

Sermon Text – Sunday, March 10, 2024 – Pastor Paula Kraus

1st Reading: Numbers 21:4-9; 2nd Reading: John 3:14-21
Scripture for Message: Ephesians 2:1-10 - Grace

What's the big deal about grace? We throw that word around a lot – “but for the grace of God” – “Amazing Grace” – “God's Grace” – “by grace you have been saved” I could go on. So again, I pose the question for you to ponder this morning, what is the big deal about grace?

Maybe before we get there, we have to explore sin. There would be no need for God's grace if sin had not entered the world. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived.” Paul expresses this well when he writes to the churches in Rome. He tells them “They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant, and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless.” Isn't that enough for you?

Paul writes to the Romans, “There is no one righteous, not even one; . . . for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” we are all sinners. From what we read in Ephesians, all of us were dead through trespasses and sins. And – for those of you who might think you aren't like that, you're not that bad – there is no such thing as a little sin but there is no sin too big for God either. We live in sin – we can't help it the world is a sin-filled place. We are at the same time willing and unwitting participants in the sinfulness of society and culture. We live in a world designed to serve the people in power and elevate wealth and fame. We are by our very nature children of wrath – like every other human being around the globe.

Our God is a god of justice who cannot look on sin, therefore, just as God responded to the Israelites in our reading from the book of Numbers, God's response to our sin should be wrath, anger, and punishment. The Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. This was God's response to their grumbling and impatience – they were a hard-headed and hard-hearted people who did not appreciate what God had done for them. They blamed God for their struggles, they looked back at the way things “used to be” and became impatient, grumbling that they left slavery in Egypt for something in their minds much worse. This illustrates what Paul writes in his letters, that “the wages of sin is death” we deserve nothing less than the wrath of God.

This section of the letter to the Ephesians begins with the bad news. But, here's the thing this doctrine of Total Depravity does not teach that a person is

as evil as it is possible to be – but that we are so corrupted by sin even the best we can do is to fall short. Sin is part of humanity’s plight – we can’t help it, we need a remedy, something that breaks the cycle and hold of sin on us. It was God who provided the remedy – hold on to that thought, I’m going to take a little detour.

Turning back to what we read in Numbers, I wonder if we can look at those poisonous snakes as a consequence of sin which will bite us and cause not only pain but will kill the spirit of God within a person. We know that God does not send sin upon us but allows us to suffer the consequences of our sin, just as the snakes were a consequence of the people’s grumbling and impatience. Maybe another analogy is helpful – the snakes were the “wages of sin.”

However, even though God sent the poisonous snakes God also provided a remedy to their deadly bite. God did this after the people confessed and after Moses prayed. Moses made a serpent of bronze and placed it on a pole. When the snakes bit a person, they would look at that serpent of bronze and live. The remedy for the poisonous snake’s bite was to look on the poisonous snake’s likeness. I wonder if the remedy for the evil of sin is to look at that evil, to recognize the sin in your life. The remedy for the Israelites was to gaze upon the very thing that caused their suffering.

Our reading from the Gospel of John, compares Moses’ lifting up the bronze serpent as a remedy for the ‘poisonous bite’ of the serpents to the lifting of Jesus on the cross as a remedy for the poisonous bite of Satan’s work in the world. The symbol of evil that God told Moses to create was a reminder of evil to the people as well as the remedy for the evil that caused their suffering. The cross is that reminder for us – when we look at the cross and recall the tragedy that occurred there, it is a reminder of the depth of the world’s sins that we cannot escape – except that same cross is a symbol of the love and grace that God gives each of us.

The thing is, we cannot receive the remedy for our sin until we are ready to acknowledge our sin and look on the thing which causes our suffering. Until we recognize the depth of our sin, we cannot recognize the fullness of God’s grace toward us. So, confession is necessary – it truly is important for us to acknowledge our brokenness and our need for a remedy. We NEED what Jesus offers at the cross. We cannot say, “I’m good” when we know that no one is good enough for God until Jesus.

