

## **Ephesians 2: 1-10 “Grace-Inspired Kindness” Rev. Janet Chapman 3/14/21**

Every Sunday, part of a preacher’s job is to interpret what is happening in scripture so we can translate it into daily life. Such practices were traditional for the Jewish rabbis of Jesus’ time and the author of Ephesians builds on this educational practice by interpreting for the community at Ephesus “What does it mean to become and live as a Christian?” In this case, to “interpret” is not as much an academic exercise as it is practical such as what a parent does when a child asks, “What is that noise?” or “Do hamsters go to heaven?” It is what a physician does when a patient worries about numbness in the left leg or intense headaches. Teachers do it, as do lawyers, friends, spouses, and neighbors. The success of such interpretation often has to do with the receptivity of the listener. There once was a pretzel stand in front of a New York office building. One day a businessman came out of the building, plunked down a dollar, and then went on his way without taking a pretzel. This happened every day for 3 weeks. Finally the old lady running the stand spoke up: “Sir, excuse me. May I have a word with you?” The fellow said, “I know what you are going to say. You’re going to ask me to explain why I give you a dollar every day and don’t take a pretzel?” The woman responded, “Not at all. I just wanted to tell you that the price is now \$1.50.” Sometimes we just don’t want an explanation.

However, that doesn’t discourage the preacher in Ephesians who knows the church all too well and that followers of Christ need significant instructions. The letter, or possibly originally a sermon, was intended to explain or interpret the church and its members in the world. Here Christians are viewed as those who share in the risen life of Christ, and therefore are raised above the pitiless control of cosmic forces such as “fate” and “luck.” We have a Creator who

operates outside of fate and luck, leading us to look past the end of our nose to a grander perspective. We are given a better understanding of who we are, once we have made that decision to follow Christ and be baptized. Fred Craddock interprets for us the words of the text: "You were dead. That is to say, you were caught in this futile way of living which was obedient only to the desires of the flesh, seeking the approval of your culture, heeding every inclination that led you away from God, aimless and helpless to extricate yourself from that cycle. But God, rich in love and mercy, by free unmerited favor, rescued your life and set you in a safe place in the constant presence of Christ. You are now alive, but not simply just to enjoy God's grace. You have been created again as God's masterpiece for two purposes: to show what God can do through Jesus Christ, and to serve human need, engaging in good works that reflect the nature of God as gracious love."

What does it mean to live as a Christian? Who are we, how do we live as Christians? The mystery is outlined in this text and closely connects to the fruits of the Spirit we are following in this season of Lent. Today's fruits are kindness and gentleness also interpreted as goodness. Verse 10 of our text says, "For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." These fruits of the Spirit you see behind me are laid out to be our way of life; we are created for good works. The author starts out saying some not so nice things about our state of being, much like the obituary from an LA newspaper a while back. Get a load of this: "Delores," it said, "had no hobbies, made no contribution to society and rarely shared a kind word or deed in her life. Her presence will not be missed by many, very few tears will be shed and there will be no lamenting over her

passing. There will be no service, no prayers, and no closure for the family she spent a lifetime tearing apart.” Whoever wrote that obituary for Delores must have consulted Ephesians – no highlights, just low lights – no redeeming qualities whatsoever. Such living ripples out into more lives than we can imagine. For those of you who have had the amazing opportunity to visit Niagara Falls, you may know that 500,000 tons of water rush over the falls every minute. On March 29, 1948, the falls suddenly stopped. People living within the sound of the falls were awakened by the overwhelming silence. They believed it was a sign that the world was coming to an end. It was 30 hours before the rush of the water resumed. What happened? Heavy winds had set the ice fields of Lake Erie in motion. Tons of ice jammed the Niagara River entrance near Buffalo and stopped the water’s flow until the ice shifted again. Likewise, in our lives when there is no kindness or gentleness, when indifference or apathy has created a blockade, the flow of God’s grace can be stopped from being experienced. It is sort of like being given a dollar a day, each and every day for 3 weeks and expecting nothing in return and then suddenly the receiver has the audacity to ask for more. We are dead inside, like children of wrath, following currents which are self-serving and filled with fear, unable to receive the grace which God freely pours out upon us.

But our author leaves little time to question or cry; with the obituary read, he pulls away from the grave news and turns towards the great news: For those who have no redeeming qualities, God has “raised us up and seated us with God in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. So that in the ages to come, God might show the immeasurable riches of God’s grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” You see, this text acknowledges the value of our good works, of

our living by kindness and goodness, yet at the same time it clarifies that these fruits are not from our own doing; they are a gift from God. We dare not boast in our own goodness or take it for granted for it is all because of God that we live in this way. As Christians, we are to be witnesses of that grace toward humanity every moment of our lives. It might be helpful to understand that in the Hebrew language, the word for “mercy and compassion” is the same word as for “womb.” “Rechem,” at its root, means “protection from harm” for a being who does nothing to earn that protection. A baby growing in the womb of its mother is utterly defenseless from outside factors, from fate, luck, evil, or whatever. The baby in the womb relies completely on grace, unconditional mercy and compassion, given by the mother in order to exist. Because of God’s grace, we are those who exist within the womb of God, protected from ultimate harm if we choose to acknowledge our dependence upon that divine womb which is freely provided. Please don’t get me wrong, however, that does not mean bad things won’t happen to us – they most certainly will because God does not operate as a puppeteer; there are forces in creation that wreak havoc on the good and bad alike. However, the difference is that those of us who seek to be open to that understanding of who we are and how we are to live on this earth are more readily equipped for the chaos and havoc. The one catch in grace as Frederick Buechner notes is that like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you’ll reach out and take it. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift as well. So that in taking it, we learn how to recognize and utilize the resources being offered so that we might cope with the unforeseen, the tragic, that which is out of our control. We place ourselves in the faith community which nourishes and feeds us in order to be reminded of God’s

promises that we won't face these struggles alone, we won't be without shelter and refuge to rest upon. The church, therefore, is to be a witness on how to exist in the midst of all that the culture will throw at us that pulls us away from being fully alive together with Christ.

There is a great story of the friendship between Supreme Court Justices Antonin Scalia and Ruth Bader Ginsburg, God rest her soul. Justice Scalia used to send Justice Ginsburg 2 dozen roses every once in awhile. His son once asked, "Dad, when has sending flowers ever swayed a 5-4 vote on the Court?" Scalia responded, "Son, there are a lot of things more important than votes." No, we do not rely on good works to save us, but we are what God has made us – people "created in Christ Jesus for good works." So instead of being frantic trying to save ourselves, our good works are transformed into blessed opportunities to live out the lives we were destined to live. Good works become expressions of Christ being alive in us ministering to the world. All because, the author states, "for by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" – if we can share kindness, goodness in our lives, it is all because of that amazing grace....

(Pianist plays first few keys of "Amazing Grace.") We cannot hear those first couple notes without being transported somewhere, without remembering something... where do they bring you right now? (pianist plays next few keys). How sweet the sound – the hymn sings inside our souls that we don't rely on kindness, goodness, to save us, but it is grace that breaks through our ice-chiseled blockades and turns loose the good works. "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me"... you are not a wretch, we've had wretchedness in our lives, but because of God, we are souls not wretches... "I

once was lost but now I'm found" – we have all been lost, one time or another, but grace finds us and we start living the lives we were destined to live. Church, let's be witnesses for grace as we sing together, verses 1 & 3.