

August 16, 2026
Holding What We Cannot Resolve

By Pr. Beate Chun

When We Cannot Make It Right

Grace to you and peace
from the one who is
and the one who was
and the one who is to come.

What do we do
when someone we love
is making a choice
we are convinced is wrong?

What do we do
when someone we love
sees something completely differently
from the way we see it—

and no amount of explaining,
persuading,
worrying,
or pleading
seems to change anything?

Perhaps you know something about this.

Perhaps you have a child
whose life has not unfolded
the way you hoped it would.

And you have tried to help.
You have offered advice.
You have pointed out possibilities.
You have explained
what you think would be best.
And perhaps, in your mind,
the answer is perfectly clear.

Everyone in the family
can see what Johnny needs to do.
Except Johnny.
Johnny sees it differently.

Or perhaps you have an aging parent
or a spouse
or a sibling.
You are worried about them.
You believe something needs to change.
You are convinced
that you know what would be safer,
healthier,
or wiser.

And yet—
they don't see it that way.
You can explain.
You can make your case.
You can offer reasons.
You can even plead.
And still—
nothing changes.

Or perhaps it isn't about a decision at all.
Perhaps someone you love
holds a conviction
that is completely different from yours.

Somehow you find yourself
at opposite end of a political
or religious argument
about something that matters deeply
to both of you.

You have talked about it.
You have listened.
You have tried to explain yourself.
But neither of you has changed your mind.

And that can be
frustrating.
Disturbing.
Even heartbreaking.

Because when we love someone,
we don't just want to understand them.
We want to protect them.
We want to help them.
We want them to be okay.
And sometimes—
if we are honest—
we want them to see
what we see.

We want them to make
the choice we believe is right.

We want to make things right.

But sometimes we can't.

Sometimes we reach the place
where there is nothing more
we can explain,

nothing more
we can persuade,

nothing more
we can fix.

And then we are left
with something very difficult:

We have to let go of the illusion
that we can control the outcome.

And we have to ask:

Can I trust God
with this person?

Can I trust God
with this relationship?

Can I trust God
with what I cannot resolve?

Perhaps you know something
about that experience.
Perhaps you are living it
right now.

Then today's reading from Romans
is for you.

Paul's Struggle

We are now in chapter 11.
And Paul has been wrestling
with a painful question.
Why is it that so many
of his Jewish siblings
have not embraced Jesus
as the fulfillment
of God's promises?

And this question
is not merely theological
for Paul.
It is personal.
It hurts.

Paul himself was Jewish.
He was born and raised
in the cosmopolitan city of Tarsus.
He was raised by devout Jewish parents.
He became a Pharisee
and studied in Jerusalem
under the famous teacher Gamaliel.

Paul was deeply devoted
to his Jewish faith.
So devoted
that he became convinced
that the followers of Jesus
were enemies of God.

He persecuted them relentlessly.
The book of Acts describes him
as “breathing out threats
and slaughter
against the disciples of the Lord.”
Whenever I hear those words,
I picture Paul
like a fire-breathing dragon.

And then—
Paul met the risen Christ
on the road to Damascus.
And his eyes were opened.

He began to understand
that Jesus was not opposed to God.

Quite the opposite.
Through Jesus,
God was doing something new.
God's promises
were being fulfilled.
God's mercy
was being poured out.

And Paul became convinced
that this was good news for everyone!

And people from many nations
began to embrace it.
People whom Paul
would have called “Gentiles”.

They heard the Gospel
and received God's grace with joy.

But strangely—
many Israelites did not.
Of course, some did.
But not as many as Paul expected.

And this troubled him deeply.
After all,
they were the original recipients
of God's promises.
The package that God mailed
into the world
when God sent Christ—
their address was on it!

And yet many of them
did not receive it.

Perhaps they didn't understand?

So Paul explained.
And explained.
And explained again.

But still they remained unconvinced.
And Paul had to ask:
How can this be?
How can I see something
so clearly—
and they don't?

How can God have opened my eyes
and not theirs?
Has God rejected God's people?
Has God abandoned them?

God's Irrevocable Mercy

And Paul's answer is:
By no means!
No. God has not abandoned them.
Because God's faithfulness
does not depend on human faithfulness.
God's gifts and God's calling
are irrevocable.
God does not say,
“Well, you didn't respond correctly,
so I'm taking back my promise.”
No.
The gifts and calling of God
are irrevocable.

God's mercy
is not something we can earn.
And it is not something
we can lose.

And this is where
Paul's argument takes
a remarkable turn.

He realizes that
he does not have to solve
the mystery.

He does not have to explain
exactly why one person sees
and another person does not.

He does not have to figure out
how God will finally
bring everything together.

Because God's ways
are deeper than ours.
God's wisdom
is greater than ours.
God's mercy
is wider than ours.

And so Paul ends
not with an answer—
but with a hymn.

*“For from him
and through him
and to him
are all things.”*

Everything.
From God.
Through God.
Toward God.

Paul is saying:
We may not understand
how all of this works.

We may not see
how the pieces fit together.
We may not understand
why one person believes
and another does not.
We may not know
how God will reconcile
what seems irreconcilable.

But we know this:
God is in it.
And God's mercy
is bigger than our understanding.

Held by God

And perhaps this is where
Paul's words become our words.

Because most of us
will eventually find ourselves
in a situation
we cannot fix.

Someone we love
will make a decision
we cannot change.

Someone we love
will see something
we cannot see.

Someone we love
will choose a path
we would not choose.

We may explain.
We may listen.
We may worry.
We may pray.
We may do everything
we know how to do.
And still—
the situation may remain unresolved.
What then?

Paul does not give us
an explanation.

He gives us trust.

He reminds us
that God's ways
are deeper than ours.

That God's wisdom
is greater than ours.

That God's mercy
is wider than ours.

And that God's faithfulness
does not depend
on our ability
to make everything
come out right.

The gifts and calling of God
are irrevocable.

God does not give up
on people

because they do not respond
the way we hoped they would.

God does not stop being merciful
because we cannot understand
what God is doing.

And so perhaps
one of the hardest acts of faith
is this:

to love someone
without being able
to control their life.

To care deeply
without being able
to determine the outcome.

To keep praying
without knowing
how the prayer will be answered.

To say:
I cannot hold this together.
But God can.

I cannot make this person
see what I see.
But God sees them.

I cannot know
what will happen next.
But God is already there.

I cannot reconcile
what seems irreconcilable.
But I can place it
into the hands

of the God
whose mercy is greater
than my understanding.

And perhaps
that is enough for today.
Not an answer.
Not resolution.
But trust.

Trust that the people
we love
are held by God.

Trust that we, too,
are held by God.

Trust that even
what we cannot understand
is not beyond God's mercy.

And so Paul ends
not with another argument,

but with praise:

"For from him
and through him
and to him
are all things.

To him be the glory
forever."

Amen.

Sermon for Sunday, August 16, 2026 - Pentecost 11

Presented at St. Matthew's Lutheran Church San Francisco

The 11th in a series of Sermons on the Letter to the Romans.

Text: [Romans 11:25-36 NRSVUE - All Israel Will Be Saved - I want you - Bible Gateway](#)

Tags: Romans 11:25-26 | Conflict | God and Israel | The mystery of God's ways