

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

Sermon: "Knowing our sin & God's mercy."

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:12-28 (Ephesians 2:1-10)

WSC Questions 16/19/87

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Opener: I heard the voice of Jesus say #672

Choruses: Hope of the Nations (Doerksen) & In Christ alone

Song after sermon: Just as I am, without one plea #682

Closer: Christ the Lord is risen today (St. George's, Windsor) #247

A second reading from the letter to the church at Ephesus

Ephesians 2:1-10

2 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² 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. ³ 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. ⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷ 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. ⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

I remember attending a workshop on mission & evangelism at St. Andrew's Hall on UBC Campus.

We were told that a big part of sharing the Gospel is understanding how the story has been good news for us.

And so, one of the exercises we were given was to answer in a word or a sentence,

"What is the Gospel?"

I'd like you to take a piece of paper

and write out your own answer.

In a word or sentence, what is the Gospel?

GIVE PEOPLE TIME

After doing this individual work

we were invited to share our answers

with each other.

Don't worry—I won't ask you to do this!

At that workshop we shared our responses.

I recall hearing words like grace and acceptance.

I recall sentences about rescue or deliverance.

We all like snappy slogans.

We all like succinct and memorable sayings.

But keep in mind that the Gospel is a story.

This Gospel is a grand, sweeping narrative that tells us things we may not particularly want to hear and invites us to recognize our shortcomings.

But that isn't where the story ends.

The Gospel is also the story of God's grace—

of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ,

and of the mercy we see most clearly

in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

It also asks us to see where we fit within it.

It asks us to recognize our need,

to receive God's grace,

and to make a decision about how we will live in response.

PAUSE

It has been a real joy to start looking
at some of our tradition's confessions.
They are refreshingly bold and outspoken
about different elements of the Gospel we tend to downplay.

What am I talking about?
We are sinners. Each and every one of us.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism defines sin
as "any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God." (WSC
Question 14)

In other words, sin is both the good we fail to do
and the wrong we choose to do.

And just in case we lack the imagination to recognize how we fall short,
Question 16 of that same Catechism that we recited today
tells us that "all mankind, descending from [Adam] by ordinary generation,
sinned in him, and fell with him in his first transgression."

We are all sinners—every one of us.
Our problem is deeper than simply making some bad choices as we grow up.
Scripture teaches that something has gone wrong
at the very heart of our human nature.
We have inherited a brokenness that expresses itself
in our desire to live on our own terms—
even when those terms put us at odds with God.

This is an essential element of the Gospel.
We are all sinners. And being sinners is a serious problem.
The second question we read from the Westminster Shorter Catechism,
Question 19, describes just how serious our situation is apart from God's
grace.
We have "lost communion with God, are under his wrath and curse,
and so made liable to all miseries in this life,
to death itself, and to the pains of hell for ever."

Those who have grown up in the church
and have the image of Jesus welcoming the little children

burned into their imaginations might struggle to see this.

But it doesn't take long reading the Gospels
to realize that Jesus didn't just welcome people
but he probed them and challenged them
and warned them about a judgment that is coming.

If you spend any time looking in the mirror
or reflecting on your own tendencies or behaviour
you'll realize that these challenges and warnings are for us.

We also stand under the judgment of a holy God
who doesn't judge by the curve or say 'good enough'.
Those of us who have determined to do better
will also realize that left to ourselves,
we cannot repair our relationship with God
or rescue ourselves from the consequences of sin.

For those who are wondering if this is simply the gloomy assessment
of an outdated confession Paul says essentially the same thing:
"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins...
we were by nature deserving of wrath." (Ephesians 2:1,3)

The Gospel reveals that we are all sinners.
And that this is a huge problem.
But this is not where the story ends.
This is where the Gospel becomes Good News.
Let me continue reading from Ephesians:
"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." (Ephesians 2:4-7)

What we could never do for ourselves,
 either atone for our misdeeds
 or mend our broken nature,
 God has accomplished in Jesus.
 By his death we receive forgiveness of our guilt.
 In his resurrection we see the confirmation of God's saving work,
 and we receive the promise that those who belong to Christ
 will one day be raised to new life as well.

