

SERMON CCI Ephesians 2: 1-10 The Wonder of Grace

How many of us memorized Ephesians 2:8-9 as we were growing up? Probably in the King James Version. Let's say it together. You gotta remember that King James ye at the beginning. *"For by grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast."* And many of us learned that grace is God's undeserved favor and blessing.

That's the familiar part. But Paul begins this chapter with very dramatic words: *"You were dead."* It's a rather startling thing to hear, when you think about it. It reminds me a bit of today's popular zombie movies with dead people stumbling around attacking people. They're usually bloody with torn, dirty clothes. They don't want to be friends. Sadly, no one seems to care to look for a cure for whatever made them zombies. Everyone leaves them in their agony or permanently kills them.

None of us really expect to run into a zombie. But, now and then, we may run across someone who had a real "near death experience." These are people whose hearts stopped on the operating room table or in the E.R. after a car accident. Some of them report that during the time when the doctors were trying to revive them, they felt as if they were floating at the top of the room looking down, able to see their own bodies lying there and watch what is happening. That was what Rob's Dad told us after his second open heart surgery. He remembered being able to see the doctors working on him in the operating room as he floated above them. He said it felt strange, but natural to him. Not scary at all. I asked him if his doctor had told him that his heart had stopped during the surgery and he said, "No." He didn't want to request his medical record to find out, but I'm quite sure his heart stopped during surgery. Happily, the doctors got my father-in-law's heart going again and he was yanked back to life.

If you meet up with someone like this, and you say to them, "You were dead," they easily relate to what you're saying. And they would probably speak with gratitude at having a new lease on life. But to the rest of us, this sounds about as realistic as zombies. *You were dead.* Yet that's what Paul wrote to the Gentile Christians in the church in Ephesus. He was referring to their pre-Christian life, the part of their lives before they believed the good news about Jesus dying for their sins and rising from the dead. During the time of their lives when they had been dead, they had not *looked* dead. They certainly had not *felt* dead. They had not *acted* dead. They looked as alive as we do sitting here this morning. So I identify with the strangeness of Paul's words. *You were dead.* I was 8 years old when I first

put my faith in Jesus Christ as my Savior. When I first understood that Jesus died for **my** sins. I was not a particularly bad little girl, not perfect by any means, but I didn't tell a lot of lies, or steal a lot of stuff, I wasn't a bully at school, I didn't use swear words, I didn't get into fights, I didn't know even what it meant to hate someone. And I did good things- I shared, I memorized Bible verses for Sunday School, I behaved at school and got good grades, I usually obeyed my parents. I have to say that one carefully because my mom's sitting here and could say whether I'm telling the truth or not. I was as alive as an 8 year old girl could be. Yet Paul says, *"You were dead, Barb."*

How were the Ephesians and we dead before we belonged to Christ? Paul says it several times- we were dead in our trespasses and sins. The JB Phillips translation of this text reads, *"To you, who were spiritually dead all the time that you drifted along on the stream of this world's ideas of living, and obeyed its unseen ruler."* Drifting like a person spending the afternoon drifting along on a river on an inner tube. When we're drifting we're not in charge, the river is. We turn and twist with the river. Paul calls the drifting life before Christ spiritually dead compared to the life God created us in his image to live. We took our cues about what matters in life, how to live, what to value and not value from the world around us. We may have thought we were making our own choices, but like a person drifting on a river, we weren't in charge. We weren't following Christ, we were following other powers and influences. Paul calls that sin. The word for sin means missing the mark. Like an archer who aims his bow and arrow at a bullseye and misses it. Sometimes it's intentional, sometimes it's by mistake, but we all sin. We all fall short of living the glory of God's image in us. We all miss the mark. Even a normal 8 year old girl growing up in a Christian family. And because of our sins, Paul says, we were dead.

Thomas Lynch is the author of numerous books on living and dying well. His credentials to speak about this come from his experience as a Funeral Home Director in the town of Milford, Michigan. Thomas Lynch says that most of what he knows comes down to one very simple fact: the dead can't do much for themselves. If you want a corpse to move from one room to another, you'll have to do it yourself. If you want a corpse to raise its arm so you can put a shirt on, you'll have to raise it. Calling to the dead body doesn't work either. He says the dead don't listen worth a toot. You really just have to do *everything* for them.

