

FROM DEATH TO LIFE: From Grace to Works

Lent IV GSW 3/18/12

Introduction to the Epistle Lesson – Ephesians 2:1-10

The Old Testament passages for Lent have a theme of covenant with God – covenant made and broken and renewed – today we heard a very strange and difficult passage in Numbers. The Gospel lessons in Lent have a focus on or foreshadowing of Christ moving toward the cross – today we'll hear a very well-known passage in John 3. And I think you could say that the theme of the Epistle lessons in Lent is about Atonement – that is, about how we are made right with, reconciled to, God in Christ – themes of sin and salvation, of cross and resurrection. And some particular language of grace and works in connection with Atonement is what we hear about in this passage from Ephesians 2.

If you're paying attention to the weather these days – and I think we all are – you might think it's summer out there rather than winter. It feels very nice to me, although a bit odd, even disconcerting, when weather is so whacky – and maybe a march tornado just south of us captures that uneasy part of it. And if you're paying attention to the Epistle lesson today – which I hope we all can – you might think that it's out of season as well – that it sounds like Reformation Sunday instead of the 4th Sunday of Lent. That Ephesians passage is a cornerstone of Reformed theology: ‘for by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God...not the result of works, so that no one may boast’ – a Reformation rallying cry – the remarkable gift of God’s saving grace contrasted with the futility of human works – that’s our theological heritage as a Reformed church. So I don’t know if it feels odd in the same way as the warm weather does to have this passage appear in this Lenten season, but perhaps we can simply ask what to make of it being here. I mentioned that there is an Atonement theme in the Epistle lessons, so since we have this Reformation text in this Lenten season, how about if we try to come at this Atonement theme from a different angle? The Reformation emphasis is one of turning from works toward grace; but what if in this season we would listen to a call from grace to works? When the Worship, Prayer, and Spirituality Ministry developed the theme of FROM DEATH TO LIFE for Lent, and then asked Jill and me to come up with sermon titles in advance to develop that theme – part of the fun we had was to play with some of the words a bit: last week

was ‘From Wisdom to Foolishness’ and today ‘From Grace to Works’ – turning around the order you would expect (that’s the kind of wild fun us ministers have: pretty crazy stuff! ☺). What might it mean to explore a very un-Reformed sounding idea of ‘grace to works’ in this season that moves us closer to the cross – to holy week?

So we’ll get to grace and works – *from grace to works* – but to do so, first I want to ask you a question: how would you describe the core of a human being? – the essential nature of a person? And this is your choice: either essentially prone toward evil, or essentially prone toward good. What would you say? Although you might want to know first: ‘well, which human being – which person? – it depends...’ And I would say ‘nope – not some particular person – any person, every person: is a human being prone toward evil or toward good?’ I’m not looking for the correct theological answer or statement – but your gut response – what would you say? I think it’s an interesting question – and I was thinking that if one WAS to give the standard theological answer (perhaps a Reformation Sunday answer) that it would tend to be the ‘prone toward evil’ view: human beings are sinful by nature and corrupted in every aspect of life. And sometimes the church gets criticized or caricatured or written off because of that – ‘Christians are so negative about people’. But in fact what I find very interesting is that I think there is a very strong, prevailing cultural voice that says much the same thing – and here’s what I mean: when someone says “I’m only human” – what does that mean in our cultural idiom? It means that you can’t expect too much – right? That humans are flawed by nature; and this is not just about innocent limitations – it’s often used as a reason for or an explanation of human waywardness. If you know the 1986 #1 hit song *I’m Only Human* – as I very well do – it says “I’m only human – born to make mistakes” (and these mistakes are anything but innocent). That sums it up very clearly: to be human is to mess up. Theology and culture agree – human beings are essentially bad; but I realize an important difference would be that theology sees this as a problem, while culture sees this as an excuse.

Interesting. So what would the apostle Paul have to say about this? Well, that’s easy – Paul is a big part of where we get that ‘prone toward evil’ theology from – Paul is a chief

spokesperson on the flawed nature of humanity, in need of salvation – right? But wait just a minute: if we look at this passage, I think you could actually make a case for either answer to my question – a case for saying humans are prone toward bad AND for saying humans are prone toward good.

Look at the beginning of this passage – the ‘humans are prone to evil’ perspective is very clear: ‘You were dead thru the sins in which you lived, which is the disobedient way of this world – we are by NATURE children of wrath’ – so it’s not just being prone to evil, it’s an IDENTITY of sin, a living death, in Paul’s none too subtle imagery. By Paul’s definition here, to be human is to be sinful, and furthermore to be under God’s judgment. Case closed.

