

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32 N.T. 150 (NRSV)

¹I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. ^{2a}God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.

²⁹for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. ³⁰Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. ³²For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

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“Can’t Undo”

Opening Prayer: Please bow with me in prayer. Father God, we come into your presence today because we love you and we want you to assure us that you love us too. Hold us close, and whisper into our ears your sweet Word of Life today. In Jesus’ Name we pray, **Amen.**

Introduction: *“Love is a many-splendored thing. Love is nature’s way of giving a reason to be living.”* Those are lines from the theme song of a movie that came out about the time I was born in the mid-1950s. Yes, love is a many-splendored thing. Love can lift a soul toward heaven, and it can unit that soul with God. **But as Jeremiah**, the prophet of old, tells us, **“The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it?”** (Jeremiah 17:9, NRSV). The fine line between love and hate can be very blurred. Love that runs hot can also run cold. Love can degenerate into a mixture of diametrically opposed emotions. Just listen to this clip from a popular song by Grammy Award winning R&B singer, **Alicia Keys**. This is the song that launched her career nearly 20-years ago way back in 2001:

{Play Aidio: “Fallin Clip.mp3” [0.21]}

I keep on fallin’, in and out of love witha you

I never loved someone the way that I’m lovin’ you, Oh, O, Awahh!

Are those cries of joy, or are they cries of pain? One moment you think you love someone and the next moment you’re not so sure. Some people just keep on fallin’ in and out of love. **Yes, love can be a many-splendored thing but love also can be a many-fickle thing.**

PAUSE

Move I.

Some people are fickle when it comes to God. Their love for God runs hot and it runs cold. Sometimes these people are very close to God—they're all buddy buddy with God. But then, at other times, they're far away from God—as if they don't even know who God is. I'm sure you've all heard of “**fair-weather friends.**” Well, when it comes to God these people treat God exactly the opposite. When a storm's brewing, they want God around, but when the weather's good, they've no use for God. I'd guess you could say that these people treat God like a “**foul-weather friend.**” When life is tough and living is a struggle, they're talking to God all of the time. But when life is good and living is large, they rush ahead on their own and leave God behind in the dust.

What if someone treated you like that? What if someone were only friendly with you when they needed something from you? How would that make you feel? Would you feel loved, or would you feel used? Sadly, that describes the way a lot of people treat God. God is their “foul-weather friend.” Such a person doesn't really love God, they just love what **God can do for them.** They're love is a very self-centered love.

Psychiatrists have a name to describe a person who acts like that; they say such a person is **narcissistic.** It was the famed Austrian psychiatrist, **Sigmund Freud,** who named this disorder after a character in Greek mythology—Narcissus. **Narcissus** was a handsome young lad who was doomed to fall in love with his own reflection as punishment for rejecting the affections of a fair maiden named Echo. Narcissus became totally focused on himself. Narcissus became narcissistic. The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines **narcissism** as **having an excessive love or admiration for oneself.** Such people have an inflated sense of their own importance. The universe revolves around them. They're love is completely self-centered.

In my 17-years as a pastor I've officiated at 45 weddings. In fact, I've got another one coming up in two weeks. Anyway, when a man and a woman get married, they're publicly declaring their love for each other. At their wedding they each **make a vow** to take each other **“for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health.”** Those vows pledge a mutual commitment to each other through thick or thin. Now, imagine for a moment, how a **narcissistic set of wedding** vows might be worded. Remember a narcissist is only interested in what's in the relationship for them. Their partner's interests are of no importance. **So, a narcissist would only offer** to give themselves to their partner **for worse, for poorer, and in sickness.** The narcissist only needs their partner, when they, the narcissist, is in need. And the narcissists would only **take their partner for better, for richer, and in health.** There is nothing mutual about this commitment, it's all one sided. **Now it's easy to see why a narcissist** would take such vows, but it's hard to image why any potential partner would ever accept such lopsided vows. But that's precisely what a lot of people mean when they claim to be in love with God. They love what God can do for them without actually loving God at all. They love the benefits without loving the benefactor. **Yes, some people are downright fickle when it comes to God.**

End I.

Move II.

