they will want to believe in Jesus. After all, he says, God has not rejected the Jews. (11:11) Let's read verses 16-24 of that chapter:

*. . . if the roots of a tree are offered to God, the branches are his also. Some of the branches of the cultivated olive tree have been broken off, and a branch of a wild olive tree has been joined to it. You Gentiles are like that wild olive tree, and now you share the strong spiritual life of the Jews. So then, you must not despise those who were broken off like branches. How can you be proud? You are just a branch; you don't support the roots—the roots support you. But you will say, "Yes, but the branches were broken off to make room for me." That is true. They were broken off because they did not believe, while you remain in place because you do believe. But do not be proud of it; instead, be afraid. God did not spare the Jews, who are like natural branches; do you think he will spare you? Here we see how kind and how severe God is. He is severe toward those who have fallen, but kind to you—if you continue in his kindness. But if you do not, you too will be broken off. And if the Jews abandon their unbelief, they will be put back in the place where they were; for God is able to do that. You Gentiles are like the branch of a wild olive tree that is broken off and then, contrary to nature, is joined to a cultivated olive tree. The Jews are like this cultivated tree; and it will be much easier for God to join these broken-off branches to their own tree again. (TEV)*

In these verses Paul says in no uncertain terms that Christianity has Jewish roots, that our Christian faith is grounded in Jewish history. He deals with Christian attitudes towards Jews, and he tells both of us that we need our history if our faith is to remain strong and healthy.

I. First of all, let's think about how powerful it is to have a common history. That's something my wife and I know, because we grew up in the same town, belonged to the same church, and graduated from the same high school. As kids our families both went to the beach. Recently Jean and I took some time off to drive to the Rhode Island shore and look for birds, a trip we've taken many times. We saw many places that we remember. Down on Point Judith there is a popular restaurant named Aunt Carrie's which Jean remembers eating in with her family when she was four years old. It has changed very little since then and is just as popular today as ever. Nearby is a beach that the two of us went to when we were in high school and dating. It's a history we share. Our common history has been a source of strength in our marriage.

Professor Miroslav Volf of Yale says that the way we experience time is similar to the way we hear a sound from a good stringed instrument. When we hear the sound of a cello, for example, we don't hear a single tone produced by the full length of the string. Present in that tone are tones from the string's half-length, quarter-length, and eighth-length—all shaped by the wooden body of the instrument. It is similar with the music of our lives. At any given time, we do not hear only the simple, solitary tone of the present; rather, in that present resonate many sounds of past experiences and future possibilities. This is how our present acquires depth.<sup>11</sup>

This feeling about history is a feeling Paul seems to have in Romans 11. He uses a most unusual comparison. The Jews, he says, are like an olive tree in an orchard. The trunk and roots of the tree are their history, going back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. You Gentiles, he says—or let's update it to read "you Christians"—have been grafted onto the trunk of that tree. You are like branches from a wild olive brought into the orchard and carefully grafted onto the cultivated tree. What would a wild olive tree be like? It almost makes me feel like I'm descended from barbarians (which I probably am). The cultivated tree is the one that's been cared for. It's been fed and pruned and protected. The wild tree could be scrawny and misshapen. It probably doesn't bear good fruit. It could be cut down for firewood. On the other hand, why bring its branch into the orchard? It must have something special to offer to the farmer—some special sort of olive, something which, with a little TLC, will produce delicious and abundant fruit.

Paul says the tree itself is Jewish; that is, it represents God's covenant with Israel when he chose them to be his own people. Now some branches have been broken off of the tree. These are the disbelieving Jews, who in their disbelief, separated themselves from their own history. They are no longer nourished by their roots. But that doesn't mean the tree is gone. Paul asks in 11:11, "Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery?" He answers with his strongest negative, "Not at all!" God's olive tree remains in the orchard, and new branches are added to it. We Christians are some of those branches. We do not have a history separate from those Jews of Old Testament times. We, too, are children of Abraham.

Paul uses a similar idea but a different metaphor in his letter to the Galatians. He talks there about becoming children of God. "If you belong to Christ," he declares, "then you are the descendants of Abraham and will receive what God has promised" (Gal. 3:29). Then Paul goes on to compare us to slave children who are adopted into a family and receive the full rights and inheritance of the sons of that family. (Gal. 4:1-7) What is important in this case and in Romans is that God has acted. He has chosen us long before we have chosen him. And his choice makes all the difference.

Now just one more thing on this comparison with the olive tree. Can it be applied today? Is there today a group who were once part of the covenant people but who by their disbelief have removed themselves from it? Clearly that includes more than Jews. There are plenty of Americans who once were Christian believers but who no longer have anything to do with Christian faith. They haven't lost their salvation, but they're not in fellowship with God. They are not sustained by the roots they once had. They are branches that have been broken off. Yet, new branches have been added. The Church has been growing by leaps and bounds. There are thousands of believers all around the world—in Asia and Africa and South America—who have accepted Christ into their hearts

and have been joined to the olive tree.<sup>1</sup> The tree itself is the same; it is God's chosen people and his promises; it is still the tree of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But the branches are different than in Paul's day. They are all sorts of people, speaking different languages, having different cultures, wearing different clothes. They are all Christians and they have a history in common with the Jews. Their faith—our faith—is grounded in Jewish history.