Except...look at the end of this passage – ‘we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.’ Now THAT, I think, sounds something like: ‘human beings are prone toward good’...doesn’t it? But let me argue with myself just a moment here – because really it seems this isn’t about human nature but about what God has done for us in Christ, a re-creation for good; yes...good point – but that closing line is compelling: ‘which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life’ – that is language that suggests the essential human nature, capacity, identity, is about doing good.

Prone to evil – prone to good; by nature condemned – created to do good...there’s not a perfect case for either, and perhaps it is enough just to see that both ideas are present – and that with the one idea at the beginning of this passage and the other at the end of it, we need to pay attention to what is in the middle...which is where the talk of grace and works comes in: ‘God’s rich mercy and great love bring us from death to life in Christ – saved by grace; God raised us with Christ to show the immeasurable riches of God’s grace in kindness – saved by grace; a gift from God, not earned by our works – no boasting, only gratitude – saved by grace’ – it’s a beautiful and powerful section to take in. It should never get old to speak of ‘saved by grace’ – the remarkable truth that we are brought from death to life by the gift of God in Christ. And the contrast is with works, with earning our way to God, as works can be a way of both pride and anxiety. From works to grace is good: but I wonder also about how ‘saved by grace’ can be both

misused and also not fully used – how grace can be twisted to lose its meaning, and stunted in a way that limits the gift that it is.

I've been reading the book *The Pillars of the Earth* – and I know many of you got to it before me. It's set in 12th century England with political and religious battles galore – and in the midst of a compelling story and great characters, part of what I've been both intrigued by and disturbed by is the description of Christianity as merely a blatant transaction between people and God, performed by the church. Just do whatever you want, and then the church simply applies absolution to it, at the right price; and this goes on until you die, and then just make sure you get the correct blessing at death. It's all just a transaction. So you're saying – well of course, that's what the Reformation fixed, right? But I'm not always so sure. Because that idea of a transaction with God continues to have a strong hold on us, on the church. That *Pillars of the Earth* theology isn't so much different than one that stops in the middle of this passage – because if we stop at God's saving work, we turn true grace into cheap grace. It is obvious to us that God's grace should not be sold and bought, with no connection to living in faithful ways; but the same trap is there if we stop at 'by grace you have been saved through faith' – it sounds like a transaction that is an end itself – one that simply looks at human beings as prone toward evil and in need of a 'get out of hell' free card. Ask around – it's what a lot of people think that church, faith, Christianity essentially is.

But the true power of grace does not complete a transaction, it creates (or re-creates) a whole new identity – something like this: 'we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.' What God's grace does is bring us to works – and it does so by freeing us to be truly human: not superior or special or separate or perfect...and certainly not indifferent or immoral or anemic either...but truly human in that we are created to follow God's ways of life – we are most ourselves when we are most fully faithful to the new life given in Christ. Grace works life in and through us – grace is not a transaction with God, but the freedom from God to be your true self.

I was at a lecture last Monday at Hope College given by the artist Makoto Fujimura who is doing contemporary illustrations for a 400th anniversary edition of the King James Bible – and they are beautiful and compelling images. But something he said I found very compelling as well – he said that our culture has a fluent language for waywardness, but does not have a language for faithfulness – and that part of what he tries to do as an artist is to give voice to the reality and beauty of faithfulness as a way of human life. Which is much the same message as the TED event I went to the week before (with some Hope Church folks among the speakers, and attendees) – all about people doing more good in our community and world. All of which strikes me as quite counter-cultural; not in the sense of having to bash the world around us, although there is plenty to name and confront that is deeply broken and deadly – but it is staking claim to the truth that it is a deeply human thing to have the mercy, love, and kindness of God expressed through our lives – that is, for grace to lead to works. I wonder about that being the reputation for Christianity rather than as a transaction outlet; I wonder about that language of faithfulness being a compelling voice for our children, our youth in a world so accustomed to the language of waywardness; I wonder about seeing ourselves with that identity. If we believe ourselves superior or self-satisfied as recipients of God's grace, we are wrong; but if we do not see ourselves as special, we are wrong too – we do have a special calling that God has given to us, to speak and teach the language of God's grace to this world – the conviction that to put God's grace to work in the ways of life is who we are created to be – the trust in God that his is how our lives and world are made to be. After all – we're only human. AMEN.