

God Lives in Us

Last week we talked about how God forms us into community through grace. I hope as we’ve been going through this sermon series, that you’ve been taking mental notes of how God’s grace – poured out on all people – gradually changes us when we decide to follow Jesus. We’re called to love people – even when we disagree with their lifestyles, their politics, and their theology. We heard what John the Apostle wrote earlier this morning. “If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God,” (1 Jn. 4:15), and “Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother or sister, whom they have seen cannot love God, whom they have not seen,” (4:20).

Those are some key verses for us, and others, who claim to be Christians. Last week we heard Christ tell us to love God, and neighbor. We can’t do that, though, if we’re fixating on everything that’s wrong with them, and all their flaws! As followers of Jesus, we would do well to consider how far we’ve come on our faith journey because of the justifying and sanctifying grace God has poured out on us. That’s what we’re going to focus on today in the lesson from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. If you have a Bible or Bible app, turn with me to Ephesians 2. We’ll be reading the whole chapter.

Read Ephesians 2.

The Collect for Purity is a prayer recorded in the Church of England’s Book of Common Prayer, and dates from the 1200’s. As an Anglican priest, John Wesley was very familiar with it. The Collect calls us to recognize that God knows us, He cleanses us, and through the on-going presence of the Holy Spirit within us, He draws us ever closer to being the divine image-bearers He originally intended for us to be. This is the same message the Apostle Paul gives in the letter to the Church at Ephesus.

Righteousness in a Fur Coat

Paul writes, “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient,” (Eph. 2:1-2). Disobedience to God’s way of doing things has been around since before God put Adam and Eve in the Garden. It’s nothing new. Because of disobedience – first of Satan and his angels, and later because of various disobedient acts of humanity – the whole Creation has suffered.

Besides the sad episode of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit, their son, Cain, murdered his brother Abel. When questioned, he asked, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen. 4:9). We see this play out through the Scriptures. Noah, also in the

book of Genesis, is another figure who was righteous, but we find out that he also messed up by becoming a drunk (Gen. 9:20-21).

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks of England talks about being our brother or sister's keeper with regards to Noah:

He says Noah was "a righteous man in a fur coat," and then made the distinction: "There are two ways of keeping warm on a cold night. You can wear a fur coat or light a fire. Wear a fur coat and you warm yourself only. Light a fire, and you warm others. We are supposed to light a fire."¹

See, in his righteousness, Noah saved himself and his family – but when you look in the Bible record, there doesn't appear to be concern by Noah with his neighbors. He wasn't calling others around him to repentance, or a closer walk with God.

Lighting Fires

Our holiness as United Methodists, must be both inward focused, on drawing nearer to God personally through spiritual practices, yet must at the same time be outward focused, on taking collective responsibility for others. When we are focused on both inward and outward holiness, we do great things to bring God's kingdom a bit closer to being on earth as it is in heaven. Let me give you an example of what I'm talking about. Back in 2013, the first year I was a lay delegate to annual conference, local churches across Ohio responded to Bishop Palmer's call to "Imagine No More Malaria."

Billions of dollars were raised – by 900 some-odd congregations at the time. Those funds were used to buy mosquito nets, supplies, and even a Cessna airplane – *Wings of the Morning* – to use in the Democratic Republic of Congo to provide medicines to remote, hard to reach locations. Just to grasp the magnitude of it, the DRC is roughly equal in size geographically to about a quarter of the United States. If you could take the size of Texas and multiply it about 3 ½ times, you'd have approximately the same amount of land as the Congo. So, it's a big place! One little Cessna plane doesn't seem all that great in a land of that size – but it's saved countless lives, and continues to fly, day-in and day-out, bringing hope and life to some of the poorest people in the world.

We light fires through the extension ministries of the Church. "Imagine No More Malaria" is just one of many initiatives. United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) often shows up on the ground long before the Red Cross, or even FEMA arrives. When the tornado hit Dayton several years ago, it was ordinary people like us who showed up, and provided bottled water to people who had just lost everything to

¹ Kenneth Carter, Jr. *Unrelenting Grace: A United Methodist Way of Life*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2023). pages 52-53.

the storm. Those initiatives are funded in part by offerings from various congregations, including us here at New Hope.

Hard-wired for Relationships

We are hard-wired for relationships, and we flourish when we're in connection with each other. Paul talks about this in the epistolary letter this morning. He contrasts what we once were with what we are now. He says:

All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages He might show the incomparable riches of His grace, expressed in His kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. (Eph. 2:3-9).

We talked about this last week, but I want to repeat it again – we were created by and for God, and the human heart yearns for communion with God. We have a God-sized hole in our hearts, and if the Holy Spirit isn't the One we let fill it, we'll fill it with something else. We see that sad truth play out on the pages of Holy Scripture time and time again. The people want God, they need God, but instead of following Him, they worship idols carved from wood and stone. Nowadays that idol is more apt to be a lifestyle, a vehicle, or I daresay, a church building.