Spiritually speaking, that's Paul's assessment of anyone's life outside of Christ. You were dead. And the dead can't do anything for themselves. But the

good news of the gospel is that when we place our faith in Christ, we are no longer stuck in a dead life, we aren't stuck in our sins and transgressions with no hope of change. Unlike in zombie movies, God **did** care enough to provide a way to bring us dead people to life. The good news is "by God's amazing grace we have been saved, or made whole."

In verse 8, Paul says that this "This salvation by grace is not our own doing." We were dead, and the dead can't do for themselves. Only grace, God's undeserved favor and blessing, can raise the dead. Only grace can give us access to the work of Jesus. Jesus' work is what can fix what is broken between God and us. When by grace God gives you credit for that work of Jesus, you become alive. Only grace can do that.

That's why Paul did not say, "It is by your resume you were saved." Paul did not say, "It is by being a good moral person that you were saved." He didn't even say that we were saved by the good works we do in this life, as important as they are. No, we have no reason to boast in explaining God's grace to us. Paul did not say that when our time comes to face our Creator, that God will roll out the history of how we lived and put all our good stuff on one side of a scale and all our wrong stuff on the other side of the scale and if the good side is heavier, we're in. There will be no opportunity in that day to brag about all our good qualities and deeds, or even the things we never did like all those bad people in the line behind us. I'm glad too, because I can't imagine spending eternity listening to people brag about why they deserved their place in heaven. Paul said it is by *grace* we were saved, and this has nothing to do with our goodness at all. Nothing. We were dead. All we could do was receive what God had to give to us.

So what good are good works then, if they're not to gain God's favor and make God love us more? I like what Pastor Scott Hoezee says about the connection between good works and grace. It's the difference between saying "Please" and "Thank you." When we bow in prayer and ask God's forgiveness and put our faith in Jesus Christ, we're saying "Please." Living the Christian life afterwards, learning to live life Jesus' way, including doing good works, is how we say "Thank You," how we show that we understand that it's all by grace.

When we've received God's grace, the rest of our lives are to become one big flow of grace-itude, saying thank you by the way we live, the things we do and don't do, the things we say and don't say, the very way we look at life itself. When a grace powerful enough to raise the dead gets deep down inside us, it bubbles up in the rest of our lives. We won't be able to hold it in. It's like shaking up a bottle

of Diet Coke—once we take the cap off, it's going to explode with energy because the fizz is in the bottle. Unfortunately, like we talked about last Sunday, one of the dangers of being a Christian for a long time is that we can develop spiritual amnesia, we can forget how much God's grace has forgiven us. When we do, the fizz goes out of our lives, and the joy, we can begin to serve God out of duty or to get something **from** God, instead of in gratitude **to** God. And the tendency to boast starts as we look down on others because they don't seem to be doing as much as us. The cure is to spend more time meditating on all God has done for us by his grace, all God has forgiven us, and all God has in store for us. Then we can live our life as a heart-felt thank you again.

Finally, look at verse 10 for a moment. "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." We are God's handiwork. Let that word sink in. Once we were dead and now we're not just alive, we're of real value in God's hands. The word handiwork can be also translated "masterpiece. It describes a work of art- a painting, or sculpture, or carving created by an artist. Ephesus was known for its artists who displayed their masterpieces in the city center for people to buy. I picture Paul walking around Ephesus watching the artists at work creating their masterpieces. And when they were done, they would mark their masterpiece with their name or a symbol that would let the customer they made it. Their stamp of pride of ownership was on their work.

We are God's masterpieces, God's works of art, created for good works. And the good works we do as we walk in Jesus' footsteps are the signature God places on his work. His signature that says to anyone who sees us, "He or she's my masterpiece. See how she was a peacemaker, see how he didn't return evil for evil, see how they forgave those who sinned against them, see their attitude toward that person or situation, see how they brought school supplies or peanut butter, or cookies to help those without, see that mark? That's my signature." Friends, we were created in Christ for good works, not just to get us to heaven, but to be peacemakers, who love others, who care for the sick and the poor, who forgive as they've been forgiven, who let their lights shine, so that in gratitude, our lives are display cases for God's love and grace. Once we were dead, but now we are God's masterpieces saved by amazing grace through faith.

What else can we say to all this except "Thank you, thank you, God!"

COMMUNION

This table is not for perfect people. It's for forgiven sinners who have accepted God's amazing grace by faith in Jesus Christ. None of us deserve to be at this table, but by grace, we've been invited anyway. Here we help each other not forget how much we've been forgiven. Here we remember again that Jesus offers his body as bread for our souls.

Paul tells us that on the night he was betrayed, Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, gave it to his not perfect disciples, and said, "This is my body broken for you."