

Free, But Never Cheap
Romans 5: 12-19

The front page of our bulletin and that bit of purple cloth on the cross are fitting reminders that the Lenten season is now upon us. Much like Advent, it is a season of preparation, participation, and anticipation. For the next 6 weeks Christians everywhere will spend 40 days in prayer, fasting and repentance, ending with the glory of Resurrection Sunday at sunrise as we celebrate our redemption in Jesus Christ.

For some people the question is why. Why do we need Lent? Why can't we just skip right to the good part- Easter Sunday? All this talk about sin and the cross and death and dying is depressing. There is some truth to that. However, Easter Sunday will be little more than a day that the Easter Bunny comes unless we comprehend just how much we need a resurrected Savior.

Just as those caught up in addictions must admit that they have a problem before healing and recovery can begin, we must confront our own sinful nature and admit that we need help as well. That is not easy for us to do, for it is our tendency to justify our actions and place the blame somewhere else. As someone once said, denial is not just a river in Egypt but a symptom of the fallen human condition.

So as we journey together through the Lenten season these next 36 days and 5 Sundays my hope is that we will more clearly see and acknowledge our need for a Redeemer and then recognize that our Redeemer is none other than Jesus the Christ. To those ends we begin this morning with a brief history lesson.

The passage we heard this morning is from the epistle (or letter) that the apostle Paul wrote to the early church in Rome while he was living in Corinth, a city in southern Greece. Because he was unable to preach to them in person, he did the next best thing and wrote them a letter describing the many great truths of the gospel. We know from chapter 16 that he entrusted a servant in the church at Corinth -a woman named Phoebe- to deliver it to Rome and praise God it has been preserved and survives throughout the ages in order that we may learn from it today, even here and now in this place this morning.

Paul does three things in this short passage. He defines what sin is, how it came about and how God will deal with it. So turn with me now to chapter 5 verse 12 where we find the definition of sin. The Greek word Paul uses for sin in that verse and for that matter 59 other places is hamartia. It literally means to miss the mark or to fall short, to err or be mistaken. Paul defines sin as anything less than hitting the bulls eye- the center of the target. The imagery is of an archer who aims for the target but misses with the arrow. In biblical terms the word Hamartia or sin means to miss or wander from the path of uprightness and honor, to do or go wrong. It means to wander from or to violate God's law, to be found less than holy. It can also mean to have no share in, in other words to be left out. We will come back to that in a moment.

We Methodists would say that target is holiness and perfection, and there are many things can cause us to miss. As most bow hunters know, taking one's eye off the target, an unsteady hand, a distraction, or faulty equipment can all cause the archer to miss. We miss the target when we become distracted with the pleasures of the world and take our eyes off the target or the prize, which is righteousness and holiness. It can result from an unsteady hand, a body that is weak from a lack of prayer, fasting and Scripture. It can come from faulty equipment, things like our fallen human nature or being swayed by false teaching. Years ago, when I used to hunt rabbits, I would joke that the reason I would miss was because the shotgun shell was faulty. The sad truth is that our sinful nature will cause us all to fall short and miss the target from time to time. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

Next Paul proceeds to reveal how sin came about. He reminds us that sin entered the world through one man- Adam. You know the story- God told Adam and Eve they could eat anything they wanted from the garden and gave them strict orders that they weren't to eat fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Adam's wife Eve was deceived by Satan's lie that God wouldn't mind and picks a piece of fruit from the forbidden tree and eats it, and while she is at it brings a piece home for her husband for him to eat as well. The result, to put it bluntly, was that God was not happy.

Even though Adam and Eve both disobeyed God and ate from the tree God primarily held Adam accountable. The Bible says he “hamartano”- he missed the mark-he erred. He violated God’s law, sin then entered the world, and terrible consequences were the result. Through one man sin entered the world, and death entered the world through that sin. Adam and his wife were banished from the garden and would eventually die as a result of their disobedience. The first creatures to die should have been Adam and Eve but God offered them a second chance- we call it grace- and instead an animal lost its life so its skin could be used to clothe Adam and Eve. They were the most expensive fur coats ever made.

