

**Series: Rethinking Church**  
**Today: Predicament and Possibility**  
**Text: Ephesians 2:1-10**

**A Communion Meditation preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.**  
**Sunday, July 4, 2010**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

While we were in Germany, I celebrated the 39<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my ordination to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament in the PCUSA. In those 39 years I have heard statements like the one I heard last fall more than once: *“It isn’t fair! It just isn’t fair! She is a good woman. It just isn’t right that she should have to suffer. When I get to heaven, there are a few things I want to ask God.”* This conversation I was having was with the good friend of a woman in our congregation who had been diagnosed with a life threatening cancer and was almost certain to die too young.

You or someone you know has probably said something like this when you have heard the news that a good man has died unexpectedly and prematurely; or when a good woman has been diagnosed with an incurable illness and is doing her best to find strength to live in the face of their death. How can we reconcile a good God with the reality of pain and suffering? What does the Gospel offer in the way of hope? These are the kind of questions which emerge every year when I meet with our confirmation class. They want to know why good people suffer, and why death has to come to some so young. Until I was preparing for this message, I had never thought of turning to Ephesians, but it is a good source for us to understand both the predicament we find ourselves in as part of the human condition and the possibility which our faith in the power of God through sacrifice of Jesus Christ offers.

## The Predicament

In order to understand our predicament from Paul's point of view, you have to come back with me to the Garden of Eden. As Christians, the story we tell ourselves to try to make sense out of life is that God placed the first man and the first woman in a idyllic setting where they could have everything they wanted or needed. In order to remain in this paradise, all they had to do was obey one rule; they were not to eat fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. It was as simple as that.

However, when God left that first man and that first woman alone, where was the first place they went? Straight to the tree that God said they could not eat from, and they bent God's word to make it seem all right to take a sample of the fruit. They asserted their own willfulness and believed that they knew better than God what was good for them.

We have a granddaughter in our home this weekend who will soon to be two years old. She is a delightful child; a real charmer, but I am reminded by her of how self-centered and self-absorbed the human condition can be. Attempting to assert her own independence, she uses the word "my" and "mine" a lot. Wanting to be sure she has enough, she wants everything that everyone else has, as well. We hear, "*My drink....My cookie....My, my, my....*" a lot.

For believing they were entitled to what God said they could not have, for believing that their will was more important than the will of God, Adam and Eve received a punishment. They could no longer live in paradise. They moved to a new address, East of Eden, and there they found themselves subject to what we call the human condition. They could no longer live forever, and as a consequence of their own willfulness, they knew the reality of suffering, pain and death.

In the culture in which we live, there is a false belief that we are just good enough; that is, if we do things just right; if we obey all the rules; if we are kind, and generous, and trustworthy; then God should reward us by keeping us from experiencing the consequence pain, suffering and death brought on by the willfulness of Adam and Eve.

We are kind of like the older woman who was pulled over by a state trooper for going 22 miles an hour on a major highway. As the trooper approached the car, he notices there are five elderly ladies inside—two in the front seat and three in the back—wide-eyed and white as ghosts.

The driver, obviously confused, says, "Officer, I don't understand. I was going the exact speed limit. What seems to be the problem?"

The trooper, trying to contain a chuckle, explained to her that 22 was the route number—not the speed limit.

A bit embarrassed, the woman grins and thanks the officer for pointing out her error. Then the trooper said, "Before you go," the officer says, "I have to ask: Is everyone in this car okay? These women seem *awfully* shaken."

"Oh," she answered, "they'll be all right, sir. We just got off of Route 127."

Paul says that even if we obey all the rules; even if we are kind, generous, caring, loving adults; even if we do everything right and according to the law of God, because of the sins of our ancestors, we cannot earn enough brownie points to assure us safe passage into heaven. We are dead in our trespasses and sins. We are subject to human suffering while we are in these human bodies.

### **The Possibility**

However, Paul does not leave us hopeless. He says that even though we deserve to be cut off from God, God has taken the initiative in the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God's Son. He has paid the price of our separation from God for us. He has laid down his life as a bridge for us to cross over the huge chasm between God and human beings which was created by the sin of Adam and Eve, and reinforced by our own willfulness.

Paul says the debt we owe to God has been paid through the gracious sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We cannot earn our way into the grace of God. It is a gift bought and paid for by God. There is nothing we can do to keep God from loving us more than God loves us at this very moment, and there is nothing we can do that will make God love us less. We know this because of what Christ did to be sure that the broken relationship with God has been mended by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Let me say that one more time: *There is nothing we can do to keep God from loving us more than God loves us at this very moment, and there is nothing we can do that will make God love us less.* If you are one of those who still believes that you have to earn God's love, forget it. That is not the way it works. Jesus paid the price so that we would always know how deeply we are loved by God.

My colleague, John Ortberg, tells the story of attending his daughter's college graduation a year ago where his wife, Nancy, was going to speak at the commencement ceremonies. As honored guests, they were invited to a special gathering of about 50 people—people from the graduating class of 50 years ago and a few faculty members. During the gathering, the President of the university brought out three students who were graduating that year and told us that for the next two years, they were going to serve the poorest of the poor in India.

The students thought they were there just to be commissioned and sent out with a blessing—which they were. But then something happened that they did not know was coming. John turned to them and said, "I have a piece of news for you. There's somebody you do not know—an anonymous donor—who is so moved by what you're doing that he has given a gift to this university in your name, on your behalf."

The President turned to the first student and said, "You are forgiven your debt of \$105,000." The kid immediately starts to cry. He turned to the next student: "You're forgiven your debt of \$70,000." He then turns to the third student: "You are forgiven your debt of \$130,000." All three students had no idea this was coming. They were just ambushed by grace—blown away that somebody they don't even know would pay their debt. The whole room was in tears. [Source: *John Ortberg, in the sermon "Patch 'Em," Menlo Park Presbyterian, Menlo Park, California (preached 5-17-09)*]

### **Conclusion and Invitation**

The title of our summer preaching series is *rethinking church*. Chapter 2 of Ephesians tells us that whatever is in our church family that keeps us from expressing the unconditional, unilateral grace of God needs to be removed. We, you and I, are to be the vehicles through which others experience how deeply they are loved by God.

This is why we come to this table on the first Sunday of each month. It reminds us that God paid a great price so that we might know how deeply we are loved and how God longs for us to receive and become the instruments of God's grace: The Body of Christ, broken for you. The Blood of Christ shed for you. Welcome to the table of the Lord!