

John 3:16-17

Ephesians 2:1-10

October 16, 2016

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

The Stewardship of All of Life

“But God . . .”

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In August 2008, the Vallejo Times-Herald of Vallejo, California ran an obituary for Dolores Aguilar, age 78. After listing the people who died before her and her survivors, Dolores' obituary, written by one of her daughters, said:

“Dolores had no hobbies, made no contribution to society and rarely shared a kind word or deed in her life. I speak for the majority of her family when I say her presence will not be missed by many, very few tears will be shed and there will be no lamenting over her passing. Her family will remember Dolores and amongst ourselves we will remember her in our own way, which were mostly sad and troubling times throughout the years. We may have some fond memories of her and perhaps we will think of those times too. But I truly believe at the end of the day ALL of us will really only miss what we never had, a good and kind mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. I hope she is finally at peace with herself. There will be no service, no prayers and no closure for the family she spent a lifetime tearing apart. So I say here for all of us, GOOD BYE, MOM.”

Kind of makes you wonder what somebody will write about you when you die, doesn't it?

Some people have likened Ephesians 2:1-3 to an obituary, maybe along the lines of Dolores'. “You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, 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. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.”

The Message version of these same verses says, “It wasn't so long ago that you were mired in that old stagnant life of sin. You let the world, which doesn't know the first thing about living, tell you how to live. You filled your lungs with polluted unbelief, and then exhaled disobedience. We all did it, all of us in the same boat. It's a wonder God didn't lose his temper and do away with the whole lot of us.”

On Saturday, July 2, Garrison Keillor's radio show, “A Prairie Home Companion,” ended its forty-two year run. If you listened to the weekly show, you probably heard the advertisements from Lake Wobegon “sponsors” such as Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery (“If you can't find it at Ralph's, you can probably get along without it.”), Powder-milk Biscuits (“They give shy people the strength to get up and do what needs to be done. Heavens they're tasty and expeditious.”), Beebop-A-Reebop Rhubarb Pie (“One

little thing can revive a guy, And that it home-made rhubarb pie. Serve it up, nice and hot. Maybe things aren't as bad as you thought. Mama's little baby loves rhubarb, Beebopareebop Rhubarb Pie.”), and Rent-a-Raptor (“Rid your home of mice, rabbits, squirrels, and pesky boyfriends.”).

Mournful Oatmeal was another sponsor, a take-off on Quaker Oats. It's the oatmeal for all year-round, not just when the weather is cold outside. Here are a couple of ads:

“Mournful Oatmeal is the cereal that makes you realize you're not as smart as your mother told people you were. You may have a certificate on the wall but you know you could never pass that examination again. You may think that spring means new life and a fresh start but not necessarily for you, buster. Mournful Oatmeal. No matter where you go, there you are.”

“Mournful Oatmeal. It's the cereal that reminds you that you've never gotten what you really want, and that even if you did, you wouldn't like it. Mournful Oatmeal. It's almost like Calvinism in a box.”

That last line — “It's almost like Calvinism in a box.” — is a sad caricature of us Presbyterians with a theology that begins stresses our tendency as human beings to sin. In fact, it's not just a tendency, it's our nature — not our created nature, but our fallen nature. It's not that we just don't get it right from time to time. It's not that we commit certain individual sins or discrete acts of disobedience occasionally. Instead, we live in Sin, with a capital S. Or, as the Good News Translation puts it, “In the past you were spiritually dead because of your disobedience and sins. In our natural condition we, like everyone else, were destined to suffer God's anger.”

As they say, I've got some bad news and some good news.

You just heard the bad news — apart from God, living for ourselves, we are dead in in our sins, we are the walking dead. Most of us don't want to hear the bad news, much less own up to it. However, if the doctor doesn't make an accurate diagnosis, she won't be able offer a cure.

Now for the good news, and it starts with one little three-letter word, “but . . .” Actually, in the Greek it's just a little two-letter word, *δέ* (deh), a conjunction that means the same thing in Greek and English — “to the contrary,” used to introduce something contrasting with what has already been mentioned.

Paul began with the bad news of our obituary describing a life apart from God, but that's not the final word. The good news begins, “But God . . .” One writer has called “But God . . .” a great two word summary of the gospel and says,

- * We were dead in sin, **but God** made us alive.
- * We were sunk in the pit of depravity, **but God** raised us up.
- * We were headed for hell, **but God** seated us in the heavenly realms.
- * We were being ruined by Satan, **but God** turned us into a masterpiece of

goodness.

* We are still inclined toward all evil if left to ourselves, **but God** won't leave us to ourselves.