What we need to do here, in our place, is to create a culture where we're dialed into the larger connection. For example, we have not had an active women's group in years. The last time we had one was prior to their name change to United Women in Faith in 2020. Yet the group is mentioned in a couple different paragraphs in *the Book of Discipline*. It seems every local church of the United Methodist Church ought to have one. I was reading about the history of United Women in Faith – it started out as a missionary society to fund overseas missionaries to India. Since then, they've also gotten involved in promoting desegregation during the civil rights era, in education, and most recently in stopping human trafficking of children here in Ohio. I would love to see all you women of faith here at New Hope, united in the work of doing God's will on this corner of earth, as it is in heaven.

If you want to meet on some Saturday out here for a brunch, and then come up with mission projects, or justice activities, you want to get involved in, let me know. I'll help cook, and I'll even wash the dishes afterwards! If we want to grow, ladies, you've got to lead the charge on that – even bad boys love their mamas! You put your mind to

it, and the guys will listen. Paul tells us, “For we are Gods handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do,” (verse 10).

Jesus Christ, Light of the World

“Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called ‘uncircumcised’ by those who call themselves ‘the circumcision’ (which is done in the body by human hands) – remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ,” (verses 11-13), Paul says. Here again, he’s reminding us of who we used to be, and of Whose we are now. We’ve been bought at an incalculable price – there’s no way for us to ever estimate the magnitude even remotely of what it cost God to do what only He could do. The purchase price for our freedom was the lifeblood of God the Son Himself.

Like me, some of you have children. It’s hard to watch them go through things. As parents, we’d very much like to be able to put them inside a giant bubble and keep them from ever getting hurt in any way. Can you imagine what God the Father went through on Good Friday? So often we think of what Jesus went through. But from the parent angle – have you thought of it before? I mean, from His perspective – seeing His perfect, sinless Child, brutally beaten, pegged to the cross, dying an undeserved death. Jesus suffered terribly on Good Friday. But so did God the Father and God the Spirit.

Three of the Gospel accounts record how the sky turned black, and the sun stopped shining while Jesus was dying on the cross. On first reading this, I assumed that it must have been an eclipse, where the moon comes in between the sun and earth, and momentarily blocks out the light. But then I started looking at other, non-Christian sources from the same period. Writers in Rome, non-Christian Jewish writers in Palestine, and even writers as far away as China record how in the spring of the year once, there was day when the sun disappeared out of the sky for three hours, and light was absent from the whole world – except for the distant stars, and fires people lit.

Jesus Christ, the Light of the world, while wrestling with our sin and death for those few hours on the cross, caused the whole Creation to mourn and experience the loss of light. His sacrificial death for our sake grieved the whole universe. The other week we talked about the prodigal son, and how his father welcomed him back. Can you imagine how agonizing it must have been for God the Father, to put all His holy wrath on His own Son at the cross? He was most certainly heartbroken. I suspect we’ll never know the depths of the sorrow God the Father felt on seeing Jesus Christ crucified.

People of the Cross and the Flame

Paul says that Jesus “is our peace, who has made two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in His flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in Himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which He put to death their hostility,” (Eph. 2:14-16). Paul was originally talking about Jews and Gentiles here. Through the ages it’s taken on added meaning. In the last seventy-five years or so, we’ve seen this play out in America. Jesus calls us to look out for our brothers and sisters, whether they’re shades of white, red, black, or yellow. He calls us to look out for our brothers and sisters – to make sure our sisters are given the same rights and privileges as our brothers.

Well, all this is a work in progress. In his book, Bishop Carter states, “The next generation’s church will be about justice and mercy rooted in discipleship and spirituality as the redefined path to sanctification [and] grounded in the core values of grace, connection, and holiness.”² Despite our scars and flaws, Paul says, “He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through Him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of His household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone. In Him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord,” (Eph. 4:17-21).

We’re God’s handiwork, created in Christ to do good works. Jesus is our peace, who breaks down the dividing wall of hostility – whatever those hostilities may be in our day and age – and in Him, there are no foreigners or strangers, but fellow citizens. These are the big takeaways for today. In Jesus “you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit,” (verse 22). We’re called to be light, and to light fires. “In our connection, we light a fire. We are the people of the cross and the flame. The cross that saves us, the flaming Spirit that kindles in us the fire of God’s love, is the integration of personal and social holiness. It is our way of life.”³

Prayer: Spirit of God, unending and unfettered, by Your divine assistance the Scriptures came into being; by Your divine assistance their message is revealed to us. Help us to interpret and meditate on what we have read and heard today, that in our time we may be refreshed and renewed in witness and in service to the world, into which You breathed life at creation itself. Amen.

² Ibid, 58.

³ Ibid, 53.