

Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 10, 2024

Sinners Like Me

Ephesians 2:1-10

Years ago, I was on a campout with Ken Peeler and his boys and my boys when they were all Scouts together. I can't remember much about that campout, although I have many fond memories of the weeklong Summer Camps we went too. This campout was on a weekend, and tended to be pretty uneventful other than the basic outdoor skills we worked on during the once-a-month campouts.

All I remember was having to get up early to drive back on Highway 19 through the Ocala Forest where we were camping. I remember how cold it was. I remember being sad that I had to leave the boys behind with the other adult leaders. I remember that I had to get back because I had church and didn't have enough vacation to take the week off. Such is the life of the second shift worker. But what I remember the most about that cold, lonely drive back on 19 was listening to the country music station.

Now, you must understand something about me to understand why this is so memorable for me, and why God just may have been involved for all I know.

#1. I do not like country music. I never have and never will; just not my flavor, or culture, or what have you.

#2. Somehow my car stereo was tuned to a country station. And I think God may have had something to do with that, because two songs played that I will never forget, that made me feel better about my situation leaving my boys behind.

The first song I heard was by George Strait "The Best Day", about a little 8-year-old boy who had the best day of his life fishing and camping with his dad and told him as much with joy in his little voice. That song comforted me knowing the sacrifice we make as mothers and fathers is always worth it for our children. Who knows the memories we are making for them even if it is inconvenient and challenging to our work and personal schedules.

The second song comforted me with the reason I was determined to get back to church and preach that weekend, and that was Eric Church's debut song, "Sinners Like Me."

Eric Church sang this song to tell the story of his father laughing at him when he made life changing mistakes as teenager, and subsequently comforting him with the phrase, “You come from a long line of sinners like me.”

And that comforted me, too, because I knew how important it was that we remind ourselves of that every chance we get. In fact, that very phrase came in handy when I comforted my boys when they made the same mistakes I did as a teen.

We all come from a long line of sinners like me.

Oh how the words of today’s letter to the church in Ephesus ring in my ears every time I hear that song, for we are indeed “...dead in our trespasses and sins...” We are the “sons (and daughters) of disobedience” and there can be no doubt that we were “...by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind...” who all came from a long line of sinners like you and like me!

What comfort that brings! Oh how that truth soothes the soul. Oh how that spiritual reality for every sinner reckons our reality as corrupted creatures whom God created and then lost to our sin!

I know that sounds strange to see all those wicked things as good. But the truth is, they are good, *because the truth is good*; and the truth is that we are sinners who made mistakes, and only a sinner can be saved.

Years ago, I attended a church conference in Orlando where we toured the famous First Presbyterian church, downtown. I was a vicar at the time, in Memphis Tennessee, and had no idea I would end up in the area one day. So, I simply took it all in and tried to learn as much as I could. Much of it was impressive. They had their own health club with full gym equipment, extraordinary community social ministry and outreach, and an impressive staff with several pastors.

But the only two pastors I was interested in were the head pastor, who was really their primary preacher and church spokesman for the community, and the administrative pastor, who devotedly followed the head pastor’s lead, even though he was much older than the head pastor, and managed the business affairs of the church.

He was the one who spent the most time with us at the conference. He was impressive, honest, and said the one thing I have never forgotten from an other-than-Lutheran Pastor. And it was quite shocking considering the successful ministry that surrounded us at every turn.

He told us with no hint of irony or humor in his voice inflection, “I think you all need to understand something important about First Presbyterian, Orlando. We have made way more mistakes than good decisions in our ministry.”

You could have hit me with a brick, and I would not have been more surprised. Almost immediately the Human League Song popped in my head, “I’m only human...of flesh and blood I’m made...Human, born to make mistakes...”

How could this be? These are some of the most brilliant pastors I have ever met. This ministry looks like one brilliant decision after another! You are the guys that took this ministry from irrelevance in downtown Orlando to a destination conference location for all pastors across the country, including Lutherans who never listen to anyone but other Lutherans!

It was as if Timmy with Total Failure Inc. Children’s Detective agency made his appearance telling me, “Mistakes were made!”

But then, I was reminded of the inspired words of Paul, who said in his letter to the church in Rome, “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks after God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”

Therein lies the truth of our sinful condition before God! There lies the reality of our good works, our good intentions, and our best efforts to try. None of it is good and in fact God sees every righteous act as Isaiah 64:6 says, “...like filthy rags.”

In fact, even worse than that, as Paul’s opening of his letter says, you are dead.

And what can a dead man do?

I don’t want to suggest I am an expert, but I do know where all the cemeteries are in the Golden Triangle. I have made over 30 trips to Florida National Cemetery in Bushnell. I routinely go and visit the graves of former members whenever I have a funeral. And, do you know what I can tell you about the activity of a dead person in my professional experience?

They don't do anything.

And without God, that is all we can do...nothing.

But then, God takes a long hard look at us through His mercy, through His love; making us alive in His Son Jesus, who takes our death to the Cross and dying for us there. And He no longer sees the sinner, He sees that we are saved!

By His grace we are redeemed and alive in Him. By the working of the Holy Spirit we live for Him. Through faith we can see Jesus for who He is - our Savior, our King, and our Intercessor!

No longer are we sinners, we are now Saints in His eternal kingdom!

The line that leads to death and damnation has been snapped by the Cross of Christ and reckoned to us as righteousness and faithfulness in Him until He comes to call us home.

You may come from a long line of sinners, just like me, but Jesus has made you His Saint by His blood shed on the cross for all sinners who are saved.

AMEN

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