

Have you ever said something and instantly wished you could take it back? After all, sometimes the mouth works faster than the brain and you want to hit “Pause,” rewind a bit, and say the whole thing differently. I’m fairly certain that most of us have had one of those moments where we wish we had a Do-over, or the ability to hit an undo button in life, for our words or our actions.

When I was a young boy, I recall that I used to love reading the *Choose Your Own Adventure* books where 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 if you wanted to find a “happily ever after” to the story.

But nothing is forever. Nothing is irrevocable — a word that practically jumps out at us from our Second Lesson this morning. Especially considering the fact that many of us would admit that 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.

If, for example, you’re sitting in a restaurant and you don’t like what you’ve 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, most stores have return policies in place for the items they sell. And these days typewriters and white-out have been replaced by the UNDO arrow found on our word processor menu.

Even bigger events in life can be reversed as well. Marriages end in divorce more often than they survive. 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, the billboard by the freeway declares that you can even reverse a vasectomy.

In our interactive world, we can review our choices, and change our choices, after we've already made our choices. Little is permanent. Little is irrevocable. And what a strong word it is. So final! So, it comes out of the mouth with a thud. Irrevocable. Done. Final. That's it.

Ok, 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 itself. And according to Johnny Cash, naming your boy "Sue" has quite irrevocable consequences. But in the bigger issues of life, hardly anything seems permanent. In fact, I dare you to try and 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 in his letter to the Romans the Apostle Paul informs his readers that God is a God of certain "irrevocables." You might say that our narrative this morning involves a sticky text, in a sticky section, of a sticky book. It's a text where theologies and dogmas take shape, and where theologians draw lines in the sand. Romans 9-11 present 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 the Jews beyond the gospel of Christ?

Now, 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 our narrative this morning points us toward two “irrevocables” in terms of being the people of God.

In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul combines two important issues: God’s people are all people who would follow him, and God continually extends his mercy to more and more people. The Apostle declares that Salvation has come to the Gentiles and to the question, “Has God rejected his people,” Paul responds, “By no means!”

In that light, then, verses 30-31 inform us that the disobedience of Israel led to the expansion of God’s people to include Gentiles. Ok, if that is the case, we may begin to wonder what kind of disobedience the Apostle was talking about? If God would so drastically alter salvation history over one thing, then we must certainly have something 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 insignificant and nominal. But their 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.

The people of Israel were blessed to be a blessing. Chosen as God’s people to extend God’s people. And although the Lord isn’t necessarily in the business of favoritism, he does favor people — all people! And his plan to favor all people in this world was to begin with the life of the people he first entered into a Covenant with. So, apparently there was something that had always been irrevocable for those who would follow God: they were to be His living mission.

Ok, so what then is our take home for today? What can we learn from this ancient letter from Paul? Well, one might say that 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 distracted, or even distorted, from who God created us to be. In other words, 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.

The English word “irrevocable” appears nowhere else in the Bible, but here in today’s Epistle. 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. On the other hand, the irrevocable gift of God are linked to one of his many attributes, not merely his actions. Despite disobedience, the Lord still offers his people mercy. “So that he may be merciful to all.”

Recall Hosea. His son *Lo ammi* — “not my people” — was not the final word of the Lord on the disobedient Israelites, whose disobedience was compared to a prostitute. The prophet reminds the Jewish people that they would one day, again, be called the children of God. Perhaps parents can best understand the heart which grants mercy in response to disobedience. It is a heart filled with love, despite the mistakes or failures their children make. A heart that longs for relationship over punishment. A heart that puts more stock in the future than in the past.

A recent *Time* magazine article reported the declining number of Catholics who go to confession. Apparently confessing our sins in this relativistic, therapeutic culture isn’t trendy these days. And yet, one could argue that this is why our liturgies retain the corporate language of confession — of that which is done and that which has been 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 most certainly should regret our sin, we should have no shame in claiming it. To claim our sins, is in the same breath, to claim God's unending mercy.

Ok, so what are we to make of all this? This is a tough letter. It reminds us that there are not many irrevocables in life, but we do know that we're a people of mission and of mercy. And the good news we find in the Bible is that the gifts and calling of God are "irrevocable."

Bottom line, perhaps pastor Dennis J. Meaker put it best when he said 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. After all, just because things don't always seem to work out as planned, it doesn't mean that God will give up on his commitments made, his promises offered. Our God is merciful, forgiving, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and most importantly, our God is irrevocable. And thanks be to God for that.