In our scripture from Ephesians, we read “But God” maybe that should read “But now, God.” The “but now” marks a transition from what was to what is now given to us through Jesus obedience and faithfulness to the cross. You were dead through sin but now God made us alive through Christ. That’s the

good news, our scripture continues with a reminder that God is rich in mercy and loves us with a 'great love.' For by grace, you have been saved – good enough that this is repeated twice – we are saved by grace, and it is the gift of God. This is not some future event but something that happened in the past and continues to have consequences in the present.

Confession is necessary because we were so corrupted by sin, we could do nothing for God, for ourselves, or for others, but now we are made alive by God in Christ. This means we are different, and we make a difference. God is a just God, rich in mercy, and God responds to us with love. God responded to the people of Israel with love and mercifully provided a remedy to the consequences of sin. Because of Jesus we now have direct access to God and through our confessions to God, we acknowledge our need for Jesus, we acknowledge the fact we have sinned. In making that acknowledgment, we open our hearts to receive God's grace.

Sin is something we need to take seriously, it permeates every aspect of life on earth whether we want it to or not – intentional or unintentional we are all sinners and need God's grace and forgiveness. We are broken and NEED what has been gifted to us from the cross – justification through Jesus' faithfulness to God the father.

A couple weeks ago, the Wednesday Bible Study group studied a lesson titled "Why We're Broken" which had us taking a deeper look into our humanity and the way sin has separated us from God. We don't often talk about "sin" per se in our messages and sermons. Some may say that's fine with them, some of us don't want to be reminded that we sin. Where does that get us in life and in our journey with God if we ignore sin? It makes me wonder where we will stand in the final act of judgment if we can't address the sin that exists in our world and in our lives.

We know sin exists – we see it all the time, in other people. I wonder if most of us can't point to someone and "name" the sin we see. But – as we have learned from scripture and from what we read today – everyone sins, there is no escaping sin. That's hard for us to hear, if you still think you are not in that category of "all have sinned" you need to take a hard look at your life. When I think about my own "sin" it sometimes gives me a knot in my stomach – how could God love one such as I.

What's even harder to accept is the fact that there is nothing I can do on my own to remove the effects of sin on my life – and neither can any of you. We can give money to the church, give money and food to the poor, we can memorize scripture and recall a bible verse for any situation that arises in our lives but that does not make us a righteous person. We can attend Sunday

Worship every week for the rest of our lives but that is not going to remove the effects of sin from your life. Because, until you look on the Son, lifted up for our sins, you cannot possibly grasp your need for forgiveness. Until you recognize the fact that you are a person needing to repent and in need of God's grace, and you recognize that the grace you look for only comes from God – you fail at righteousness. That is the bad news, but I am not going to end with bad news.

Guess what, because of Jesus you don't have to measure up! Jesus died for you – that is the good news, and the good news is real. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans that “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Now, because of the cross, Jesus' obedience to God makes us righteous. Not because of anything we have done but because God willed it to be so. Maybe it works like this – all humanity falls short of God's glory therefore God must declare a person righteous if that person is to avoid punishment for his or her sins – remember there is no such thing as a sin too little or a sin too big. Scripture tells us that God accepts faith in place of the righteousness human beings do not have and for a person who trusts God's promises in Christ God declares them righteous. God wipes the slate clean, each sin is paid for by Jesus, and Jesus' perfect righteousness is credited to the believer's account.

Maybe this illustration will drive home the point – If we look through a piece of red glass, everything is red. If we look through a piece of blue glass, everything is blue, through a piece of yellow glass – same thing, and so on. When we believe in Jesus Christ as our Savior and have faith in God's promises, God looks at us through the glass lens of our Lord Jesus Christ. God sees us in all the shining holiness of the Son. Our sins are attributed to the account of Christ and Jesus' righteousness to our account. That's the gift God gave us on the cross – the shining holiness of his Son.

The good news that we can carry with us is this – “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God . . . For we are what God has made us.” And that my friends is the big deal about grace!