

It sounds like something that can't be done. It's called grafting and it takes one part of a tree or bush and makes it grow on another. It happens in agriculture all the time, especially on commercial farms. Where people need sturdy trunks for ornamental trees or bushes they do grafting. When a tree has been damaged, they want to give a specific shape, or even to make a tree into art they use grafting. I also read about some gardeners who graft weird combinations together like potato and tomato plants. On one plant both vegetables grow, one above ground the other below.

Whatever grafting is used for two things previously separate are fused together as one. Sometimes we have relationships we'd like to graft together. Maybe we've drifted apart from a special friend. It might be that what once was a close sturdy relationship has broken off and needs repair. We look for anything that would help put things back the way they were.

In our relationship with God we weren't even that close, at least not from the start. God wasn't a special friend we drifted away from or a relationship we wanted to try and repair. It was worse than that. Grafting forms the basis for Paul's discussion of Jews and Gentiles and their relationship with God in the second lesson for this morning. It also is how we can talk about our relationship with him. We've been...

Grafted into God's family
Make room for the wild branches
All the branches rely on the root

For much of the book of Romans Paul highlights the differences and similarities between Jews and Gentiles. They're like two branches from opposite trees. The Jews were branches on a tree with all the privileges. They had the close connection with God throughout their history. They had the Law and the blessings of God's presence. The Gentiles were like branches from the wild tree with none of that. Still Paul says that both branches are in the same spot before God. **"There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."**

When a branch growing on a tree dies it needs to be cut off. The Jews were just such a branch. They were naturally part of God's tree but they rejected. They hardened themselves from hearing the sweet message of the gospel. They turned away from it and stumbled over it. So God cut them off his tree. He brought punishment on them. But out of that something wonderful happened. **"Because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious."** God took the fatal flaw of the Jews, their sinful rejection of his message, and put it to work for the Gentiles.

When grafting plants, selection is key. You want good branches with good fruit. You don't want wild shoots that seem out of control. That's just what the Gentiles were, it's just what we were, wild shoots. We weren't born into God's family. Our parents were sinful and so were we. We were selfish from birth, always wanting attention and love first. We were producing bad fruit by the bushel. Laziness, greediness, and lustfulness were just some of our wild tendencies. There's no way we belonged attached to God's family.

Paul says that's just what happened. **"You, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others."** God made room just for you. He took your wild sinful laziness, your sinful greed, and your lust and paid for those sins on the cross. Then he took you and grafted you right into his family. You didn't furnish anything; no strength or abilities of your own. He made room because his love wants you in the family. The message of the Word of God worked on your heart and you were grafted in. Through Christ God grafted you, a wild branch, so you are part of the family.

This puts us in an unnatural position. We have privileges and the danger for arrogance is high. It can happen in the way we look at other people. We get judgmental of their actions or language. We can look down on those who don't have as much 'Bible smarts' as we do. We can think ourselves better than we really are. But remember who we are. We are still unnatural branches grafted into the family by God's grace. He's made room for us in love. We respond by staying in his love.

Successful grafting requires that vascular tissues fuse together inside the plants. Tissue is placed in close proximity to each other and it fuses together. Structural tissue doesn't bond as easily. So the wood of a tree, which serves as structure to hold the tree up, might not fuse as well as the tissue inside, which brings nourishment to the whole tree and leaves. Because the structure doesn't fuse as well physical weak spots result. Because the Gentiles were a wild shoot grafted in we might think it would create a huge weak spot. Gentiles weren't strong enough to hold together on their own. But branches growing in God's kingdom, whether naturally connected or grafted in, don't need to rely on themselves for support. All branches rely on the root.

In order to graft a branch into another plant something has to get cut. Usually it's a small slice, a wedge in the trunk, or a split. For the Gentiles to be grafted in a slice needed to be made in the natural branches, the Jews. **"Their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles."** The Gentiles received an extreme privilege because of God's grace and the Jews rejection. But God's saving plan was in action. He cut the Jews off so they might realize what they had. Paul wanted to save every Gentile out there because God did. He wanted everyone to hear the good news about Jesus. But not just for them. Paul wanted jealousy to spread among the Jews.

Jealousy can work in two ways. It can deepen the jealousy. A jealous husband isn't made less jealous when his wife plans a lunch with a guy who's just an old friend. Some Jews would see the Gentiles being brought into the kingdom and think, "Great, there goes the neighborhood." It would just confirm their jealousy. But sometimes jealous spouses will be spurred on to work harder at relationships. That was the reaction Paul was hoping to get from the Jews. **"I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them."** Jews who saw the Gentiles experiencing a relationship with God might want that back. It wouldn't be to the exclusion of the Gentiles anymore, but rather everyone enjoying a relationship with God together.

Typically in grafting one plant is selected because of its roots. The other plant is more important, selected for its stems, leaves, flowers, or fruits. These are the traits desirable for duplicating. In God's kingdom it's the other way around. Whether you're a Jew or a Gentile you don't bring the pretty flowers, the beautiful leaves, or the good fruit. You have the depressed feelings, the worry, and the fear of the unknown. You bring sin. In God's kingdom the root is the most important. **"You do not support the root, but the root supports you."** The root has the traits everyone depends on. Jesus is that root. He's got the strength we need and depend on. We've been grafted in but we get to partake of these blessings from him.

Without a root the grafted plant would fall down and die. Without Jesus we who were grafted in would fall down and die eternally. Look at the Jews. They rejected Jesus and God cut them off. He broke off branches that were naturally part of his family because of unbelief. We're grafted in, much easier to cut out. If we fall into unbelief he won't hesitate to cut us out. So we stay connected by the means of grace in Word and sacraments. These are the sap which keeps us strong and growing in the faith. We're part of the family which means we live reflective of who we're connected to. No longer living like wild olive branches we live connected to Christ.

Grafting doesn't always work. You can do everything right and the two plants still might not fuse together. The Jews were grafted to God by nature, but they rejected. Their rejection was for the Gentiles gain, our gain. We hear about Christ because of their rejection. God's grace made room for us and fused us to Christ. And God wants more, more to hear the good news, more to be grafted to Christ through the Word. Everyone connected to Christ can know they remain there, strengthened and supported by the root, which is Christ. They know they've been grafted into God's family.