But you can't undo God's promises. No matter how fickle you may be, no matter how narcissistic; God's promises still stand just as they always have. God's love for you isn't conditioned on your love for God. God remains faithful to you even if you're unfaithful to God. Did you hear what I just said? **God remains faithful to you even if you're unfaithful to God.** That statement is contrary to human intuition. Human intuition says, **"If my spouse is unfaithful to me, then I'm freed of my vow to remain faithful to them."** When one partner breaks their wedding vows, the other partner is free to seek a divorce. Marital unfaithfulness is acceptable grounds for divorce. (Matthew 5:22)

Our Bible lesson today from Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome is rarely the subject of sermons. Many argue that the rivalry between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians back in the first century isn't relevant to Christians in America today. But some have twisted Paul's words here in Romans 11 to argue for something called **"replacement theology."** The argument is that since the **Jews** rejected Jesus, the new believers in Christ's **church have taken the place** of Israel in God's master plan. Naturally, theologians have to give this theology a more sophisticated sounding name, so they call "replacement theology," **"supersessionism."** Checking our trusty *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, we find that supersessionism is **"the belief that...the Christian church has superseded Israel as the chosen, covenant people of God."** In other words, God has practiced a unique variant of **re-gifting**. But rather than the person receiving the unwanted gift re-gifting it to someone else, the person who gave the gift in the first place takes it back and re-gifts it on to someone else who they feel is more deserving. While this might all sound perfectly logical, it is **exactly the opposite of what Paul says in Romans 11.** Paul makes it crystal clear that God's gifts are irrevocable. God will not, and does not, take them back.

Let's look at the key verse from our Bible lesson today. In **Romans 11:29** (NRSV) Paul writes, "**For the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.**" To be **irrevocable** means that God cannot unilaterally take back his gifts and his call. What God has done with the people of Israel and what God has done with the people of the Church are still fully in effect.

Now, "**irrevocable**" is not a word we use all that often today. In fact, the only place I can think of, outside of this verse here in Romans, that uses this word is in the legal field. How many of you have ever heard of an "**irrevocable trust?**" (*Raise hand.*) According to the website *InvestorWords.com*, an irrevocable trust is "**a trust which cannot be changed or canceled without the consent of the beneficiary. Contributions cannot be taken out of the trust by the grantor.**" This explanation fits what God has done extremely well. God cannot take away the promises God has made to anyone. Now, the beneficiary is free to ignore the promise, but the promise still stands. God's promises are irrevocable trusts.

Like many people, hardly a day goes by when I don't use a word processor. I can hardly remember how I used to write back in the days before computers. (Yes, I'm that old.) What makes a word processor so convenient is how easily you can edit what you write. **To insert a letter just type it where you want it** and to delete a word just **highlight that word** and **hit delete**. Oh, and if you accidentally delete something you didn't want to just **go up to the edit menu** and hit "**undo clear.**" But **God's promises** don't work like a word processor. Once God has made a promise **it can't be undone**. **If you try to edit** the promise, all you see is the words "**can't undo.**" {Audio: "*Ding Sound.mp3*" [0:01]}. Human words may be editable. **But you can't undo God's promises.**

End II.

Move III.

And God shows mercy to fickle people. God doesn't treat people as their past unfaithfulness would deserve. God chooses to treat those who turn toward God better than they deserve. That's what it means to show **mercy**. Simply put, "mercy" is about getting better than you deserve whereas **justice** is about getting exactly what you deserve. **Justice says divorce** the unfaithful spouse while **mercy says it wants the unfaithful spouse back**. The big problem facing everyone is how to strike a balance between **justice** and **mercy**. To show justice without mercy becomes stifling and cold while showing mercy without justice becomes arbitrary and mushy. **Justice** and fairness go hand in hand and **mercy** and love go hand in hand.

So far, I've been using the analogy of the relationship between a husband and wife to illustrate the relationship between people and God. This analogy has been great at **helping us understand unfaithfulness**. But no analogy is perfect. All analogies break down at some point. In marriage when one spouse is unfaithful to the other, we say that they've cheated. So in the relationship you have the cheater and the cheated-against. Where the marriage analogy starts to break down is when **we try to understand why God chooses to show mercy**. If the cheated-against spouse wants the cheater back, we see them as being weak and gullible. We figure they're suffering from low-self-esteem and truly deserve better. The problem of course is that marriage is a relationship between two human beings. And human beings have all kinds of flaws and weaknesses. God on the other hand is God and is never weak or gullible. God has no problem with low self-esteem. But analogies are the only way we have to describe God. Marriage is a useful analogy for describing the relationship between God and people, but like all analogies, it comes up short. So when one analogy starts to break down, you have to switch to another.

Throughout the Bible, the most common analogy used to describe the relationship between God and people is the **relationship between a parent and a child**. God is the parent and we are the children. **Mercy** is much more understandable in this relationship. Parents show mercy to their children all of the time because they love them.

