Life is full of puzzles. There are situations that don’t really make sense to us. Some of these situations could be described with the word ‘paradox’. A paradox is a situation that seems impossible or absurd; it doesn’t make sense. A paradox is a situation that seems contradictory, but when you examine the situation you realize it is true.

For instance, when I was a third grade teacher I had a girl in my class named Megan. Megan was legally deaf. Megan wore hearing aids in both ears, but even with the hearing aids she could not hear very well. After watching Megan in class for several weeks I realized that she was reading the lips of the other children in class.

After watching Megan in class for several months I realized the paradox of her participation. Megan was legally deaf but she was the best listener in the entire class. Whenever I spoke to the class Megan looked at me and she read my lips and she listened to my words. If I gave directions to the entire class I knew there was always one child who had heard and understood what I said: Megan. This was the paradox: Megan was deaf and she was one of the best listeners I ever had in my class, among more than 1000 students.

Sometimes people try to explain away the mystery at the heart of the paradox. I told another teacher about what I observed in Megan. She said it was easy to explain because I wore a special microphone around my neck. The microphone amplified my voice in Megan’s hearing aids.

But this explanation leaves out an important detail. Megan’s hearing aids made my voice louder, but her hearing aids didn’t make my voice clearer. Megan could not hear my voice as clearly as the other students in the class and yet she was the best listener in class.

At the center of the paradox of Megan’s listening was a powerful truth: she knew the importance of listening. When we encounter a paradox we should live with it and try to learn from it. The paradox of the little deaf girl who could listen better than anyone else is a story of joy and hope. If we try to explain away the paradox we only deprive ourselves of the truth and power witnessed by the little girl in the center of the story.

The Apostle Paul faced a paradox in his preaching and ministry. This was the paradox Paul faced: Jesus was Jewish; he could be considered a descendant of King David. Paul was Jewish; he was a pharisee and well educated and knowledgeable in the Hebrew Scriptures. Paul’s mission was to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. And at the very same time that some Gentiles were receiving the grace of God’s salvation in Christ, some Jews seemed to be moving away from God’s grace.

On its face this situation seemed absurd and unfair. How did it happen that some of God’s own people who had devoted themselves to following the commandments for years seemed to be going astray while some Gentiles who had no previous connection or efforts to follow the Holy Scriptures had come to receive God’s grace through Christ?

By the time he wrote his letter to the Romans, Paul had been puzzling over this question for more than ten years. Paul had heard some fairly ridiculous answers to the paradox of Jewish and Gentile responses to Christ from the Gentile members of his congregations.

The letter to the Romans is addressed to Gentile followers of Christ in Rome. We can tell that Paul is concerned by things he has heard from Gentiles because he begins chapter 11 of the letter with his strongest rhetorical tactic: stating an absurd position and taking it apart. So Paul begins chapter 11 with these words: “I 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. God has not rejected his people whom he knew before all others.”

The paradox of Gentiles following a Jewish messiah contains a powerful truth. Some people in Paul’s time and in our time have tried to diminish the paradox by giving God characteristics that seem
utterly human and not at all divine. Some Christians today think that only those who follow Christ are receiving and participating in God’s saving work. Some Christians claim that God’s salvation does not extend to the Jews. Under this scheme God appears to be like a domineering old man who keeps changing his mind: first he makes a covenant with the people of Israel, but then he give up on them and insists people must give up on the old rules and follow a whole new set of rules in order to be his people. We call this idea supersessionism: the Jews used to be God’s favorite people but now you have to be a Christian.

This seems like the sort of thing people do. Paul is incensed that people would imply that God would be so unfaithful. God’s faithfulness to us will never be broken. This is one of the two main themes of the Letter to the Romans. Paul states it clearly in chapter 1: *The Gospel is the power of God for salvation for everyone who has faith, for the Jews first and also for the Gentiles.*

This is the truth at the center of the paradox: God’s salvation is for everyone, for Jews and for Gentiles. Since the time of Abraham some Jews have turned away from God’s salvation and many, many Gentiles have turned away from God’s salvation. That doesn’t change the point that God offers salvation freely to all.

For Paul, God’s grace and faithfulness are the main point. Salvation has everything to do with God’s grace and nothing to do with our plans and efforts to save ourselves without any help from God. Salvation has everything to do with God’s faithfulness and nothing to do with our claims of entitlement. Salvation has everything to do with God’s eternal love for all people.

So Paul’s God is a universalist. Paul’s God reaches out to the children of Israel in the time of Moses by making an unbreakable covenant with them and giving them the Torah. In a similar way Paul’s God reaches out to the people of Paul’s time and takes on human form and becomes accommodated to our needs and our way of life.

This might be difficult for us to grasp but, according to St. Paul, God’s love and salvation are for everyone. We make a mockery of God’s faithfulness when we try to explain away the paradox of God’s salvation coming to different groups of people at different times and in different ways. We are completely superior when it comes to fighting about our differences and dividing ourselves from one another. And we do not understand how God can love and give the gift of salvation to people who are very different from us. We don’t understand the freedom of God’s grace. We don’t understand how God can be so generous to so many people. We don’t understand the paradox. Instead of taking it apart or explaining it away we should try to learn the truth at the center.

Just as God accommodated Godself to humanity in the person of Christ Jesus, so we should also accommodate ourselves to one another. We should strive to be reconciled with one another. Reconciliation, mercy and love are at the center of God’s way.

For St. Paul, the fate of Jews and Gentiles was completely inter-related. Paul’s hope was that the Gentiles would be saved by following the Jewish Messiah, Christ, whose teaching was completely in line with the Jewish prophets. Paul’s hope was that more of his Jewish sisters and brothers would return to the way of Moses and the prophets, spurred on by the Jews and Gentiles who are following the one who fulfilled the teachings of the prophets.

The inter-relatedness of Jews and Gentiles is what Paul is getting at when he says, *there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same God is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.* The universal nature of God’s grace is at the heart of the final verse of our reading, *Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.* Paul is quoting the Hebrew prophet Joel. Joel’s prophecy was for the people of Israel and Paul extended the message of God’s salvation to include an additional group of people, the Gentiles.

What would Paul say in our time? Perhaps he would say that the fate of Jews and Christians and Muslims and Hindus and Buddhists and Bahai’s and others are completely inter-related. Perhaps he would say that it is only in working together, in accommodating ourselves to one another, and giving ourselves over to God’s grace that we live in God’s saving love.