

15 March 2009

## Life Unbound

*(This is the third message in our Lenten series 'Together Again: The Meaning of the Atonement.')*

### Ephesians 2:1-10

There was a letter to the *Times* advice column this week from a young woman who was struggling with a very particular kind of problem. Here's what she wrote:

*'I'm 18 and in my first year of university but I can't help thinking that I'm sinning somehow. I didn't grow up in a religious family, didn't go to a religious school, or have God-fearing friends. I just seem to have developed this strong belief that I'm not good enough...'*

The response from the person answering the letter went like this:

*'Your transition to university has triggered a state of acute anxiety and paranoia that has left you with thoughts that are irrational, but feel real...These thoughts are sometimes called cognitive distortions...Having a mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of. You should treat this as you would a chest infection or a broken leg...'*

I want to say, respectfully, that I think the advice person from the *Times* got this one wrong. Now it may be the case that this young woman has deeper problems that just her sudden awareness of being somehow affected by sin. But I want to say very clearly, especially as we continue our time of reflecting and preparing to remember Christ's sacrifice on the Cross—I want to suggest that the young woman in our story just might have been given a gift.

The point of this series as we reflect and prepare for Easter is that Christ's sacrifice offers us healing for our relationships with God, with ourselves, with each other, and with the earth.

It's worth reviewing for a moment what those relationships were supposed to look like. The Bible describes it with the word **Shalom**. We were created to live in a constant, blissful state of perfect Shalom. Shalom appears more than 250 times in the Old Testament—it's clearly important to God that we understand it.

Shalom describes a state of perfect completion and wholeness. One writer called it 'the webbing together of God, humans and creation in justice, fulfillment and delight.' In the famous blessing from the Book of Numbers, we hear this: 'The LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you Shalom.'

So let's keep this part set firmly in our minds: We were designed to live healthy, content,

happy lives filled with wholeness and peace, all in the presence of God. 'The webbing together of God, humans, and creation in justice, fulfillment and delight.'

Today we look at how Christ heals what might be the most difficult of all our relationships: the one we have with ourselves.

*1As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. 3All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. 4But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. 6And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. 8For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9not by works, so that no one can boast. 10For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

We've been in Paul's letter to the Ephesians before. Ephesus was in modern day Turkey, one of a handful of Christian churches that grew during the first century. It's not one of the churches that he had helped to start, but now that they were growing he wrote them this letter to support and teach them. Paul wrote this from his prison cell, and it's a reminder to hold on to faith no matter what might challenge you.

In our passage Paul talks about being dead in sins. It's important for us to wrestle with what the Bible says about sin. The story of Jesus life and ministry and sacrifice doesn't make much sense without including the sin that makes it all necessary. I suppose the key here is to think of sin not as a list of wrong things that we do, even though that might be important for us to try sometime. Sin here is anything that gets in the way of having an ongoing, life-giving, Shalom-filled relationship with God.

By the end of our passage Paul makes it clear that Christ has offered every person a way back to the way things were supposed to be all along. 'For it is by grace you have been saved through faith...'

And why did this happen?

'For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.'

Paul makes it clear that we can't earn God's grace by doing good works—that would amount to an impossible payment plan that none of us could ever manage. But on the other hand, once we've received that grace we're freed to do the good works that God had planned for us all along. Not a bad deal.

But all of this begins with our need to recognize that our sense of self has taken a beating—that it's wounded and broken and distorted from what it was meant to be.

How is our relationship with our selves distorted? I can think of three ways at least.

First, the effect of sin is that it cuts us off from who we were created to be. It breaks that circuit we talked about last week—it disconnects us from the true source of life and power. Because of that we can be blinded to the role sin plays in our lives, and we then fall into a cycle of suffering the consequences of sin without seeing the link between the two. In the end that blind sport makes us unwilling or unable to be forgiven—it keeps us from allowing the *atonement* to *atone*.

This year those of us who have been tainted by seminary training are celebrating the 500th anniversary of the birth of John Calvin. Whatever you might have picked up from the caricatures of Calvin and Calvinism, the truth is that he was a brilliant theologian and deeply caring person. At a time when the Christian world could have gone completely mad, Calvin set out a vision for living the Christian faith in a community that still has power today.

Given Calvin's reputation it's a surprise to most people that the first line of his massive two-volume theology is this: 'Without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God.'

To me that's always sounded so contemporary. 'If you want to know God, then get to know yourself.' It sounds so '60s.

But on the next page Calvin turns the tables and adds: 'Without knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self.' That's more like it. Seeing ourselves clearly teaches us something important about ourselves, and about God.

I was thinking of Calvin's statement when I read the letter from the young woman, and the Times' response to her. What if she's not crazy or troubled at all? What if she's not a victim of 'cognitive distortion', but instead is seeing her own life honestly for the very first time?

What if her self-awareness is just a preamble to a discovery of what Christ can do and be in her life?

That leaves us with still more important questions:

What part of the Shalom is broken in our relationship to ourselves?

How do we relate to ourselves in a healthy way?

What do we do when we realize that the distance we feel between us and God has more to do with us than him?

For our time during Lent, it's important to ask this critical question: What happens in the

work of Christ that makes things right in our relationships to ourselves?

Some of the answers to that are in our text:

God in his grace makes us alive; He raises us in Christ's resurrection; He sets us free to do good works.

All of that can be broken down into three statements: In Christ's atonement for us, he reminds us of our sin and brokenness. But Christ also forgives and restores us—he helps us from feeling annihilated as we look at our own lives honestly. And then, just as he has done with his people from the very beginning, God releases us to be who he made us to be in the first place.

But that's not easy.

C.S. Lewis describes this restoration in one of the Chronicles of Narnia. I hadn't read the *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* for more than 25 years, but a section of it has always stuck in my mind. A boy named Eustace is seduced by greed and is transformed into a dragon. When he wants to change back—when he is aware of his sin and wants to repent—he tries to peel the dragon skin off of himself, but he can't do it.

Aslan comes to him and says: 'You will have to let me do that.'

Eustace describes the process like this: *'The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything.'*

After he was done he said: *'And there I was as smooth and soft as a peeled switch, and smaller than I had been. Then he caught hold of me...and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing I found that all the pain and gone...and then I saw why. I'd turned into a boy again.'*

In this story we see the full outline of what it means to come to faith—what it means to experience healing in our relationship to God and also to ourselves. We see repentance, restoration, and release to life the way it was meant to be. There's even a baptism.

As we each move through our journeys of faith, it's important to remember that the relationship we have with ourselves is inseparable from the relationship we have with God. To know one is to grow in knowledge and understanding of the other, and back again. The girl who wrote to the *Times* wasn't crazy. She was feeling disconnected from who she was supposed to be, and from how she was supposed to be.

Don't we feel the same sometimes?

In our text this morning God promises that he is 'rich in mercy', and that the gift of his son comes out of his great love and kindness toward us.

My prayer for all of us is that as we prepare for the amazing events of Holy Week, we'll allow God to give us the gift of Shalom in our own lives—the gift of being webbed together with God, others, and creation in justice, fulfillment and delight.

Amen