

The Irrevocables
August 17th, 2008

Scripture: Romans 11:1-2a
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**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Stacey D. Jones on August 17th, 2008 at
Northminster Presbyterian Church.**

Have you ever said something and instantly wished you could take it back? Sometimes the mouth works faster than the brain and you want to hit “Pause,” rewind a bit, and say the whole thing differently... Do-overs.

In the *Choose Your Own Adventure* books (a series of children’s game-books first published by Bantam Books from 1979-1998), each story ends with two options: a narrative fork in the road where one choice usually continues well while one ends poorly. So if you chose to fight the three-headed space alien and met your death by his plasma ray-gun on page 83, you could just go back and choose to flee on your spaceship to Moon base Alpha by turning to page 86. It was always “happily ever after.”

But nothing is forever. Nothing is irrevocable — the word that jumps out at us in this text. We love do-overs. Options, choices, second chances. In fact, it’s one of the marks of our culture. As a generous and forgiving society, we like to be able to give people a second opportunity, and on a consumer level, there’s just about nothing that we can’t throw out and “do over,” or get another one. Or, you’re sitting in a restaurant and if you don’t like what you ordered off the menu, just complain and the manager will bring you something else on the house to make up for it. Referees’ judgments don’t always stand because football coaches have red flags and extra officials are assigned to video replay every call. Because the customer is always right, we have 30-day return policies on widescreen televisions. Typewriters and white-out have been replaced by the UNDO arrow on the Edit drop-down menu.

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Even bigger events in life can be reversed as well. Marriages end in divorce more often than they survive. Unplanned pregnancies can be aborted. If you don't like your name after all these years, you can legally change it. Unhealthy consumer debt can be erased through bankruptcy. If you want more kids, I saw a billboard by the freeway that says you can even reverse a vasectomy.

In an interactive world, we can review our choices and change our choices after we've already made our choices. Little is permanent. Little is irrevocable.

What a strong word. So final. So it comes out of the mouth with a thud. Irrevocable. Done. Final. That's it.

So what are the truly *irrevocable* things in life?

A bullet cannot go back into the gun. Too much toothpaste won't go back in the tube. A lotto ticket won't unscratch. And according to Johnny Cash, naming your boy "Sue" has quite irrevocable consequences.

This recalls the famous cigar store wooden Indian episode on *Seinfeld*. The episode plays off of the phrase "Indian giver," where Jerry uses an unPC phrase when his Native American friend wants a *TV Guide* back that she gave to Jerry. The phrase, and the episode, play off of the idea that when we give a gift to someone, it should be irrevocable.

But in the bigger issues of life, hardly anything seems permanent. Wrack your brain to find actions and choices that people in our culture haven't somehow found a way to wriggle out of. Not much is permanent.

But this text says that God is a God of certain "irrevocables."

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This is a sticky text in a sticky section of a sticky book. It's a text where theologies and dogmas take shape, where theologians draw lines in the sand, and where dispensationalists splash about, happier than a dog with two bones. Romans 9-11 presents a cadre of conundrums. What is Israel's role in light of the good news of Christ? Who are the people of God — Israel, the church or both? What is the extent of God's predetermination? Will there be a special salvation for Jews (“*Sonderweg*”) beyond the gospel of Christ?

Despite what the lectionary says, this passage hardly feels “proper” or “ordinary” to most of us. But this passage may be just what we need to hear. In a relative world, a few absolutes are helpful to bank on. And this text points us toward two “irrevocables” in terms of being the people of God.

A People of Mission

In this text, Paul is combining two important issues: God's people are all people who would follow him, and God continually extends his mercy to more and more people. Salvation has come to the Gentiles (11:11) and to the question, “Has God rejected his people,” Paul responds, “By no means!” (11:1)

In that light, verses 30-31 say that the disobedience of Israel led to the expansion of God's people to include Gentiles. So what exactly was this disobedience? If God would so drastically alter salvation history over this one thing, then we must certainly have an irrevocable to consider.

A reading of the minor prophets reveals two major themes in God's disappointment with Israel: Their worship and their justice were thin and token. But this disobedience can be traced back even further into Israel's history, back to her very DNA as God chose and called her. Genesis 12 records the foundational marching orders for Israel as God's people: “I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing ... in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (12:2,3).”

Blessed to be a blessing. *The* family for the *Not Yet* family. Chosen as God's people to extend God's people.

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God isn't in the business of favoritism, but he does favor people — all people! And his plan to favor all people is the life of his current people. So here's something that has always been an irrevocable for those who would follow this God: living on mission.

This whole passage reminds us that God desires our fellowship, and wants us to be in mission. Mission is in our DNA. To be a non-missional Christian, then, is to have become distorted from our design.

Quite simply, non-missional Christianity ought to be as rare as growing a sixth finger.

Evangelism, serving nonbelievers, tending to issues of social justice — to not follow God in these things is to live in disobedience.

A People of Mercy

The English word “irrevocable” appears nowhere else in Scripture but here in verse 29.

On one hand, the Scriptures acknowledge that seasons of blessing may be temporary. Rains come and go. Crops boom and bust. Riches can be transient.

But the irrevocable gift of God is here linked to one of his attributes, not merely his actions. Despite disobedience, he still offers his people mercy. “So that he may be merciful to all” (11:32).

Recall Hosea. His son *Lo ammi* — “not my people” — was not the final word of the Lord on prostitute Israel. They would again be called the children of God (1:10).

Perhaps parents can best understand the heart which grants mercy in response to disobedience. It is a heart of love ... despite. A heart that longs for relationship over punishment. A heart that puts more stock in the future than in the past.

Here again this word “irrevocable” comes into play in a different way. The Greek word for *irrevocable* literally means “without regret”; something is given with no claim to do-overs. The only other place the same Greek word appears is 2 Corinthians 7:10: “For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret [‘irrevocable’], but worldly grief produces death.”

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Godly grief over sin connected to repentance. This is something we should foster. We should ask God for it. We should celebrate it. And we should claim the truth of our sin without regret.

A recent *Time* magazine article reported the declining number of Catholics who go to confession. Confessing our sins in this relativistic, therapeutic culture isn't trendy these days.

Yet this is why our liturgies retain the corporate language of confession — of that which is done and that which was left undone. The place of confession and repentance is not a place of worldly grief and self-abasement. It is the place of honesty. While we regret our sin, we need have no shame of claiming it. To claim our sin is in the same breath to claim God's unending mercy.

In summary

So what do we make of all this? This is a tough text. Not many irrevocables in life, but we do know that we're a people of mission and of mercy. The Bible says the gifts and calling of God are "irrevocable" (11:29).

Bottom line, perhaps pastor Dennis J. Meaker put it best when he wrote, saying that what we learn here is that "God does not give up on his commitments simply because they do not seem to be working out as planned."

And that is good news for the world.

Things may not seem to be working out as planned.

It doesn't mean that God is giving up on commitments made, promises offered.

God is God.