

Sermon Series: As for You
Part 3 by David Hockett
Ephesians 2:1-10

October 2, 2016
Boone UMC

So we're making our way through the letter of Ephesians and last Sunday we were reminded that we have been called to be a people of hope, who have been given an inheritance of abundant life, and in whom the very power of God that raised Christ from the dead is present enlivening our witness and mission. We are called to live resurrected lives, to be Easter people, to offer a counter witness of truth, and reconciliation, and hope in the midst of a world of lies, and division, and despair. I suggested that one of the ways we might do this is by guarding our words, by intentionally speaking life into the world, building others up even when we disagree with them. It's just a small thing but an important one made possible by the resurrection power of God given to us.

Now today we turn our attention to the second chapter of Ephesians and the ongoing discussion of why and how we are called to live differently, to be a different kind of people. Will Willimon once observed, "Most Americans are Pelagians, as far as I can tell." That may not be a familiar term for many of us. Pelagianism was the heresy that St. Augustine condemned.

Pelagius (354) contended that down deep we are basically good people who are capable of making progress given enough time and effort. The function of theology and preaching is to appeal to our better motives in order to motivate us to be the sort of people we know we ought to become. Now Augustine rejected this too optimistic assessment of humanity affirming that we are sinners. We are prone to do and to be wrong. We have a bent, as Wesley said, toward sinning. We are not plumb, our lives are not upright; there is something within us that has us leaning in the wrong direction. (Willimon)

Now Augustine didn't dream this up. Ephesians makes this abundantly clear. "You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived." Things are not as they should be. Something has gone horribly wrong with God's good creation.

Aleppo, Charlotte, women and children sold into slavery every day, millions displaced by war, hunger, profit before principle. We are created in the image of God with the capacity to know and love God, and with the holy vocation, the calling to love our neighbors and to rightly steward God's good creation, but we have so rejected that identity and have become so self-obsessed that we are incapable, on our own, of being the people God dreams for us to be. Luther describes our condition as one in which we are turned in on ourselves. Our lives are not directed upward toward God or outward to our neighbors as they should be. We are the walking dead, and it's not a pretty picture. I talked last week about how sin is like a disease, a cancer on the soul. We're not basically ok. We are a sick and dying people because sin plagues the soul, and robs us of life.

Sin is not merely the wrong things we do it is our condition and it affects our relationship with God and keeps us from being our true and best selves. It's a disease that manifests in the sick and ugly ways we treat each other, in how we abuse and exploit creation, and how we live as if we have no need of God. This is why Paul writes,

“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me....Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:15-20, 24b)

Ever felt that way? Like you know what you should do but seem powerless to do it and the very things you know you shouldn't do seem to come far too easily and you repeat them over and over. And you feel trapped, caught, and you wish there was some way you might be free to be that person you want to be and that you know God longs for you to be. So given our condition, God must therefore do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. And so Ephesians tells us that we are saved by grace, not by our own works. Our salvation must be an act of God, not the result of our own earnest efforts.

Sometimes we are not even aware of just how sick we are and that we're incapable of healing ourselves. As Allen Verhey writes, “We are left to the mercy of the powers, which are only too ready to claim ultimacy and to tell us who we are and whose we are, only too ready to nurture enmity toward those who are different. So only God can rescue us from this condition. The walking dead can find life only by God's breath and Spirit. We must be filled with Christ and raised from the dead.”¹ The good news is that God in Christ has launched a mission to rescue us, to bring us back from the brink, and to set us on a new path that leads to life and freedom. Paul writes, “So God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our sins, God made us alive together with Christ.” (Ephesians 2:4-5)

