

Dear **friends**,
brothers and **sisters**,

I am a **fan** of the **lectionary**...

The **reading** plan **provided** by the **church**
that gives you **options** for sermon **readings**.

In the **Lutheran** church where **I** grew up,
it was a fairly **mandatory** option.

And I've **come** to **appreciate** it.

Because if you **always** only **read**
and **re-read** the texts you're **comfortable** with
you get **stuck** in your **ways**
and you start **listening** to **yourself**
more than **to** the **Bible**.

That's not **good**.

But **then** again:

A **plan** can **also** get in the **way**.

It can **also** get you **stuck**.

If you only **follow** the **selected** set of **options**
you **limit** your **sight** to a **fraction** of
what is a **vast** and rich **library** of resources
that takes a **lifetime** to explore.

That's not good **either**.

As my friend **Julius** pointed **out** to me this **week**:

Dr. Martin Luther King said:

“**I** have a **dream!**”

and **not**

“**I have** a **plan!**”

So for my **third** sermon with **you**

I decided to **discard** the **plan**

and **select** a **text** that is quite **personal** to me.

It's the **parable** of the **olive** tree that I just **read** for **you**.

It's not an **easy** text at **all**.

And it can be **dangerous** to put under public **scrutiny**

what is so **close** to your heart.

But I decided it was **time** to dig in

and explore **deeper** and closer

what I thought I already **knew**.

I'll **open** this by telling you my **favorite** line from the passage:

“Do not **boast** over the other **branches!**

If you do boast, remember:

It is not **you** that supports the root

but the root supports **you.**”

Rather **humbling**, isn't it?

It's a **bit** of a **counter-intuitive** truth.

Because:

We **ourselves** want to be the **root**.

We want to be the **OWNERS** of our **success**.

We obviously **don't** want to own our **failures**,
but we **DO** want to **own** our **success**.

The **vision** of the **self-made man**!

The **glory** of a **self-made woman**!

We **all** want to be **self-made**
almost **all** of the time.

The **Bible** has a **different** idea.

“**Then** the LORD **God** formed a **human**
from the **dust** of the **ground**
and **breathed** into his **nostrils**
the **breath** of **life**
and the **human** became
a **living** being.”

We aren't **self-made**.

We're **God-made**.

Our **mistake** is somewhat **understandable**.

So **we** should have **empathy** with ourselves,
for **God** has **empathy** as well.

But that **doesn't** make all desires **good**.

The Bible has **very** strong words for this.

Many times it uses the word **PRIDE**.

It features **prominently** in the psalms.

And **much** of those **psalms** are attributed to **David**.

In them, you can **see** him **wrestling** with his **pride**
as a **powerful** king of a **proud** people.

But **most** of the psalms don't give **good marks** for pride.

It's **ambivalent**, at best, to be **proud**.

Psalm **10** associates **pride** with the **desire**
to push **God** out of our **life**,
and to focus **solely** on our **OWN** achievement,
our **OWN** success:

“In the **pride** of his **face**
the **wicked** does **not** seek God;
all his **thoughts** are:

“There **IS** no **God**.”

(Ps 10,4)

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

pointed to this when he **described** how many of his **peers** defined **success**:

“We are **prone** to **judge** success” he said,
“by the **index** of our **salaries** or the **size** of our **cars** **rather** than by the **quality** of our **service** and **relationship** to **mankind**.”

Touché.

Psalms **73** goes **further** and associates **pride** with **violence**:

“Therefore **pride** is their **necklace**; and violence **covers** them as a **garment**.”

(Ps 73,6)

Our **own** pride,
our **desire** to be in **control**,
our **desire** to be on **top**,
our **desire** to **rule** the **occasion** and **not** be ruled **by** it...
all these **desires** are the **perfect** breeding ground for **hate**.

“**Why** am I not on **top** anymore?”

Why are we losing **control**?

Why did **nobody** bow down and **listen**,

when I shared my grand **vision** for how to rule this **world**?”

Oh, we **all** do have it.

We have it **deep** inside us.

Anyone who **pretends** to have no **darkness**, is a **liar**.

Anyone who **claims** to have no **pride**, is a **fool**.

Admitting there is a **problem** is the first step towards **solving** it.

We must speak **up** to our **failures**,

we must **share** our **defeat**,

we must **carry** the load **together**

and **help** each other **up** when we're **weak**.

Sometimes that means **calling** out **evil**

and **hate**, and **injustice**,

with a voice **loud** and **clear**.

And **sometimes**

it also means **quiet**.

Simple.

Steady.

Quiet.

Psalm 59:

“For the **sin** of their **mouths**,

the **words** of their **lips**,

let them be **trapped** in their **pride**.”

(Ps 59,12)

Pride is a **trap**.

It seduces **you** into **longing** for **more** of **yourself**.

More of your **glory**.

More of **you**, you, you, **you**, you.

Pride is never **satisfied**.

Proverbs **11**, verse **2**:

“When **pride** **comes**,
then comes disgrace,
but with the **humble**
is **wisdom**.”

(Spr 11,2)

And in **Proverbs** 16, 18:

Pride goes
before **destruction**,
and a **haughty** spirit
before a **fall**.”

(Spr 16,18)

So **what** does all **this** have to do with our **reading** from Paul?

Let's dig in **deeper**.

The **main** purpose of Paul's **letter** to early Christians in **Rome**
was to establish **relationship**.

And in order to do that,
he had to **lay** out his **thoughts**.

He had to **show** his **hand** on core **theological** issues.

He had to **clarify** what in the **world** he was up to and how **his** thought related to **that** of **other** thinkers and **writers** and preachers.

One of the **main** questions for him was:

How does this **emerging** faith in **Christ** as the **Messiah** **relate** to the **faith** of **Jews** who **didn't** see Jesus as the **Messiah**?

