

Ephesians 2:1-10; Acts 8:26-39  
Sola Gratia: Grace Alone  
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell  
10-22-17

---

Since the dawn of time, we humans have organized ourselves into tribes. Your tribe tells you who you are, your tribe tells you what your responsibilities will be, and to whom you will be accountable. These can be good things. Your tribe can help give you a sense of place and identity in the world.

But tribalism also tells you who you are not. It's an interesting thing to see people who are all a part of one group or another behaving the way that group has trained them. A few years ago, there was a Dove commercial that did an interesting thing. It went to 5 different countries around the world and found buildings where there were two doors next to one another, doors that had high levels of traffic.

And above each door they put a word, above one door was the word beautiful, and above the other door was the word average. And before people entered many would stop and pause and wonder what door they should enter through. More often than not people would choose to go through the door marked average. So much so, that there formed a que, a line of people waiting to go through the average door. We learn how to think about ourselves from our tribes, and the stories we tell our children about who they are.

We also learn from our tribes who we should be concerned about, who we should fear. And all communities get tribal when they're afraid. Fear is the trap that we've been helpless to avoid since the garden—fear that leads to distrust, and to sin. Fear of loss, fear of not having enough, fear of the mythical “them.” They're the one's to blame, watch out for them, they're trying to take something away from us, they're not like us. Be very afraid of them. Be afraid of the democrats, be afraid of the republicans, be afraid of the fundamentalists, be afraid of the gays, be afraid of the Arabs, be afraid of the Jews, be very afraid of them. This mindset settles over our lives and over our minds like a dark cloud.

When Paul opens the first few verses of Ephesians 2 saying: **You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of the world...** it feels like he is expressing what life is like with this dark and gloomy cloud over us. Those of you who have kids or grandkids know the movie Trolls, it's like living in Bergentown. Or if kids movie illustrations are not your cup of tea perhaps Garrison Keillor. You might remember his ad for Mournful Oatmeal: It's like Calvinism in a box. This is what it's like living under the curse of sin in the world, life gripped by fear.

The book of 1 John however reminds us that Jesus' love is a perfect love, and perfect love casts out all fear.

The early Church from the book of Acts faced this dilemma. For the first few chapters of Acts the only place the church existed was in Jerusalem. But thanks to the Spirit the Church began to grow, and the people were excited: “look at all this growth we've experienced at Downtown First Church Jerusalem.” They weren't thinking about them. Until one of the deacons of the church gets stoned,

Stephen. Then persecution does what motivation cannot do by itself, it spreads the church out, sending it in all different directions.

One deacon, Philip, goes off and finds himself first in Samaria. Samaritans were cousins of the Jews, very distant cousins. They did not use the same Scriptures, they didn't worship in the same place, they intermarried, the Jews didn't care for their very distant cousins. Jews didn't even go into Samaria, if they were on their way from Jerusalem to Galilee they would go around Samaria, it was like they had a beltway always go around, and don't get off on the wrong exit. And yet it's in Samaria, the place where the Jewish authorities would never imagine looking, that Philip went to hide out.

And while Philip is in Samaria he decides to do a little preaching. And to Philip's surprise so many Samaritans are converted to faith in Jesus Christ, they said what do we do now? So he baptizes them, Samaritans joining the church, it's amazing, the cloud is lifted from this people and Jesus becomes known to them. So, Philip thinks to himself, "they'll never believe this back at headquarters in Jerusalem." But before he can go, the Spirit says to him, I'm sending you on a different mission, south toward Gaza. And when he arrived there, he was standing in the road waiting for his next calling. Standing in the road, waiting for his calling.

While he was standing there, he sees a chariot coming, and inside the chariot is an Ethiopian Eunuch—an official of the court of the Queen. What's interesting about this description is that we're not given the Eunuch's name, all we're given are categories with which Philip sees him. He's black, he's a gentile, he's a eunuch, he's powerful, he's the secretary of the treasury of the royal court. And the Spirit says to Philip: "Go over and join this chariot." So Philip goes over to him and hears him reading from the Prophet Isaiah.

Do you understand what you are reading? How can I, unless someone guides me? And he invited Philip to sit with him as he read: **Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter...In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? I bet he read this text over and over again.**

According to Deuteronomy 23 Eunuchs were not allowed in the Holy assembly. And this man had come all the way from Ethiopia to Jerusalem in a chariot, obviously a long distance to go, and he wasn't let in. He probably had to stand in the court of the Gentiles, he's stuck outside and can't get into be a part of the worship.

Imagine coming to worship one day and having someone say to you: There's something wrong with you, you're one of them. You can't go in there, you need to stay in the narthex—the court of Gentiles out there. And so, you're so desperate to hear good news you stay there, and as people are leaving you say to them: "what was the music like? Did the preacher pray for people like me? Did they say anything about depression, or divorce, or my broken heart?" And then you get in your car and go on your way.

But you didn't deserve to be in church. Here's the reality, we're all Ethiopian Eunuchs.

We're all people who are dead in our trespasses, we're all people who follow the courses of the world, we're all people who carry out the desires of the flesh and are by nature children of wrath. This is who we really are, dead to rights. We all walk into this place and sit in these pews because we

think we deserve to be here. There's a phrase that we use, even in places like this: "I just want what I deserve." And I want to say, "oh no, that's the last thing you want. What you want is what you need." And the thing we all need is the extraordinary grace of God.

Ephesians 2 goes from Bergentown or Mournful Oatmeal to something unimaginably hopeful in two words. The Gospel message in Ephesians 2:1-10 is once again in the prepositions, "But God." You were lost, but God. You were stuck in your self-serving ways, but God. You were trapped in your lustful passions, but God. Your greed, your arrogance, your pride, your depression, your anxiety, BUT GOD.

Jesus, I imagine Philip explaining to the Eunuch, is the God who knows what it is like to be excluded and pushed away from the assembly, he's the one who knows what it means to be lumped into the category "them." Jesus knows what it means to go without, and to face accusation, and to be utterly overlooked.

And the Eunuch is apparently so excited by this news that he stops the chariot and says hey, there's some water right there, what's keeping me from being baptized right now? Philip says, "nothing, let's do it." Apparently, Philip really likes baptizing people. And as they enter the water they go in as two people separated by two very different categories, they go in as us and them. But when they emerge out of the water it's as brothers in Christ, all a part of one family.

The kingdom of God doesn't have two doors, one for beautiful people and one for average people, it only has one entrance, and it's for those who are in Christ, those who have come to the realization that by rights we're dead, what we deserve is not union but expulsion from his holy presence...but God.

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he has loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Jesus Christ, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

In Jesus Christ you are given a gift you could never deserve or earn, and one that you can never lose. In Jesus Christ God is literally dying to create a new family, a family that's made up of you,

and us,

and them.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.