***GRACE ABOUNDS!***

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March 1, 2020

Texts: Romans 5:12-21 and Psalm 32:1-7

Last year, or maybe it was the year before or the year before that, I foolishly asked the kids in the Children’s Message if they knew what Lent was. One child quickly replied, “It’s that fuzzy stuff that gets stuck in your belly button.” And before I could speak, another added: “It’s the soft stuff you take out of the dryer and throw away.” Maybe it was the remnant of my Western Pennsylvania accent that confused them, or maybe not, but I trust that most of you can now distinguish Lent from lint – at least within the confines of this sanctuary.

Lent is that season of the church year when we journey together across forty days (not counting Sundays) toward the cross and empty tomb. It is a time for self-examination, personal reflection, repentance, and renewed commitment to faithful paths. Some of you mark it by giving up something like chocolate or soda or broccoli while others take on something like intentional prayer or daily devotions or acts of service. Lent is a time to gather up the lint of our lives – those sins that tend to accumulate in our hearts, hands, minds, and belly buttons – and throw them away in favor of a renewed commitment to be better disciples of Jesus. It is a time to be realistic about our sins, but also about sin itself.

That distinction between ***sins*** and ***sin*** is as subtle as an ***s*** but as significant as a savior. ***Sins*** are those things we do or fail to do that violate a commandment or expectation of God. They include those things that the Ten Commandments try to steer us away from like murder, theft, adultery, and coveting your neighbor’s donkey. They include those seven deadly sins that inspired a sermon series a couple of summers back. But ***sins*** also include our failure to do those common things mentioned in Matthew’s Gospel, like feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick, and the failure to do less tangible things like love God, love our neighbors, and forgive those who sin against us. Sins are our failures – failures to do and failures to not do, and they include all those things we confess on a daily or at least weekly basis in our Prayers of Confession. They are tough to root out even when we want to, for as Paul bemoans: “*I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.*’ (Romans 7:15) Such are the nature of the ***sins*** in our lives.

The root of those ***sins*** is that human condition we call ***sin.*** In his book *Did God Kill Jesus*? theologian Tony Jones describes the distinction in these helpful terms:

*Sin is an ailment. Sin is a chronic disease, and we all live with it. Some of us manage to live with it better, controlling the disease, and others among us struggle against sin but are controlled by it. And some of us it destroys. Behavior isn’t the disease; sin itself is the disease. That is, sin must be thought of as a condition rather than an activity.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

If ***sin*** is the disease, then ***sins*** are the symptoms. We try to manage the symptoms, but the underlying condition lies beyond our ability to cure. As Brian Powers suggests, sin is like a mutated gene in our DNA; “*the body cannot simply heal this problem, because its natural processes have been distorted*.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Sin distorts our view of God and of ourselves so that we who are created in the image of God fail to reflect that image as God intended; we offer only a distorted, tarnished image, leading biblical scholar and theologian N. T. Wright to declare: “*Sin is not just ‘doing things God has forbidden.’ It is…the failure to be fully functioning, God-reflecting human beings*.”[[3]](#endnote-3) That is the reality of sin – it keeps us from being the people God created us to be. That has been the reality for humankind for a long, long time – since the very beginning!

In the second story of creation in Genesis, God creates humankind from the dust of the earth; in Hebrew it is a word play, the *adam* is created from the *adamah*, the earthling from the earth. We are created out of the same basic elements as the rest of creation; we are not different from creation in substance, only in form and in purpose, created in the image of God to reflect that divine image, to care for all that God has created, and to enjoy life in all its glorious wonder. Within Scripture God alone creates (*bar*a in Hebrew); humans make, build, construct, and plant, but God alone creates. And then God grants to created humankind free will to make choices, with guidance as to good and bad choices, but with no compulsion to choose the good. Why God would give us that power to choose is a divine mystery, but that is what God did. For better or worse, we choose.

Not being God, humans tend to choose badly; Adam and Eve choose to eat the forbidden fruit of the only tree of the garden which was off limits to them. Then they compound their problems by trying to hide from God and engaging in a blame game – *it was the woman YOU gave me; it was the serpent* – rather than accepting responsibility for their actions and confessing their sins. The story of Adam and Eve is the story of all humankind, including you and me; it is a story of disobedience, a story of rebellion against God, a story of disordered desires and misplaced loves that lead to bad choices, a story of those created in the image of God who reflect a badly tarnished image. It is, in short, a story of the sin that describes our human condition and leads to sins – a story that is retold in various forms across the pages of Scripture. So Cain kills Abel, Jacob steals his brother’s birthright, Joseph’s brothers sell him off to a traveling caravan, Noah has to build an ark because sin is so rampant that God is ready to scrap the whole project with a flood and start over again – and all that is just in Genesis! Were that the end of the story, we would have little reason to hope, for we cannot heal ourselves from that sinful infection. But that is not the end of the story; it is just the beginning!

In the subsequent pages of Scripture we hear of God’s faithfulness that does not give up on us, God’s forgiveness that offers a fresh start, God’s love that refuses to let us go even when we are pushing God away. “*Happy are those whose sins are forgi*ven,” sings the psalmist. “*Happy are those whose wrongs are pardoned, those to whom the Lord imputes no wrong*.” Again and again we hear of God’s longing for the people to repent of their sins; again and again we hear the voices of prophets calling God’s people back to faithful paths. Again and again we hear that the steadfast love and mercy of the Lord endure forever and God’s faithfulness is to all generations. While that is good news about our sins, there is little said about the underlying condition of ***sin*** which infects us – until Jesus comes along, not only calling us to repent of our sins, but also proclaiming that he comes to heal us of sin itself and restore us to right relationship with God. In short, he comes to save us because we cannot save ourselves!

In the portion of the letter to the Romans that we read this morning, Paul describes in one word God’s response to that long-standing problem of sin: GRACE! God’s grace, extended to us in Jesus Christ, addresses not only our sins, but also that underlying condition of sin. He restores us to right relationship with God by healing that plague of sin that distorts who we are. And in so doing, he grants us life, abundant life, hope-filled life, eternal life! For, God’s grace is more potent than sin, a sufficient remedy for any and all of us, no matter how egregious our sins may be. Adam may be the archetype for fallen humankind, but Christ is the archetype for how God intends humanity to be: faithful, loving, righteous, self-sacrificing, obedient to God even in death. “Just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous,” writes Paul. “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more!” In Christ God responds not just to the problem of our sins, but also to the underlying problem of sin, knowing that we could not, cannot, solve it on our own! In that promise is our hope!

That hope journeys with us through these forty days. Lent is a season to repent of our sins and reflect on the sin that infects us. It is a season to recognize who we really are and who we have failed to be as those who reflect distorted images of God. It is a time to ponder that great mystery of grace that has been extended to us in Christ, not because we are so good, but because God is so good. But it is also a season to praise God for that great gift which gives us hope, not only throughout these forty days, but for all days to come. “*The solution to sin is not to impose an ever-stricter code of behavio*r,” writes Philip Yancey. “*The solution to sin is to know God*.”[[4]](#endnote-4) It is through Jesus Christ that we know God best! So, perhaps that is the best starting point for us all this Lenten season – to know God by knowing Christ, and in so doing, to know something about who we really are, and who we may yet be! Amen

1. Tony Jones, *Did God Kill Jesus?*, HarperOne: 2015, p.243 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Brian S. Powers, *Full Darkness: Original Sin, Moral Injury, and Wartime Violence*, Eerdmans Publishing Co.:2019, p.154 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. N.T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began,* HarperOne:2016, p.268 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*, Zondervan Publishing: Grand Rapids, 1997, p.210 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)