

January 14-15, 2012

Over the Fence

Title: *Dig Deep*

Theme: *"We could just do it because Jesus told us to, but God longs for our heart more than our obedience. The truth is, we won't spread God's love until we discover the delight of faith in our own lives."*

Text: Ephesians 2:1-14

Notes on the Text (*Most scholars now attribute Ephesians authorship to the Pauline community following the death of Paul, but for our purposes here, Paul is referred to as the author.*)

In the years following the life and death of Jesus, the church began to answer some very deep, reflective questions about what this Jesus event means. As Christianity spread across the world, the 'What' of Jesus life, death and resurrection was becoming firmly embedded into the lives and cultures of many people. But people are not satisfied with merely the 'What's' of the Jesus story – there's a need to answer the next question, the question of the heart – 'So What?' What does this mean for me? What does this mean for my community? What does this mean for the world? That's precisely the question the writer of Ephesians is answering. Want to know the 'So What?' of the Jesus event? Read Ephesians!

The whole of Ephesians is separated into two distinct parts. Chapters 1-3 cover God's great action toward and for us in Jesus the Christ, and Chapters 4-6 cover our response to such overwhelming love and grace. It's a classic Because/Therefore structure, something the Apostle Paul is famous for! We find ourselves in the middle of the first three chapters, at the heart of what Paul wants us to know about God's action toward us. It's the centerpiece of his proclamation, and Lutherans have forever held it high as the standard and rallying cry of the Church. Most Lutherans have learned at least a portion of this passage by heart during their Sunday School and Confirmation days. It's that important!

Verses 1-10 comprise the first movement, and within these verses there are 3 sections. Verses 1-3 frame the problem in stark reality. Paul pulls no punches when he describes the human condition. We're dead. Not hurting, nor injured, nor lost nor blind or any other term so popular in describing the effect of sin on the human life. Nope – we're dead. And there's more! Not only are we dead but we're *by nature* objects of God's wrath! Dead and condemned, from the get-go, not only by the things we do, but *by nature*, by *who we are*! Good news, right?! Paul wants to be crystal clear about our situation, giving us no wiggle room for excuses or exceptions. We, you and I, by nature, from the moment we came into this world, are stillborn and condemned – sin is real and has real effects. That's our starting point.

What can we do about that? Some argue that we're really not dead, that sin isn't by nature but a learned condition as life goes on. But if we hear Paul's proclamation, what does that leave us? What can a dead person do? How can a dead person respond? Ever been to a funeral and asked the one lying in the casket to do or say something for you? How absurd and insensitive. That's where Paul has us. Lying in the casket, arms folded across our chest, but without the love of God to see us through – instead, we have God's wrath. Helpless and hopeless. Even the nice people. Even the 'good' people. All of us. Without exception.

Then Paul adds something to this picture of condemnation. In verses 4-9 spell out a totally different reality that the one previously proclaimed. It starts with that lovely word 'But' in verse 4. In the face of the reality of verses 1-3, another reality has taken place. God has done something – God has acted because we couldn't. Because of God's love for us, out of his mercy in the face of deserved

judgment, God has made us alive in Christ. We have been moved from death to life. The humanly impossible has happened – it's a done deal. There's no waiting to see if we want it. There's no waiting to see if we'll choose it. There's no appeal to one's presumed 'free will' – it's dead, remember! God steps into the great cosmic war and brings to life those who were once dead and condemned – that's you and me! And not only that, we've been seated with Christ in the heavenly realms, as grand victors of the whole cosmos! Why, you ask? Sin would have us focus right back in on ourselves, saying only that it's because God loves us and doesn't want us to perish, ala John 3:16. But Paul takes us out of ourselves again, showing us that God does this to the glory of God alone! All eyes are on God, all glory given to God, throughout the heavens and on earth. This is about God – and how amazing God is! For it is by grace you have been saved through faith – and this is not of your own doing, it is the gift of God – not by works, lest anyone should boast. Nothing comes from us – not even faith. It's all about God – God's action toward us, bringing us to life, showing mercy and love and grace to those who are deserved of wrath and condemnation. There's nothing we can do or say – we can't take credit for this at all. This is God's doing in Jesus the Christ. And it's a done deal. Verse 10 then points us to the additional movement of God in all this – that even our lives have been prepared for us in advance – God's action toward us once again. Nothing is left to chance. Amazing.

This first movement of restoration for Paul is that between God and humans. He then moves on to show the restoration that God is doing between people, Jew and Gentile to be specific. God is not done simply when we are 'saved' as some like to speak of it – God continues to restore as the dividing walls come tumbling down between us, having all been made one in Christ. And that's where we begin to see our neighbor in a different way. They are just like us – identical in their predicament with sin and identical in the love of God to them in Christ Jesus. The dead are raised, the far off have been brought near, reconciliation has happened through the cross of Christ. What we seem to make impossible of our own volition, God has made a reality. We are restored with God and with one another. That's God's grace in action. That's God's love in the flesh. That's the Because that propels us to live and love our neighbor as ourselves. This is the cornerstone of our life as Christians. All other ground is shifting sand, as the old song goes! This is the grand 'So What?' of Christianity.

Preaching Possibilities

This is like the descriptor on the package of seeds telling you what the seed is all about., and the anchor for all we do when it comes to evangelism. When we see ourselves as dead yet made alive in Christ, then we can look to our neighbor and see the same situation. When you see your neighbor as dead, yet can come to life through God's power working through you in your proclamation of the Gospel, why would you not go to them and bring them to life? There's a song by Charlie Peacock that kind of gets at this, although he doesn't push the imagery far enough. The lyric goes 'You don't ask a drowning man if he wants to be saved, when you know he's sinking down, down beneath the crashing waves' In a world chasing after love, acceptance, and life, this message of Paul breathes all of that into their reality. And while some would place Jesus out in front of people like a carrot, waiting for them to choose Jesus, we simply proclaim what God has done, and let God's Spirit do the work. The richness of the reality that Paul proclaims is the impetus for all we do. Because/Therefore. Because we live, we love our neighbor. Good theology makes for Good works. ☺

What do we want our people to know? Why it is we do what we do – that we, who were dead in sin, have been made alive in Christ by God's grace and to God's glory, and that moves us outward to love our neighbor as ourselves.

What do we want our people to do? Move their neighbor from death to life through the proclamation of God's grace through relationship.