



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

By Grace Alone
A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

March 22, 2009
Fourth Sunday in Lent (Year B)
Ephesians 2:1-10

One of the exciting things in our house these days is listening to Sarah telling stories. She gets so excited as she tells about something that happened—or that could happen. All of a sudden she pours forth a big stream of words filled with great excitement. She throws in about 3-4 “you know whats?” into the mix just so to keep you engaged in her tale. If you listen to her, you can’t help but realize how the language isn’t large enough to contain her enthusiasm.

That’s sort of what these verses from Ephesians are like. You can’t tell in your Bible because it’s been translated and broken into sentences, but the first 9 verses that we read today—if you look at the Greek text—are one sentence. And it would be impossible to diagram it on the blackboard. The language itself can barely contain the burst of praise that pours forth from Paul’s lips. You can almost hear him singing hymns with lines about God saving “a wretch like him” or God finding a way to redeem “such a worm as I.”

It’s an amazing thing to hear someone gush about the radical goodness of God’s grace.

As I thought about this, I remembered a day many years ago now when a group from the church was gathering to play kickball. One of the captains was Casey, who was about 13 at the time. Casey was what I would call highly athletic and highly competitive. Another member of the group—an adult—was the polar opposite. She was not athletic, bless her heart (to put it nicely) and she wasn’t competitive either.

Anyway, Betsy had been Casey’s teacher in Sunday School, and over the years they had maintained a great relationship. It was built on mutual love and care. But even with that deep love, none of us expected what we heard when Casey, as a captain, began the process of choosing teams, and he called Betsy’s name first.

When I talked with Betsy, she told me that not only was that the first time in her life that she had ever been the first one chosen for a sporting event, it was also the first time when she wasn’t dead last. You could sense the deep-felt joy that filled her and does to this day. And when we talked, her words poured forth one after another in what Casey’s choosing had done for her.

And, Betsy was smart enough to know that it was nothing about her that made Casey choose her that day. It wasn’t her athletic prowess or anything within her. It all had to do with Casey. She was chosen by grace alone.

By grace alone. If we Presbyterians should get anything, it’s that. It’s built into everything we believe and do.

When Chris asked me and Alayne the questions of us at Aaron’s baptism, we heard him ask not “Trusting in *your own* goodness or faith, do you promise to teach the faith to your children,” but rather “Trusting in *God’s grace*....”

When we receive new members, we'll ask them to do certain things by asking them *first* if they trust in the gracious mercy of God.

At weddings we remind the couple making promises that no promises are sure without God's grace.

When we install or ordain officers, we ask them to make their vows only after they assure us that they are trusting not in their own goodness or faith or morality but that they are solely trusting in the gracious mercy of God.

When we commission someone to teach or go on a mission trip or lead a choir, we remind those gathered around the font this truth: "The grace bestowed on you in baptism is sufficient for your calling because it is God's grace. By God's grace are we saved, and enabled to grow in the faith and to commit our lives in ways that serve Christ."

By grace alone—if there's anything we should get, it's that.

But we don't. At least many of us don't. And so we keep trying to do more or believe more so that our efforts can get us saved.

I have always loved the language and thought of the most recent affirmation of faith written by the Presbyterian Church. That particular affirmation is called *A Brief Statement of Faith*. One of my professors in seminary was on the committee to write that statement, and she once talked about the response it generated when it was sent to the church for review. She said that almost everybody commented that it was too long to be called *A Brief Statement of Faith*, but then she said that almost everybody had a suggestion for something that needed to be added. In other words, it's too short but you need to add this.

One of my favorite part of that affirmation is the section on God the Father, which we will say together later in the service to affirm this:

*We trust in God,
whom Jesus called Abba Father.
In sovereign love God created the world good
and makes everyone equally in God's image,
male and female, of every race and people,
to live as one community.
But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator.
Ignoring God's commandments,
we violate the image of God in others and ourselves,
accept lies as truth,
exploit neighbor and nature,
and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.
We deserve God's condemnation.
Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.
In everlasting love,
the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people
to bless all families of the earth.
Hearing their cry,
God delivered the children of Israel*

*from the house of bondage.
Loving us still,
God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.
Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,
like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,
God is faithful still.*

One of the reasons I like that particular section is because of its brutal honesty. It states in unequivocal terms that we are worthy of God's condemnation. It's not afraid to say with Ephesians that we were all dead in our sin. But, according to another member of the writing team, it was that line—'we deserve God's condemnation'—that generated the most reaction and complaint from Presbyterians when the affirmation was sent out for review and comment before its final approval by the General Assembly.

People had a hard time admitting what Paul once declared: "I am the chief of all sinners." We Presbyterians, it seems, aren't prone to being that forthcoming about our own sinfulness, as evidenced by the complaints and suggestions that the committee received.

Somebody offered this revision to the committee: "Don't say 'we deserve God's condemnation;' say this, 'Some people deserve God's condemnation.'" Makes you wonder who would be on that list and, of course, whether the person making the suggestion figured he or she is deserving of God's condemnation.

Another suggested that we should all be on the list, but not to be condemned. That person suggested this: "We all deserve to be *evaluated* by God." I guess that leaves it open for God to decide who deserves condemnation, and who does not.

I don't know about you, but I'm glad they left it in there. I have no trouble affirming that I deserve God's condemnation because, like Paul—and King David before him—my sin is ever before me.

The reason we affirm our sin, though, isn't so that we can wallow in our guilt. No, it's so that we can treasure again the unending mercy of God. The line we often affirm together when we use the language from the newest confession of faith—we deserve God's condemnation—is not the last line. It is followed by that all-important word—yet.

It goes on to say, "Yet, God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation." Our sin is not the ending, but rather the beginning of our salvation.

That's what Barbara Brown Taylor speaks about in her book, *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation*. She talks about our sin as our only hope, "because the recognition that something is wrong is the first step toward setting it right again. There is no help for those who admit no need of help. There is no repair for those who insist that nothing is broken, and there is no hope of transformation for a world whose inhabitants accept that it is sadly but irreversibly wrecked." (Page 59)

It is good for us to acknowledge the depth of our sin, which we do every Sunday in our worship together. We always confess our sin before God and one another in the prayer of confession. And our sin can take any number of forms, but the result is always the same—we become less human and our relationships with God and others are strained.

That's why the classic prayers of confession that the church prays always speak of "the things that we have done that we ought not to have done" and of "the things that we have failed to do that we ought to have done." They leave plenty of room for all of us to confess the avenues our sin takes.

The church can be a community that lives this truth in the world. As one theologian has said, "the church exists so that God has a community in which to save people from meaninglessness, by reminding them who they are and what they are for. The church exists so that God has a place to point people toward a purpose as big as their capabilities, and to help them identify all the ways they flee from that high call. The church exists so that people have a community in which they may confess their sin—their own turning away from life, whatever form that destructiveness may take for them—as well as a community that will support them to turn back again. The church exists so that people have a place where they may repent of their fear, their hardness of heart, their isolation and loss of vision, and where—having repented—they may be restored to fullness of life." (Taylor, 85)

By grace alone—you don't have to earn it. But you do have to respond to it.

So what are we to do in response? We are to be a walking before/after to show what God can do through Jesus Christ. And we are to serve human need by engaging in good works which reflect the nature of God as gracious love.

It is that God, after all, who alone is the agent of our salvation. It is not our own doing. It is always the gift of God, for we are saved by grace alone.