Remember:

At the time,

there **was** no such thing as **organized** Christianity **yet**.

Jesus was a **Jew**.

Paul was a **Jew**.

The **whole** original **crew** were **Jews**.

So **all** of them had to **figure** out how to relate to their Jewish **ancestry**, and their Jewish **surroundings**.

And Paul was one of the **innovators** in this area.

While **Peter** thought Jewish **food** restrictions stayed **intact**,

Paul was more **liberal**.

He wanted to missionize **abroad**, where people weren't **circumcised** and had **different** rules about **food**.

Paul traveled **all** around the **Mediterranean**

and **preached** to **all** who would listen.

He didn't **distinguish**

between **worthy** Jews and **unworthy** Gentiles.

He thought **Jesus** had died for **all** nations and **all** people.

And **therefore**,

all of them were **worthy**

of salvation through **Christ**.

But **that** openness raised a **problem**:

If all can **join** and **faith** is **key**,

then **what** about the Jews

who **didn't** see Jesus as **Messiah**?

Were they now suddenly **damned** for all **eternity**?

Why? Where did that come from?

It would've been quite a **radical** shift

for a this early Christian **community**

that still saw the **Jewish** Bible

as the **holy** and **binding** foundation for **all** their life.

So **Paul** tries to **explain**

how the relationship of the **venerable** Jewish **tradition**

and this **new** emerging **Jesus** movement might work

theologically.

Like **Jesus**, he doesn't just give them a theological **tract**, but rather offers an **image**, a **metaphor**.

This **metaphor** is the **tree**.

The **olive** tree.

Such a **tree** has a few basic **components**:

It has **roots**.

It has a **trunk**.

It has **branches**, and **fruits**, and **leaves**.

Paul explains why Israel is **not** lost **forever**, and how **God** used Israel's **stumble** to **bring** out great **fruit** amongst **Gentiles**.

So in this **tree** image:

The **root** might be **God**.

The **trunk** might be **tradition**, covenant, **salvation**.

The **Jews** are the **branches**.

And **justice** is the **fruit**.

So what **happened** when all these **non-Jewish Gentiles** started **adopting** the Christian **faith**?

They were **grafted** in, Paul says.

They were **stuck** into the **trunk**

and started **displacing** the original **branches**, the **Jews**, in this **trunk** of **salvation**.

But **here** comes the **key**:

This **moment** of **success** –
finally being the **ones** to **replace** the **saved**,
the ancient **people** of the **Jews** –
this might **finally** be
the **time** to **shine** for the **Gentiles**
and to **boast**
and be proud
and **celebrate**
because finally **THEY**
were **now** on **top**.

Well, **Paul** won't **have** it.

“Do not **boast** over the **branches!**” he warns.

When you're **tempted** to **boast**,
always remember:

“Not **you** carry the **root**,
but the **root** carries **you**.”

In Paul's parable,
the Jews are **indeed** broken **off**
from the **trunk** of **salvation**
because **they** don't see **Christ** as **Messiah**.

HOWEVER, he says:

“Do **NOT** become **proud**,
but **stand** in **awe**.”

The Jewish **tradition** is
why **all** of **this** is even **possible**.
Humility is in order.

Borrowing **words** from Isaac **Newton**:

“If **I** have seen **further**,
it is by **standing**
on the **shoulders** of **giants**.”

Paul adds **another** word of **warning**:

“If **God** did not **spare** the **natural** branches,
perhaps God **will** not spare **you**.”

Continue with **kindness**,
“otherwise **you also** will be **cut** off.”

Proverbs affirms this with a **poignant** rule of **thumb**:

“Your **pride** will bring you **low**,
but **he** who is **lowly** in **spirit**
will obtain **honor**.”

(Spr 29,23)

It's **easy** to be **humble** when you're **low**.
But to **humble** yourself when you're **high**,
is **infinitely** hard.

We're **not** always easy
when we're **weak**.
But we're **most** in danger of **sin**
when we're on **top**.

So when **you** have a moment of high,
think **Paul**,
think Psalms,
think **Proverbs**.

Or **alternatively**...
listen to Kendrick **Lamar**!

**“Hold up... Sit down... Be Humble... Sit down...
Be Humble... Sit down... Be humble!”**

In his song **“Humble”**,
Kendrick **chronicles** the **challenge** of his **rise**
and the **voice** of his pride within.

**“That shit way too crazy, ay, ...
Obama just paged me, ay.”**

“**Obama** just paged me” is **probably** not even **exaggeration**.

President Obama **praised** his work a lot
and even **invited** him to the **White** House.

So **Kendrick** is **reflecting** on the great **temptation** of **success**.

And he has a **clear** and **simple** message for himself:

Hold up. Sit down. **Be humble**.

It's **easy** to be **humble** when you're **low**.

But true **humility** comes **out** when you're on **top**.

“**Character** is what you **do** for **those**,
who can do **nothing** for **you**.”

Remember **that**,

when you get **stuck** in **yourself**,

and you **cannot** see **beyond** the **sea** of your own **pain**,
your own **hate**, your own **things**, and your **success**.

Craft **reminders** into your daily **life**.

Like this one:

“For not **you** carry the **root**, but the **root** carries **you**.”

Only **then** can we **freely** ask **ourselves**

what Dr. **King** termed

“**life's** most **persistent** and **urgent** question”:

What am **I** doing for **others**?

So **now** let us **sing** our next **song** with the **band** and
if you **want**: join in the **chorus** with the **words**:

“We must **go!**

Live to feed the **hungry**,
stand beside the **broken**.

We must **go!**

Stepping **forward**.

Keep us from just **singing**.

Move us into **action**.

We must **go!**”

“God of **Justice**”.

Thank you.