God has inaugurated a rescue plan in Jesus
 that has its proof and fulfilment
 in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

This is another essential part of the Gospel.
 But I worry that even this Good News element of the Gospel
 is often ignored and rejected.

I recall an elder at a previous church confiding to me
 that he was beginning to doubt the resurrection.
 This man had been caring for his spouse.
 and dementia was slowly stealing away
 more and more of the person he loved.
 It was becoming increasingly harder for him
 to believe in the resurrection
 when everything he saw seemed to be moving in the opposite direction.

His questions don't make him unusual.
 Christians have wrestled with the resurrection from the very beginning.

While the ancient world was both familiar and accepting
 of stories about gods and supernatural events,
 bodily resurrection was not something most people expected.
 The Jewish Pharisees believed in a future resurrection,
 but the idea that one person had already been raised from the dead
 was extraordinary.

So even when there were first-hand witnesses
 to speak about the reality of Jesus' resurrection,
 the church needed to affirm and defend this claim again and again.

In today's letter to the church at Corinth,
 Paul addresses people who were struggling with exactly this question.
 Paul argues that resurrection is the linchpin of the Gospel.
 Without it, there was no assurance that our sins have been forgiven
 or that we have a redeemed future to look forward to.

Paul says, "if Christ has not been raised,
 our preaching is useless and so is your faith." (1 Corinthians 15:14)

But Paul is assured of what he has been preaching.
 He goes on to say "Christ has indeed been raised from the dead,
 the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.
 For since death came through a man,
 the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.
 For as in Adam all die,
 so in Christ all will be made alive."
 (1 Corinthians 15:20-22)

Did you notice how the story comes full circle?
 We all sinned in Adam, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism reminds us.
 And those who are in Christ will be made alive in him.
 The gospel story has many elements.
 We are all sinners.
 Our sin puts us in a desperate situation.
 By God's grace, a rescue plan was launched
 that has its proof and fulfilment in Jesus' resurrection.

So then how do we respond?
 The last question we read from the Westminster Shorter Catechism
 talks about repentance, a 'repentance unto life'.
 This involves recognizing all that has been mentioned,
 both our desperate situation and God's saving work in Jesus.
 But just as it involves understanding,

it also involves action, a response.
 In the words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism
 we are invited to “turn from [sin] unto God,
 with full purpose of, and endeavour after, new obedience.” (WSC 87)

This is the full Gospel.
 It can't be shared in a word
 or a single sentence.
 It involves putting ourselves in the story itself
 with all of its necessary elements.
 It involves looking at our own brokenness,
 recognizing our perilous situation,
 and turning to the one who offers us a new future
 demonstrated by Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

Some people won't dare look at themselves that closely.
 Some will reason that their situation isn't that bad.
 Some people won't be able to fathom the offer of grace
 that has come to us in a miracle.

The Gospel doesn't ask us to pretend that our sin isn't real.
 It invites us to bring our sin into the light
 and to entrust ourselves to the mercy of God.

You probably recall the story of the thief on the cross—
 the one who turned to Jesus and asked for mercy.
 Think about his situation.
 This man had nothing to offer Jesus.
 He couldn't undo his past.
 He couldn't make things right.
 He couldn't promise years of faithful service.
 He couldn't demonstrate that he had become a better person.
 All he could do was turn toward Jesus and ask for mercy.
 And Jesus gave it to him.

That is grace.
 Not that our sin doesn't matter. It matters enormously.
 But our sin does not have to have the final word.
 Christ does.

So what is the Gospel?
 We are sinners.
 Our sin puts us in a desperate situation.
 But God, who is rich in mercy, has acted in Jesus Christ.
 Christ has died.
 Christ has been raised.
 And now he invites us to turn toward him
 and receive the life he offers.

That is the Gospel.
 So repent. Turn from your sin.
 Turn toward Christ.
 And live in the hope of the risen Christ.
 Thanks be to God. Amen.