We may or may not agree that they did or didn’t get what they deserved and perhaps some would object that it wasn’t fair for the animal to lose its life. But the bigger problem for many is the latter part of verse 12 where Paul clearly states that death spread to all because all *have sinned*-hamartano. The inference is that all *have sinned* and all will die because the sinful nature of Adam and Eve will be passed down through their offspring. We inherit it whether we want it or not. In other words, because of *their* disobedience *then* sin is part of *our* DNA *now*. It doesn’t seem fair. After all we weren’t the ones that picked the fruit or decided to eat it. Why are we suffering for the sins of another, especially someone that lived some 5000 years ago and whom we have never even met?

That is a difficult question that is best answered after reading the OT Book of Job, especially the last five chapters. 42:5-6 sums it up well. Part of the answer may be found in what I said earlier about shifting blame and denial. Most of us don’t like to admit that we’ve done wrong and even when we do, we often blame our actions on someone else. Though we might legitimately debate and seek answers as to *why* we sin, in the end we still must acknowledge that regardless of the reason the fact is that we *do* sin. Though it might not seem fair or just, the reality is that sin is anything but fair or just and it will have far reaching consequences. In fact, if we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that our own sinful actions have affected others in negative ways they don’t deserve. In a way, we are just as guilty as Adam and Eve and face the same penalty.

Romans 6:23 reminds us of what that penalty is. The wage of sin is death. To use that other meaning of the word hamartia, sin will leave us out of the kingdom of God. The good news is that there is a way in, to be more specific there is one way in. Gods plan to deal with sin and its terrible effects may be summed up in a word- grace. Grace is God offering us a second chance to retrieve our arrow that missed the target by a mile to try again. And like so many of the best things in life, things like love, peace, and joy, our salvation is a free gift of grace, and it comes from none other than Jesus Christ. That is good news for those of us who are less concerned with the cause of sin and more concerned with learning how to overcome it.

Just as death came to all through one person in Adam, the free gift of God's grace is made available to all through one person- Jesus Christ. Paul says Adam was a type of the one who was to come. The one great similarity between Adam and Christ stops there. Adam and Jesus are nearly polar opposites. Adam was the epitome of disobedience. He had everything, more than any of us could ever imagine and yet he chose disobedience. Christ on the other hand chose to lower Himself and give up everything including his life in obedience to the Father.

Adam unwillingly gave up his life while Jesus Christ willingly chose to die on that ugly beautiful cross we now adorn with purple and wear around our necks on a golden chain. Jesus willingly and obediently chose to die for people who worship and love His name as well as for those who despise Him. He died so that human sin might be forgiven, and salvation made possible. Adam's sin was responsible the death of many while Christ's death and resurrection makes possible the life of many. As Eugene Peterson puts it in his paraphrase of the Bible called the Message, "one man said no to God and put many people in the wrong; one man said yes to God and put many in the right."

That is truly good news for us this Lenten season as we contemplate sin, death, judgment, redemption, and resurrection. The truth is we can not change why we sin, but we can choose to allow Christ to help us overcome it. Instead of blaming someone or something, we can choose to admit we fall short more often than not and need God's help in improving our aim, strengthening our hand, and focusing our attention on hitting the mark- the holiness and righteousness of Christ. It is a free gift, available for the asking.

During this Lenten season I encourage you to pray that we might have an opportunity to share this gift with somebody and have them know they too can have a second chance. Let us continue to pray for those who have said no thanks that they might see the light of Christ and experience His love. We also pray this morning that those of us who have accepted this free gift will continue to aim for the target and not be satisfied until we hit the mark perfectly in the center every time. We pray for all of those needs in Christ's name. Amen