That is the good news, the gospel. God has done for us that which we cannot do for ourselves. And that is our new condition in Christ. Notice that Paul says you *were* dead in sin. But now, you have been saved by grace. It's not something that we are born into or that we've earned. It is a gift given to us because God loves us. Salvation is not a human achievement. It is not the result of a choice or decision we make, no matter how important that choice or decision might be. It's not that we've found God; it's that when we were lost in sin God came seeking us. Our salvation, our new life in Christ is a free gift of God given to us despite what we deserve which is why it's called grace and why it's so so amazing. Salvation, or the liberation from sin and death and the restoring of our souls after the image of God, is God's work. It is not something we can take credit for or boast about. It is not something we earn. This is not our achievement. We Americans are so obsessed with results, with producing, with the bottom line that we approach our relationship with God the same way as if salvation can be bought. The good news is you measure up, not because of what you bring to the table, not because of what you've worked hard to produce, your value comes from what God has done and from God's love for you. Which means also that our neighbors are to be valued not by what they bring to the table, thus making

¹ *Ephesians*. Allen Verhey & Joseph S. Harvard, 80-81.

them worthy of our love and our forgiveness and our compassion, rather, just like us, in their unworthiness they are made worthy by grace.

Now saying this does not mean that we play no role in God's work of salvation. That we can just sit back and enjoy the ride. Works and fruit do matter. But they matter not as a prerequisite for God's love and salvation but as a response to God's love and salvation. Because we have been saved by grace through faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, we are therefore called and empowered to live in a different kind of way. "What God has done to save the world must already shape the lives of individual Christians and the common life of the Church... Good works are not done in order to get on God's good side or to earn God's affection."² Rather being saved by grace means that we have been set free from the power of sin and death. It means that we are no longer caught; we are no longer slaves to sin; we are no longer prisoners of small and petty desires. Being saved by grace through faith in Christ means that we are set free in order to live differently. The grace that saves us makes us agents in God's mission of healing and restoring the world. You who were dead in sin, have by the grace of God been raised to lead resurrection lives.

Allen Verhey reminded me "in his book *Brother to a Dragonfly*, Will Campbell, a noted Baptist preacher and theologian, recalls a conversation with his friend P.D. East. The conversation takes place in Alabama during the civil rights movement. They had just learned of the death of a young seminarian, Joseph Daniel, who had been registering black citizens to vote. East complained about the church's lack of witness during those times and said that it reminded him of an Easter chicken.

He had given his daughter, Karen, a baby chicken on Easter. It had been dyed a deep purple. Well the chicken grew and started putting out new feathers that were a deep red. So they took the half red, half purple chicken and put it in the yard with their other chickens. At first, it was different and the others knew it was different. It didn't bother the other chickens or act like the other chickens or look like the others chickens. But over time, it began to behave more and more like all the others, pecking and fighting, and knocking the other chickens down until they were all just alike and it was just one more chicken.

'Well, Will said, the Easter chicken is still useful, it still lays eggs right?' "Yea, Preacher Will it lays eggs...but they all lay eggs. Who needs an Easter chicken for that? The Rotary Club serves coffee, and the 4-H club says prayers. The Red Cross recruits donations for disaster victims. Mental Health does counseling and the Boy Scouts have youth programs."³

Ephesians calls us to be Easter people, people filled with the resurrection power of Christ, people who differ because we know that we are all saved by grace. Not Easter chickens, who may still be useful, but who look just like the rest of the flock. Being saved by grace, having our identity in Christ, being set free from the power of sin and death calls for a response, calls us to be a people

² *Ephesians*, 82.

³ *Ephesians*, 86-87.

“who no longer follow the course of this world, who no longer conform to the warring madness of this world, who no longer perpetuate the ignorance and hatred that divides us, who don’t participate in the lies, or the selfish materialism of a culture that leaves us ‘rich in things and poor in soul.’ Ephesians demands that we be different because in Christ we are.”⁴

We are different. Not because of who we are or what we’ve done, but because of what God has done on behalf of humanity. It is now our holy vocation to remember what God has done in Christ and to respond, to live by grace lives that point to God’s good future. The pull to live by the old story of sin and death is so powerful, so alluring. And it takes time to learn a new story and allow it to fully take hold of us. So church I’m here this morning to remind you of your story. Once you were “dead through the trespasses and sins in which you lived”, but now, in Christ you have been saved, set free by the amazing grace of God that finds the lost and enables the blind to see. That’s our story.

This world desperately needs us to live it until that day when the darkness is dispelled, and God’s will is done on this earth as it is in heaven.

⁴ *Ephesians*, 87.