Abundant Grace Peace Presbyterian Church

Ephesians 2:1-10 4th Sunday in Lent

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In Lent, we seem to be moving back and forth between law and grace, and yet in some ways, the law is graceful, and grace calls us to live faithfully according to God’s law. Let’s remember where we have been in the last weeks. We first considered the covenant promise of God with the rainbow, then heard the hard call to deny ourselves and take up our cross. Then the challenging gift of the law in the Ten Commandments, and now a reminder that without grace, we are lost. Ephesians says we were dead in our trespasses and sins, before God’s grace.

Monday I thought I was dying. I felt so terrible. Running through my head – is this a virus? Am I having a heart attack? Could not even sit up without fainting or being so nauseatingly dizzy. There is nothing like a serious illness to make you be glad to feel reasonably normal. So when I emerged on Wednesday and started studying this passage, I read you were dead in your trespasses. Whew, I feel that deadness in a special way this week, wondered what message God was giving me when I said last week I commit to taking a Sabbath, and I was so sick, I could not even consider getting myself food or drink. Think about a time when you felt really sick and how grateful you were when you began to feel like you were alive again and not dying!

Let’s hear the scripture now, but first, we must pray for help to hear and live them rightly. Prayer: Speak to us, O God, your word of grace and truth, and help us to turn from our sinful ways, to embrace with thanksgiving your grace, and walk in your holy ways, by the power of the Spirit and in the name of Christ we pray.

***Ephesians 2:1-10 (NRSVue)*** ***– Abundant Grace***

You were dead through the trespasses and sins **2**in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. **3**All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, doing the will of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else, **4**but God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us **5**even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— **6**and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, **7**so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. **8**For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— **9**not the result of works, so that no one may boast. **10**For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we may walk in them.

The writer of Ephesians was not Paul, but a disciple of Paul writing in his name. That was an acceptable thing to do back then, just as it is seen as acceptable today for important people to have speech writers. This does not take away any power of the message, which is a beautiful one. And here’s a summary of Ephesians as a whole and especially of this important chapter 2: that in Christ, God has transformed the relationship with humanity by the free gift of grace, and in so doing God has enabled us to enjoy a new multi-ethnic communal life, as we share Christ’s peace with one another. Now Ephesus was a large city, mostly not Jewish, so full of gentiles who had no sense of real divine direction.

Our passage begins starkly. You were dead -- this idea that all those living without the grace of God, may have been physically alive, but they were spiritually dead. They were trapped in selfishness, anger, and purposeless lives, as they followed the forces of evil and did just whatever the heck they felt like doing. In our day, there are many people who get lost, following the ways of the world, all caught up in anger and arrogance, in selfish ways of thinking and living. Death is described here as a kind of land, through which we all walk. In the New Testament, death is not just a one-time demise when our bodies wear out; instead it is also understood to be a letting go and letting God have control over your life.

Some of us may have had experiences in life when we know we were headed in the wrong direction, when we were making bad choices, and our lives were deconstructing or coming unglued. We were at odds with people at work or school or at home, in broken and fearful relationships. In this passage there is a decisive turning point, and this turning point is not related to you as much as to what God did in coming as the Christ. The turning point is with the two words “But God”

But God. But God who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which God loved us. Think about that for a moment. If you said to someone in your family, with great love do I love you, it would carry more weight than just saying “I love you.” If I said to Richard, “My love for you is full of tremendous love” he would do a double-take. Most of us give overwhelming loving messages to our family members when they are themselves being wonderfully kind, loving, and generous toward us.

But God is different. “With great love do I love you,” God says to humanity, when we are dead, lost, selfish, stupid. It is like the remarkable parent who picks up a teen at the police station, after that kid gets in big trouble, and begins with love and patient, not angry yelling. Or the spouse that finds a way to support and challenge a partner with addiction without being an enabler. That’s what it is like with God. Whether God starts with expressing anger or expressing compassion, the goal that God always has in mind is lovingly restoring our relationship, lovingly and firmly setting boundaries for our own good, which is what we discussed last week with the Ten Best Ways to Live.

Because God is NOT going to leave us in that predicament - dead, lost, selfish, stupid. So God answer to our predicament of deadness is Jesus Christ. Via our mutual connection in Christ’s humanity-divinity, we are made alive together with Christ. By grace you have been saved. God has raised us up with Christ and seated us with Christ in the heavenly places. Notice that these verbs of which God is the subject, not you and me– made alive with, have been saved. Raised up with and seated with in heavenly places.

We tend to live as if these are all promises yet unfulfilled, and in some places in the Bible, that is certainly the way it reads, that we are being saved or that we will be saved. But here, they are past tense. Done. God did it. We had nothing to do with it.

Why would God be so generous? This passage gives us a reason -- So that God, in the ages to come, can show off how boundless is this grace!

Then, as if it has not been adequately stated that God really, really loved us when we did not deserve it, when we were stuck in sin, being jerks, being confused and lost and messed up, then it is stated again.  **8**For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— **9**not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

Grace is the gift that saves you through your trusting in it, and you have no responsibility for earning and no credit here. Grace is the free gift of God that we do not deserve and cannot earn.

And last but not least – the end goal of God in this saving grace. God re-created us in Christ, made us alive in Christ, loved us with a love so great and saved us in Christ for this purpose: so we would walk in good works.

God does not lavish us with love for us to go our own self-absorbed way. God does not lavish us with love, so that we can go on sinning. No, God lavishes us with love so that we will walk humbly along with Christ, doing good. We were created for good works. Some of the most inspiring people I have ever known are the ones who never write off anyone. They keep caring. They keep forgiving. They keep boundaries, but they keep loving. To forgive someone is not to allow them back into your life to take advantage of you. But to forgive someone is to release them and yourself from all the bitterness. It is to recognize that none of us deserve the love and blessings we have.

The pastor, Rev. Anthony Thompson, who lost his wife in the Charleston church shooting, forgave the perpetrator, Dylann Roof and got criticized for his Christ-like behavior. The Stephen Ministers have been reading his book.

Rev. Thompson said, “When I forgave him, God released me from the burden of hate, anger, and sadness that I felt over my wife Myra’s death. God released me. When you go to God with it, then you’re no longer the victim, and you will be given peace. Rev. Thompson now leads prayer marches through Charleston, hoping to bring different cultures, different faiths, different races together to see what God might do.

Those who truly understand the grace of God, live with gratitude, grace, and forgiveness, no matter what comes their way. We are loved with an everlasting love. Loved with an understanding love. Loved with a love that ushers us into heavenly places with our friend Jesus. Nobody but God can give you this perfect love. Nobody has grace so full and abundant as this. You will never run out of it. So cultivate it and share it with everyone, even your enemies! Share this love and transform the world.