

## **FOR THE WORST PART OF YOU AND ME, GRACE WINS**

Romans 7:15-20

Kelly Boyte Brill  
Avon Lake UCC  
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Our theme for Lent this year is the phrase, "Grace Wins". Inspiration comes from a song of the same title. Each week the sermon will be based on the lyrics from that song. One of the lines says, "For the worst part of you and me, grace wins." As soon as I heard that line, I knew which scripture I wanted to use for today. To me, it is one of the most gut-wrenchingly honest pieces of scripture in the entire Bible. Especially this verse, when Paul writes, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." Anyone who's ever made a New Year's resolution knows what Paul is talking about. "I WILL not eat the entire box of Girl Scout cookies. I WILL go to the gym three times a week. But darn it, week after week goes by and I feel stuck. I don't do the things I say I'll do. And all the things I try not to do are the habits I can't break."

Anyone who's given up something for Lent knows what Paul is talking about. "I told myself this would be the year I quit smoking, but as soon as my co-workers go out during our break, I find myself going right out there with them."

Does any of this sound familiar? "I hate the amount of time I waste online. I sit down to check my email and the next thing I know I'm analyzing the gowns that the actresses wore to the Oscars and it's an hour and half later."

"I wanted to get something accomplished tonight but instead I flipped from channel to channel, and ended up falling asleep on the couch. The worst part is I didn't even watch anything I enjoyed."

"I wish I read more." "I wish I walked more." "I wish I made more time to see my family."

And sometimes the confessions I hear are more anguished. They're spoken by people who can't look up when they say the words. Shame pours out of people like tears as they talk about addiction, about hiding bottles of booze, about internet porn. Sobs shake out of shoulders as the words of regret come tumbling out - "I didn't mean it to be an affair." "It started with me skimming a few dollars but pretty soon I took more and more." The words could very well be those of Paul: "I can't seem to do the good that I want to do, what I end up doing is something bad."

In another chapter of the letter to the Romans, Paul says, "We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

I have never been to confession, and I've never talked to one of my priest friends about what it's like from their point of view. I know it's depicted in the movies almost as a mockery. Say what you've done to the priest, repeat so many "Hail Mary" prayers and you're good as new. I'm sure that for some people, it's much more meaningful than that, or it could be. Confession is good for the soul; it requires honesty. I have never been to confession, but I have been to counseling, and it can be similar. A good counselor is quiet long enough to allow you space to speak the truth of your life. The good, the bad and the ugly. You could face the truth of your life on your own, of course. It doesn't require a priest or a counselor. But most of us need the accountability of another person, the invitation to say what it is we most regret. And then, best of all, the invitation to be forgiven. To let it go.

In Christian vocabulary, we call this grace. Grace is the word for that unconditional love God showers upon us, love that doesn't keep a record of wrongs, love that doesn't demand something in return. Love that forgives and even forgets. That kind of love, that kind of grace leads to freedom. Freedom to live as we were intended to live, not burdened by shame or guilt or regret.

We are all tempted in different ways. Some are tempted to lie, some are tempted to practices that abuse their bodies, some are tempted by laziness, some by workaholism, some by greed; what all of these temptations have in common is that they keep us from living whole and well lives as God intended, lives that are bent towards service, towards health, towards joy.

I am tempted towards self-righteousness, towards noticing the sins of others and ignoring my own. When Doug and I were in Florida a few weeks ago, we did a lot of sightseeing. We kayaked among the manatees, we took an airboat ride in the Everglades, and one afternoon we found ourselves in Naples without any plans. We saw a sign for a boat tour of Naples, we bought tickets and hopped on board. It turned out to be a boat tour of one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in the United States, the Port Royal neighborhood of Naples, where homes are on canals or the gulf of Mexico. Many of America's richest businesspeople have homes there; some are owned by the businesses themselves as places where their top executives can vacation. There are currently several homes for sale in Port Royal; they range from \$4,000,000 to \$61,000,000. The owners are people like the inventor of Play-Doh, the inventor of Drano, some Goldman Sachs executives, and the former CEO of Aetna insurance who has a house and a guesthouse on the beach, and who is building homes there on a private island for each of his seven children. Part of me loved the tour. It was like looking at a copy of Architectural Digest - these homes are gorgeous, and it's voyeuristic to see how these people live. But part of me was disgusted by it, too. Once you've volunteered in a homeless shelter, or with Family Promise, once you've seen people in India living in cardboard boxes, it's hard to think it's cute to hear about the guy who went to Italy to choose his own marble, or the famous mystery writer who tore down a \$20,000,000 home to put up something "nicer."

I can feel really smug thinking about how much more humble I am, how much simpler my life is. But when I'm feeling more reflective, more confessional, more honest, I have to

acknowledge that - to many people in the world, and in our own country, I'm wealthy. And not nearly as generous as I could be.

Indeed we all have sinned and fallen short of the grace of God. We all are in need of grace, to forgive us and to free us. And, real estate aside, we're all more alike than we are different.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn won the Nobel Prize for Literature for his works describing the human condition and criticizing Soviet life under Stalin. He was imprisoned and exiled for 12 years. In his book about that time, he writes this:

".... It was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart, and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. Even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained; and even in the best of all hearts, there remains a small corner of evil.

".... If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"

The line between good and evil does not lie between the United States and another country, between me and someone of a different political party, between Christianity and other religions, between me and you who are free and someone who is in jail. No, the line between good and evil lies smack down the middle of each one of us.

Listen to a couple of verses from our passage again, this time from the Message version of the Bible: "What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. I decide to do good, but I don't really do it; I decide

not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time."

But that's not the final word for any of us. The final word is grace. It is a restart button. It is the cleansing waters of baptism, which don't just wash over us once, but are offered to us again and again. When you leave worship today, touch the water in the baptismal font, and listen to God saying to you the words spoken when Jesus was baptized, "You are my beloved child; in you I am well-pleased." Those are words of unconditional love. Those are words that say to us that God sees the best in us, affirms our best intentions, overlooks our mistakes, forgives us, and offers us new beginnings. Grace wins.

There's just one hitch. You have to accept it. You have to be willing to forgive yourself, to accept the fact that God has accepted you. This is the hardest part for many people. I have been with a lot of people near the time of death. One of the saddest experiences I had was visiting a member of this church in the hospital a few days before he died. He was a gentleman, a retired businessman, but he was haunted by a mistake he'd made while in a position of authority, a mistake which had caused several people their jobs. He was convinced that God would not forgive him, had not forgiven him. He had been carrying around that heavy burden of guilt, and shame, and regret. I tried to remove that burden from him so that he could, at least at the end of his life, feel a sense of peace, for I believe with all my heart, soul, mind and strength that God had forgiven him. I'm not sure he believed me, even though I told him this. I sat on the edge of his bed, and I took his hand in mine, and I said, "Do you remember the parable of the Prodigal Son?" He nodded yes. "God is standing at the end of the driveway. Every night, God looks left and right for you, hoping, praying that you'll come home. God is ready to throw you a party. He didn't punish the Prodigal Son, he didn't lecture him. All he wanted was for that child to be back in relationship with him." That is grace. It is offered to each of us, the best gift imaginable.