

Ephesians 2:1-10
Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell
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The Poem of God

The scripture lesson from Ephesians 2:1-10 today is a lot like being hit by a Mack truck, especially when we read it in the way Paul's original audience would have understood it. Remember, the chapter divisions we have now were added much later.

So, let's look at the context: Paul has just finished extolling the grandeur of God's power and love in what we now call Chapter 1, and then he transitions abruptly into, "You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived." No softening the blow here — Paul starts with "YOU WERE DEAD."

Quite the transition Paul! No softening of the blow. No "now hear me out here because this might sting," just "YOU WERE DEAD." It's a shocking statement, and immediately, we should ask, "How so?"

Paul answers by pointing out that this death was due to the choices made by the Ephesians themselves — choices that led to a death-like existence. Paul talks about "trespasses and sins," following "the course of this world," "the ruler of the power of air," and "passions and desires of flesh and senses." In this, he names what has been called the World, the Flesh, and the Devil, trying to paint a comprehensive picture of how humanity becomes entrenched in the complexities of evil.

Paul is simply observing what we all know to be true. After years of imprisonment, internal exile, banishment, Soviet dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn concluded famously, "When I lay there on rotting prison straw ... it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either — but right through every human heart — and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains...an un-uprooted small corner of evil."

Or as a friend of mine used to say : "We aren't all Ivan the Terrible, but it's not for lack of talent."

When Paul talks about being "children of wrath," he isn't saying that we are born evil but rather that our actions and choices lead us into destructive patterns of life —

what has become “second nature” to us through habit. That word “nature” is used to describe that which “by long habit has become nature.” The death Paul speaks of here is a self inflicted wound, the consequence of ‘your trespasses and sins.’

What is God’s wrath, though? We tend to think of it as divine punishment, but a more accurate understanding is that wrath represents God allowing us to experience the natural consequences of our choices. In other words, wrath is when God consents to our refusal of divine grace and grants us the dignity and discomfort of “finding our own bottom,” to use 12-step language, the end of which is willing surrender to the arms of grace.

We could look no further than perhaps the most famous “child of wrath,” the Prodigal Son. When Jesus wants us to understand what God is like, he tells a story of a person making horrible choices (can anyone relate?), consequences for them, and God as a loving parent who scrambles from their porch to run towards their wayward child, embrace him, and welcome him home. And throw a party for him, there’s that too. Not a lot of thunderbolt throwing.

This is Grace. Which is act 2 of this story Paul is telling about you, and me.

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— ...— 9 not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

The God who allows the consequences of those choices in your life, is also a God who is rich in mercy and can “make us alive together with Christ” all by grace and not by any perfect repenting on our part, lest we get tempted to boast about it.

The Greek grammar used here emphasizes that we are entirely passive in this — God’s grace has done it all.

Robert Farrar Capon: Grace takes the agency of salvation out of human hands, whereas the heart’s desire of every child of Adam and Eve is to keep it there—to strive endlessly to find something we can do to make ourselves legitimate.

How are you in your life right now “striving endlessly to find something you can do to make yourself legitimate?” Aren’t you exhausted? Is your timeline on social media telling a story of “striving endlessly to make yourself legitimate?” Are you in your quiet moments scheming, dreaming, planning on how you might legitimize yourself today? What do you think you must have to finally be ‘legitimate’? Is every conversation an opportunity for you to humble brag, ever so carefully?

But grace renders all of our self-legitimizing efforts irrelevant because we are already legitimized, and always have been, as God's beloved children. We have never been separated from God, although it certainly can feel that way. God's disposition towards you has always been full of mercy, full of grace, full of love, and never separation.

Best of all, and usually forgotten it seems is verse 10. Maybe the greatest statement of grace in the text.

10 For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

"For we are what he has made us." How many of you need to hear that today? You are NOT what you have made of yourself. You are what God has made ... and God's intention all along has been that people become what they were made to be and the earth be filled with the glory of God. To quote St. Catherine of Sienna, "Be who you were meant to be and you will set the world on fire."

With works that God prepared beforehand "*to be our way of life*". Our way of life! The move which the passage celebrates is a move from a death way of being to a life way of being, here and now. The "good works" are not to be reduced to a list of moral do's, which match a list of moral don'ts. Throughout the passage, "good" is about God's goodness and generosity. It is about finding life in which we know ourselves to be made for love and compassion and that is in fact how we are likely to function best.

So that our lives might be God's poem. God's workmanship. A poem of grace. A poem of love. Saving us from the cacophony of our bad choices, to write a new song of beauty, goodness, generosity, and grace.

We are called, Stone Church of Willow Glen, not to be a poem of insularity. A poem of me, myself and I. A poem of a church just for ourselves. A poem of resting on our laurels.

No. We are called to be a poem of church not just for ourselves, but for those who need this Poem of love. A poem of love in action. A poem that is good news for all of Willow Glen and beyond.

A Poem of Grace. We are called to be the Poem of God for Willow Glen. So many of you have benefited from that sweet poem of love for most of your lives. May God give us grace to keep writing that poem so other generations may benefit from it as well. It's a song worth passing along.

Amen.