* We were dead; note the past tense. **But God** has made us alive.¹

“But God” is a two-word summary of Ephesians 2:8 — “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” In other words, the good news is what Eugene Peterson says in the margin quote on the front of today’s bulletin: “glory does not consist in what we do for God but in what God does for us.” And, my oh my, what God has done for us!

The story is told about a debate between Martin Luther, the great leader of the Protestant Reformation, and Desiderius Erasmus, a Dutch humanist and theologian, about God rescuing us from sin and death. Erasmus likened God’s rescue to a mother helping her baby learn to walk. The mother holds the baby’s hand, helps the baby get balanced, lets the baby take a few wobbly steps, and catches the baby when she falls. Luther strongly disagreed with Erasmus. No, Luther said, we were like a caterpillar surrounded by a ring of fire. God reached down and plucked the helpless creature from a certain death.²

One minister has said “it is our duty as preachers to take people through the depths so that they can sing on the heights. Don’t ever leave them down there. Make sure they can sing, ‘Amazing Grace,’ by the time you say ‘Amen.’” And so, in a few minutes we’re going to sing, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see.” There’s that little word again — “but” — a complete change from before, not because of anything we have done for God (“not the result of works, so that no one may boast”) but because God has done everything for us in Jesus Christ.

God’s amazing grace has come to us in Jesus Christ because

- * God is rich in mercy.
- * God loved the world so much that he gave us his only Son.
- * God loved us even while we were still sinners, even while we were his enemies.
- * God is rich in grace and kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

Here’s another picture to help us appreciate God’s amazing grace in our lives — a needy beggar stretching out his hand to receive a gift. That’s wonderful enough, but imagine the beggar not even asking for the gift, not even knowing that he needs the gift. That’s what the gift of God’s grace is like for you and me.

But there’s more to the story: the beggar becomes a doer . . . not that we do anything to **get** God’s grace in Jesus Christ, to **earn** God’s grace in Jesus Christ, to **deserve** God’s grace in Jesus Christ. However, there is a final verse in today’s epistle lesson that says, “For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” In other words, what are we going to do with God’s gift of grace?

If someone ever describes you as “peripatetic,” don’t be offended! It’s not a word you hear used very often, but it simply means somebody who travels from place to place, especially to do certain work, maybe on a temporary basis. The Duke Progress Energy folks in our area this week could be called “peripatetic linemen.” Traveling nurses are “peripatetic.”

And we are called to be “peripatetic Christians.” That doesn’t necessarily mean we travel to and fro doing temporary work. But it does have something to do with way we live and what we do as people who have received God’s amazing grace in Christ Jesus.

“Peripatetic” comes from a Greek word that can mean, quite simply, “walk about.” Most of the time, however, in the New Testament it means something like “live, conduct oneself.” Listen to some verses from Ephesians 2 from the American Standard Bible:

* v. 1-2: “And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world . . .”

* v. 10: “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.”

It’s a totally different way of living, a totally different life orientation — walking according to the course of this world vs. walking in God’s good works. What makes the difference is that two-word gospel — “But God . . .”

Movie fans recently mourned the death of the comic genius, Gene Wilder. One of his most famous roles was in *Young Frankenstein*. In one scene with Marty Feldman, he tries to explain that his name is pronounced “Frahnken-shteen,” not “Frankenstein.” Then he speaks to Marty Feldman and calls him “EE-gor.” Marty Feldman corrects him, “It’s EYE-gor.” As the stooped over EYE-gor leads Dr. Frahnken-shteen deeper into the castle, he turns, offers him his crutch, and says, “Walk this way!” Dr. Frahnken-shteen shrugs, takes the crutch, and shuffles down the steps!

The good news is, “by grace you have been saved.”

The rest of the story is “Walk this way!” — live in the good works which God has prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

This sermon is the first in a series called “The Stewardship of **All** of Life.” These sermons will NOT be six sermons on how to give money to the church. The emphasis is on **all of life**. Stewardship is really about our life orientation and how we will walk through life. We have been given the gift of God’s grace in Jesus Christ, in order to live a new life, engaged in the work God has prepared for us to be our way of life.

We once were lost, but now are found; were blind, but now we see.

We once were dead in our sins, but God has made us alive in Christ Jesus.

Walk this way! Thanks be to God!

Let us pray: Lord, as we hear your Word and give thanks for your abundant grace in our lives, remind us that you have shared with us your most precious gift, our Lord Jesus Christ. Help us to model our lives after his message of compassion, love, and service to you and to all the world. In Christ’s name, Amen.

NOTES ¹Stan Mast, Ephesians 2:1-10, www.cep.calvinseminary.edu.

²Ibid.