

***Irrevocable* – Romans 11:1-2a, 29**

Rev. Matt Nieman

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None of us would ever consider disowning a child of ours. I mean, seriously disowning our child. We all have our moments, due to a kid's misbehavior, when we talk as if claiming them as our own is just something we can't continue to do. The mistakes, the disobedience, the unruliness — "Child, one of these days I'm gonna disown you."

Not surprisingly, the late comedian Rodney Dangerfield built much of his "No Respect" persona around the idea that his parents didn't want him. He used self-deprecating humor to suggest they went to great lengths to avoid him or get him out of their lives.

- "When I was a kid, my parents moved a lot — but I always found them."
- "My old man used to take me to the zoo. He said he was hoping my real parents would claim me."
- "When my parents got divorced, there was a custody fight over me. No one showed up."
- "One time my whole family played hide and seek. They found my mother in Pittsburgh!"
- "I asked my old man if I could go ice skating on the lake. He told me to wait until it gets warmer."

Kidding aside, there are real-life moments, unfortunately, when it indeed becomes, in the eyes of some parents, impossible to continue a relationship with a son or daughter.

Rarely does legal disownment of a child occur. Instead, it can be emotional.

Parents quietly withdraw from the relationship due to a conflict. They stop calling. They stop asking. They stop trying. The connection, while not formally broken, is functionally gone. They say in their hearts, “I’m done. I can’t do this anymore.”

Sometimes the emotional disownment comes from *exhaustion*. Years of worry, conflict and bad behavior have drained hope dry.

Or it comes from *hurt* so deep that the parent doesn’t know how to keep loving.

And sometimes it comes from *disappointment*. The child simply didn’t become what the parent had imagined, and so the parent, unexplainably, gives up.

Disownment can also be *legal*. A child is cut out of the will or written out of inheritance, and the law no longer recognizes them as part of the family. They’re effectively told: “You are no longer my child.”

The child, then, may be left with a wound that reaches to his or her very core: *If even my own parents don’t want me, who will?*

But here is the extraordinary thing about Romans 11: Paul says that God doesn’t love this way. Right in the middle of the most difficult theological discussion of his entire letter — Israel’s unbelief, rejection and stumbling — the author of Romans makes one audacious, unambiguous, uncompromising claim about Israel or anybody else. “God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew” (v. 2).

And then, a few verses later, he says something even more astonishing. “The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (v. 29). Irrevocable. Not subject to performance reviews. Not dependent on behavior. Not undone by failure, stumbling or wandering.

Paul repeats himself because he knows how hard it is for us to believe that spiritual disownment isn't what God does. We know humans can give up on relationships, because we have seen it with our own eyes. We know people can withdraw their love, because some of us have lived through emotional wringers. We know relationships can break, because it happens all the time.

But God is not like us. And Paul knows we need to hear that clearly.

In this text, Paul says both God's gifts and God's calling are irrevocable. Once they are given, there's no taking them back.

The Christian story is primarily about this — the irrevocable gifts and calling of God.

First, the non-returnable gifts God provides.

Where do we start? What's your favorite gift of God? God's creation — the earth and everything in it, God's love, God's forgiveness, God's patience, God's kindness? Whatever your favorite among the many God has offered us, they are freely given and God will never reach out and take them back.

When we don't deserve them due to our sin, when we refuse them due to our selfishness and arrogance, God doesn't pull them back or take them off the table. They are still there for us whenever we choose to accept them. God

doesn't care what our past histories are (and, boy, do we have histories), God doesn't care if we speak with a certain faith dialect or no faith dialect, God doesn't pull the plug after offering these gifts to us many, many times over. God is not taking them back.

When Jesus died on the cross and rose from the grave on Easter morning, he didn't do so for just some of us. He did this for all of us—no matter what we have done prior or what missteps we might make again.

These gifts are irrevocable.

And when we live in this grace—this heavenly and unmatched grace—we are freed. We are freed to be the people God wants us to be. Because we don't have to be perfect, we don't have to have a perfect past, we don't have to worry that some future blunder is going to cause God to reach out and take back what God's already given. And that is liberating.

Social worker and author Brene' Brown wrote a book titled, *The Gifts of Imperfection*. The subtitle of the book is "Let Go of Who you Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are."

That is exactly what should happen when we live in God's grace. Because of these gifts God has given and will not retrieve some day down the road, we can and should let go of who we think we're supposed to be and embrace who we are—loved and forgiven.

Each of us is different and has a unique identity. But commonly, we're children of God who are simply called to be good receivers of the irrevocable gifts God has offered.

And so, too, is God's calling irrevocable (says Paul). Just like we can't give back God's love, forgiveness, or our lives, we also can't give back our calling.

Each of us has a calling. Name it what you wish: a job, a mission, a purpose. But make no mistake, we each have a calling or sometimes more than one calling. God refuses to take this calling back. As long as we have breath left in us, there is a purpose for our lives.

The kingdom of God is only brought in fully when each of us acts on our calling. When each of us is working to be faithful to the call of Christ in our lives, then the divine plan begins to take shape.

Finding out what our call is, however, isn't always so easy. We all struggle to discern what God would have us do next.

We begin by figuring out what gives our lives meaning. What entities, activities, or issues grab our interest and passion? Maybe it's rather broad, like taking care of our neighbors. Or maybe it's seeing our grandkids succeed in school.

We start with identifying our interests and passions. After that, we identify the specific needs in those areas of interest.

So we take our passions or interests and we find out where they cross with the world's needs.

That's how we find our calling. As Frederick Buechner once said, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's hunger meet." At that intersection, the call God has issued to each of us and never takes back becomes apparent and alive.

The gifts of God and the calling of God. Both are irrevocable.

How should we take this? Should we be excited, should be frightened, should we concerned? Or should we be glad?

The late Rev. Peter Gomes, former minister of Harvard Memorial Church, in his final book *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, told a short story about an encounter he once had with the Queen of England and her mother, the Queen Mother, 25 years ago now.

Gomes writes, “In the summer of 2001, I found myself [worshipping] in the parish church in Windsor Great Park, where the royal family attends Sunday worship when in Windsor. The parish church is tiny, Victorian, and Gothic, complete with a choir composed of estate workers, and on the Sunday in question both Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and the Queen Mother were in attendance.

“To my great delight, immediately following the service I was invited to join mother and daughter for drinks at Royal Lodge, the Windsor residence of the Queen Mother. Then in her one hundred and second year, she was holding court in the form of a splendid pre-luncheon party in a setting worthy of a Merchant and Ivory film, and eventually I was summoned into the royal residence, where Her Majesty maintained a lively conversation. Among other observations, the Queen Mother remarked on how excellent the sermon had been [that morning]. ‘Don’t you agree?’ she asked me, which is a difficult question for an honest clergyman to answer, so I did what anyone would do under

the circumstances: I agreed. Then, with that world-class twinkle in her eye, the Queen Mother remarked, ‘I do like a bit of good news on Sunday, don’t you?’”

The Queen Mother’s penchant for a bit of good news on Sunday served as the inspiration for Gomes’ book about the Gospel. We all long for a bit of Good News from the Bible—especially in worship on Sunday.

The word of the Lord from Paul in Romans 11—how the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable—is Good News. God has given us gifts that will never be taken from us, including the gift of new life in Jesus Christ. So, too, is the reality that no matter our age or our abilities, there is a calling for each of us—something to do for the kingdom. We’ll always have a place.

That’s Good News on Sunday for a people who could always use a little more of it.