How many of you have ever had a rebellious child? (Raise hand.) As we all know too well, all children have a rebellious stage. Ok now, how many of you have ever taken your rebellious child **to the elders of the city to be stoned to death?** (Raise hand.) Hum, no one has. Gee, you guys must not take the Bible very seriously. Did you know that in **Deuteronomy 21** there's a commandment that instructs parents to take their rebellious children to the elders of the town to be stoned to death? Skimming Deuteronomy 21:18-21 (NIV) we read, **"If a someone has a stubborn and rebellious son, ... his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him to the elders at the gate of that place. ... Then all of the men of the town shall stone him to death."** That commandment has been in the Bible for thousands of years, and yet I don't know of any parent who's ever followed it. That's because when it comes to their children, **parents understand mercy**. If we flawed human beings know how to be merciful to our children, then surely we can grasp why God chooses to be merciful to us.

Human beings can be stubborn and rebellious. Human love for God runs hot and it runs cold. Human beings can be downright fickle. **But God's love is a parent's kind of love. And God does keep right on showing mercy to fickle people.**

End III.

Move IV.

So, just keep on falling in love with God again. Hold fast to the faith you had at the beginning. Return to God and humbly receive God's mercy and God's forgiveness. Remember that we love God because God first loved us. God knew us even as he was knitting us together in our mother's wombs. The love God has for us like the love a parent for their child, and it's like the love a husband for his wife. God's love encompasses each of those analogies and has heights and depths that we haven't even begun to fathom. The question facing all of us isn't if God loves us. The question is "**Do we love God?**" Do we love God with every ounce of our being? Do we truly love the Lord our God with all of our **heart..., mind..., soul..., and strength...?**

About a dozen years ago, right after I was ordained, we **United Methodist**, here in Western Pennsylvania implemented a new plan for ministry that we called "**Believe Again.**" When you think your best days are in the past and the joy has gone out of your life, that's what you need to do. You need to believe once again that God's promises are true. You need to believe again that God is working everything together for your good. You need to believe again that God is working to make tomorrow better than today. Now as I recall a lot of people didn't like that name for our conference's plan for ministry. **There was a long line of people with complaints.** They said we already believed, so we don't need to believe again. We never stopped believing in the first place. It's good to think that. But if every United Methodist in Western Pennsylvania actually believed God's promises were true, we wouldn't be stuck in our long ongoing malaise? **Our sanctuaries wouldn't be almost empty**, and we wouldn't be closing churches at a rate of about one a month. But that's exactly what reality has been and still is. So, we did need to **believe again**, and by the grace of God, that's what some of us have been doing; we're believing again.

Back then our Bishop, Thomas Bickerton, gave every pastor in Western Pennsylvania a copy of this tiny **little brown book** by that late Bishop **Rueben Job** to remind us what it means to be a Methodist. (Hold up the book.) The title of Bishop Job's little brown book is "*Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living*" which was published in 2007. Bishop Job's book is a little devotional on John Wesley's three general rules for the people called Methodist, which are:

- 1) **Do no harm by avoiding evil of every kind.**
- 2) **Do good and be merciful to everyone.**
- 3) **Attend to God's ordinances.**

To our ears today, Wesley's third general rule sounds a bit strange. How exactly do we tend to God's **ordinances**? And what are ordinances anyway? Bishop Job knew people today would have problems understand this rule, so he reworded the rule. The way Bishop Job said the third rule is:

- 3) **Stay in love with God.**

While that word ordinance is a strange word to our ears, for John Wesley it meant engaging in the activities that help you develop and maintain a vibrant relationship with God. **Stay in love with God.** Worship God, read God's Word, pray, take Communion, and meet regularly with your fellow believers in Christ. We human beings are prone to drift away. Our love for God can run hot and it can run cold. **So, we do need to keep falling in love with God again and again.**

End IV.

Conclusion: Some people just keep on fallin' in and out of love. Love can be a many-splendored thing but love also can be a many-fickle thing. **Yes, some people are downright fickle when it comes to God.** Their love for God runs hot and it runs cold. God becomes little more than a foul-weather friend. **But you can't undo God's promises.** God's promises are irrevocable. If you try to edit God's promises all you'll see are the grayed-out words, "***Can't Undo.***" **And God shows mercy to fickle people.** God's love is a parent's kind of love. God doesn't treat his children as they deserve. God treats us better! **So, just keep on falling in love with God again. Hold fast to the faith** you had at the beginning. Cause God's truly got a love for you that you "***Can't Undo.***"

Closing Prayer: Let's pray. Father God, thank you for loving us with a parent's kind of love. Thank you for your mercy and for wanting us back. May we never stop loving you. **Amen!**

10:30–Closing Hymn: “*This is the Day of New Beginnings*” Hymnal No. 383
Verses 1 thru 4

Sending Forth: God's not concerned if you've been unfaithful in the past. Today is the day of new beginnings. God is making all things new. Go forth living in the love that you can't undo—God's love for you. **And all of God's people said...Amen!**