II. In the second place, Paul says that our common history should shape our attitudes: "So then," Paul writes, "you must not despise those who were broken off like branches. How can you be proud? You are just a branch; you don't support the roots—the roots support you." That puts me in my place: I'm just a branch! If you know anything about history, you'll know that people who call themselves Christians have totally ignored this verse. Instead of treating Jews like fellow descendants of Abraham, they have treated them with cruelty and disdain. This verse makes it clear that Paul would never approve of such attitudes.

My wife and I watched a really funny TV program last week which illustrated disdainful attitudes. It was an episode of a British comedy series named "Keeping Up Appearances." The leading character, played by Patricia Routledge, is a woman who is highly conscious of her social position and wants nothing to do with her lower-class sister and her family. In one episode this woman buys some new furniture and arranges to have it delivered. More important to her than the furniture is the fact that the truck which delivers it has painted on the side the royal insignia with the phrase "by appointment to her majesty the queen." She wants her neighbors to see that truck and be impressed. When the woman's sister and her lower-class husband show up in a rusty, decrepit truck to pick up her old furniture, the woman is humiliated to think the neighbors will see them.

Acting superior to others is actually a particular problem for Christians. We have discovered something we think is wonderful. But in sharing it we communicate the idea that we have something good and the other person does not have it. That makes us better than the other person—or so it seems, both to us and to them. A lot of people who otherwise believe in God are repelled by the church because of these so-called "holier than thou" attitudes. Jesus found the same problem among the Pharisees, who prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers." He sharply criticized such attitudes and praised the tax collector, who "would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner'" (Luke 18:11-13).

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<sup>1</sup>Attend Adult Seminar during Lent to learn about the emerging worldwide Church.

Paul says, “ So then, you must not despise those who were broken off like branches.” Then, in verse 20, he adds, “Do not be proud of it; instead, be afraid.” If God could break off Jewish branches because they did not believe, he can also break off Christian branches for unbelief. We can be estranged from our history. We can’t take our position for granted. We need to let our attitudes be shaped by our common history.

III. We need that history. Our faith needs that history—if it is to remain strong and healthy. Here, once again, “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 9:10). “God did not spare the Jews,” Paul says. “Do you think he will spare you?” Paul realized he himself needed the grace of God every day. He wrote to Timothy, “This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief” (1 Tim. 1:15 KJV). Every Christian should memorize that verse. Without the continued nourishment of the past we easily fall into error and trouble. We would do well to be afraid of being cut off.

Our faith needs nourishment. In verse 17 Paul says, “You, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root” (NIV). Paul knew how trees grow. The sap comes up through the trunk of the tree to maintain its life. The Greek word Paul uses is found only this once in the Bible. In the Greek it reads, “the fatness of the root of the olive tree.” How is our faith to be nourished, to be fed? In this place, Paul says we should stay close to the root of our faith, which means feeding from our Jewish spiritual heritage.

On the farm of Mr. Hughes off Juniper Road in Bloomfield every year you can see maple trees with buckets hanging against their trunks, collecting the sap which flows so well during the warm days and cold nights of early spring, sap which is then boiled down into maple syrup. It’s a New England tradition. So we know what Paul means by “the nourishing sap.” The *New Living Translation* does a good job with this verse. It says, “So now you also receive the blessing God has promised Abraham and his children, sharing in God’s rich nourishment of his special olive tree.”

I can give personal evidence of this. One of my interests is family history. In my own family there was only one genealogy that was passed down to me, and that was because there was a famous name in it. Through my father’s mother our line can be traced back to Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island; and that list of names was passed down from generation to generation only because of our one famous ancestor. I have read two biographies of Roger Williams, and one of his biographers says that he “counted the presence of God in his life as more valuable than all the world’s riches and honors.”<sup>iii</sup> His example—his life, his beliefs, his humble servanthood—inspires me today. It is a “nourishing sap” welling up from the roots of the tree. Yet more important are the spiritual ancestors we Christians all share—that “great cloud of witnesses” with

whom we are surrounded (Heb. 12-1).

I conclude, then, that our Christian faith is grounded in Jewish history. Jews and Christians are kinfolk spiritually. We who call upon the name of Jesus Christ are the spiritual descendants of Abraham. This history should shape our attitudes. Our faith needs this history if it is to remain genuine, strong and healthy.

I know my own father would have appreciated Paul's message in Romans 11. I close with a verse of his favorite hymn:

Faith of our fathers! Living still  
In spite of dungeon, fire, and sword,  
O how our hearts beat High with joy  
When-e'er we hear that glorious word!  
Faith of our fathers, holy faith!  
We will be true to thee till death.<sup>iv</sup>

By Richard N. Pierce, January 13, 2007

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i. From Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory* (2006), p. 24

ii. *Ibid.*, page 73.

iii. Gaustad, Edwin S. *Liberty of Conscience*. Judson Press, 1999. Page 163.

iv. Words by Frederick W. Faber, 1814-1863