

It's Not Me, It's You  
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz  
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15:29

"It's Not Me, It's You" Pilgrim Church UCC March 15, 2015—Fourth Sunday in Lent (Ephesians 2:1-10)

One Sunday I went grocery shopping right after church, and as I was waiting in line to pay, the man in front of me spotted a friend in the line next to us. They struck up a conversation and it wasn't like I could go anywhere with my shopping cart, so I heard them catching up and then begin to complain about how crowded the store happened to be. The man in front of me said, "I should have known better than to come shopping on a Sunday since you have to deal with all the holy rollers who just got out of church." And then both of them looked right at me. I couldn't think of anything to say and wondered if I missed a Scarlet Cross emblazoned on my chest or something, self-consciously contemplating how they knew that I just came from church anyway. I cringed to think how they would react if they knew that I had just led a worship service, organized religion being my vocation and all. But instead I just smiled and probably began to blush a very deep shade of red.

On the drive home, all these snappy responses came to me of what I could have said. The best may have been the old joke, "Oh right, because in the Church we're just a bunch of hypocrites, correct? Well there's always room for one more." Truthfully I wanted to go a little "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" all up in there, but with the perceptions of Christianity out in the world today—we may want to first step back and contemplate why the negative view of all Christians as apparently self-righteous holy rollers. For Millennials and younger generations in particular, the view is often that Christians are anti, well, everything. Anti-science. Anti-social justice. Anti-women. Anti-gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. Anti-environment. Anti-progress. You name modern movements focused on social justice and changing the way that it's always been done—the Church is probably against them. That's the all too common perception. And let's face it, many denominations and groups of Christians live up to those preconceived notions.

Though I hope that just now you were sitting in your pew thinking, well that's not us. That's not Pilgrim Church. That's not the United Church of Christ. You're right, that's not us. But if we don't tell people and show people that there's a different way of being Christian, how will people know that we exist, that we're real, that we're here? Now, I could have said something to those guys at the grocery store. But I sometimes get flustered too. It's hard to defend our Progressive Christian faith when someone seems to have his or her mind made up and there appears to be a refusal to truly listen.

For long periods in our collective Christian story, we've sometimes emphasized who or what we're against and that it's all about us. Our good works, our pure lives, our perfect way of being, our judgments about society and people. But today we hear in the Letter of Paul to the Ephesians: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast." [1]

Grace is God's gift. We can't earn it through being perfect holy rollers or even by doing everything in our power to make this world better. None of us should be boasting about how awesome we are because it's not about us. If we truly accept God's gift of grace, then we'll do good works because we just can't help it! It's not about us, it's about God. It's the opposite of that awkward (though sometimes true) break-up line: "I'm sorry—it's not you, it's me." No, that's not how grace works. It's not me, it's you—God! You are the Giver of Grace. You are

the Giver of New Life. You are the God of Resurrection and Salvation and Second Chances and there's nothing we can do to earn that. All we have to do is open our hearts wide enough to receive God's grace.

What makes these words more powerful is when we frame them around Paul's story. There's debate about whether or not Ephesians was written by Paul shortly before he died or if a Christian admirer of Paul wrote the letter to apply Paul's thought to a church situation in that author's day. Whether Paul himself wrote the letter or not, Paul's story sheds some light on the contents and why these words about death and sin and God's love and being alive together with Christ and grace and faith and God's gifts matter for all of us holy rollers here this morning.

It's hard to imagine someone who had a more dramatic change of heart in our Christian Bible than Paul. The man who started out as one of the biggest persecutors of the followers of Jesus became the Apostle to the Gentiles after his conversion on the Road to Damascus. The man who watched and approved of the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr—the man whom we are told was “ravaging the church by entering house after house, dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison”—this is the man who would help spread the young faith far and wide, who would write letters of encouragement to churches urging them to hold fast and be of good heart.[2] Saul the persecutor became Paul the protector of the followers of Jesus. And we're left to sit back in awe of how he was once dead inside because of his sins and yet made alive through Christ. Paul was saved by God's grace because he was able to open up his heart to what God could do in his life. For Paul it truly was a religious experience, a moment of transformation that would change his life and Christianity forever.

When we hear that we are saved through faith, and God's grace is a gift—there is nothing we can do to earn it, we can hopefully hear the implications. Whether it came directly from Paul or not, the author of Ephesians knew what they were talking about because this is how God's grace played out in Paul's life. These words were penned and they can still pierce our hearts today because they're just true. If God's grace was received by Paul, who once sinned by persecuting people and throwing them in jail and approved of an innocent man being stoned to death, don't you think that you can receive grace too?

It's like what Barbara Brown Taylor outlines in *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation* where she encourages us not to abandon the traditional language of sin and salvation and grace because sin's not going away. Lent can feel like a downer Liturgical Season because we talk about hard topics like sin and repentance. But it can be so hopeful if we focus on God's gift of grace extended wholeheartedly for all of us to receive. As Taylor says, recognizing sin in our lives is about measuring “the full distance between where we are and where God created us to be—to suffer that distance, to name it, to decide not to live quietly with it any longer—that is the moment when we know we are dead and begin to decide who we will be tomorrow.”[3]

This process is hard, but it will be good news. If you have never felt this distance caused by sin in your life, I would argue that you're either really lucky or maybe you're not paying attention and naming what it is you're experiencing. Because it's remarkable to hear this description of sin as this feeling of being dead inside and distant from who God created us to be. And then we can experience this moment where we start to turn back to God (that's what repentance means) because we're destined for better things. This is what happened to Paul and it can be what happens for you and me. The distance is awful, we suffer because of it—and we start asking ourselves what it would feel like to surrender, realizing that we don't control how God lives and moves among us.

Speaking of not being able to control how God lives and moves and times we are distant from who God created us to be, the Bible Study Class and I are reading through Genesis right now. We got to talking about Abraham on Tuesday. Abraham is of course the Father of the Abrahamic Faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Abraham is a big deal in World Religions and isn't a perfect human being by any stretch of the imagination. Rebellious students of the Bible that they are (which I admire and appreciate most days), they began to question what makes Abraham so great anyway? Why was he chosen by God in the story to be the one God covenants with and promises, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing."<sup>[4]</sup> A brilliant response to our line of questioning was that perhaps Abraham's story shows us that God can use anyone for God's work.

Genesis is full of deeply flawed human beings. The Bible is full of deeply flawed human beings. As Maundy Thursday and Good Friday loom on our horizon, we'll hear the stories again of deeply flawed human beings—Judas betrayed Jesus to the religious authorities. Peter, Jesus' best friend, denied that he even knew Jesus three times. All of the disciples eventually deserted Jesus and fled into the night. Even Jesus, who we may consider to be without sin, even Jesus had a temper. He once got mad and cursed a fig tree. He went into the Temple, overturned tables, and drove people and animals out with a whip. We always want Jesus to be so kind and gentle and peaceful and tame, yet he got mad sometimes—especially when he was going about his justice work. God used Jesus to show us who God created us to be—saved through faith, created for good works, destined to receive God's grace if we are willing to accept the gift.

This is hopeful for all of us. Because the good news is that the Church is full of deeply flawed human beings. And God knows it. And God can use just about anyone to show forth acts of love. We have to open our hearts to receive grace, to be about the work of transformation. But God can use us, yes, even us. God can use me. God can use you. Because in the end it's not actually about us at all. It's about God and God's grace and God living and moving among us. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your doing; it is the gift of God." Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Ephesians 2:8-9.

[2] Acts 8:3.

[3] Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation*, 43.

[4] Genesis 12:2.