

Sermon 7-26-09
Psalm 145:10-18
Ephesians 2:1-10
Rich in Grace

Whether you're an old member or a new, our story as a church goes back 140 years to 1869 when we were organized as the Fleming United Presbyterian Church. In that year, God was up to something within the lives of 28 people who were the founding members. For the next thirty years, and after a name change to Emsworth UP Church, God continued to work in the midst of this community and his church and in 1895, the very building we worship in was dedicated to the glory of God. Now, that's just a fraction of our communal story, yet stories give us perspective by reminding us where we've been as we continue to discern where we are going in life.

Each of us has a story. It varies from person to person in the details, but we each have a story of our spiritual pilgrimage with God. Some stories might be more colorful or articulate as opposed to others, but we still have a story about the things God has been up to in our lives; about our spiritual pilgrimage with the Lord our God. Some of our stories are communal stories, wrapped up within the history of a particular congregation or family, but we also have personal stories that continue to shape who we are as disciples of Jesus Christ. Sometimes we overlook the power that stories have in our lives, but we also overlook the fact that each one of us has a story, as individuals and as brothers and sisters in Christ, that is wrapped up within the larger story of what God is doing in the world and for the salvation of all creation.

In the midst of the myriad of stories that make up our personal and communal lives there is one overarching story that contextualizes and shapes who we are and what we are called to do. This story is centered within God's story; particularly God's story of salvation and redemption

revealed to us in, through, and as Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. This overarching story is what the Apostle Paul alludes to in our passage from Ephesians.

Paul bears witness to the common story we share by basically saying, “Look, it wasn’t all that long ago that you were mired in that old stagnant life of sin; that life of sin and disobedience that doesn’t know the first thing about real life. All of us lived that way, doing whatever we felt like doing because we just didn’t care.” Paul’s a realist and knows the ins and outs of the world. His emphasis here is that with sin and the offences of the former life, we are dead, helpless, and seemingly on our own. “Paul hammers home the assertion that human sin results in spiritually dead people, and dead people, by definition, cannot do anything for themselves.”¹ This is our common story, according to Paul. Apart from the work and ministry of God in, thorough and as Jesus Christ, each and every one of us is in a dead-end, stagnant life trapped in the clutches of sin and death. So why does Paul spend so much time focusing on this common story of humanity? Paul does it to make us realize that apart from God’s love in Jesus we have nothing, can do nothing, and have no real hope for life both here and beyond. Apart from God, Paul asserts, we’re dead. We might be walking around, but we’re dead. Thank goodness the story doesn’t end there.

“But God who is rich in mercy,” Paul writes, “because of the great gift of love he had for us, even when we were dead in our offences, made us alive together with Christ.” Paul opens this section of Ephesians by painting such a bleak picture so that we are reminded of God’s glorious mercy and grace that he has bestowed on us out of the freedom of his love. To be rich in mercy is a part of who God is toward us; it’s a part of God’s faithfulness in and through Jesus toward us in the midst of our unfaithfulness. And even though we were dead, spiritually dead, God gives us a

¹ Scott Hoezee, “Ephesians 2:1-10” *The Lectionary Commentary*, vol. 2,, 311

new story, a new context for our lives, by showering us with his blessings that are rich in grace and mercy; taking each and every one of us, even though we were dead in our offences, making us alive together with Christ out of the freedom of his grace and power. Pushing the richness of this mercy and grace further, my great hero in the faith, John Calvin, rightly suggests that the meaning of this passage is “that there is no other life than that which is breathed into us by Christ; so that we begin to live only when we are engrafted into him, and enjoy the same life with himself (Calvin, Ephesians, 224).” We enjoy this same life with Christ in seeing our stories, our very lives becoming a part of God’s great story of salvation and redemption; from Genesis, through prophets, the Gospels, and to today, Paul leads us to see our lives, our personal stories, in terms of God’s story. Because of Christ and the richness of his grace, because we are joined to him, we are raised up with him and our lives are a part of his life; our stories are a part of our living, reigning, active, and present Lord’s story and this isn’t our doing, it’s God’s.

The other day I found an old journal that I hadn’t used for a number of years. I began writing in it in May of 2000 and did so on and off for the next three years. It was astounding to me to see some of the things written there. There were funny notes jotted down quickly, reflections on specific days and occurrences, poems, ideas, and fond memories. As I poured through the pages I was struck by the overarching story they told. Some were stories of happy times while others were much more somber in character; but both reflected the events happening within my life at the time. And peering beneath the veneer of those stories, I caught a glimpse of the way Jesus was working and moving in the midst of them; remembering what I was experiencing in the moment the stories were written while having the advantage of knowing the outcome as of today. In reflecting upon my own story, the joys and the sorrows and the struggles, I saw the richness of God’s grace in Jesus Christ; I discovered that my story is a part of God’s

story, a small part of course, but a part of God's story because Jesus has made me a part of his risen and reigning life through the power of the Holy Spirit. I tell you all of this not because it is some special privilege that I possess alone; rather I share it with you that you might reflect upon your own lives and see them in terms of the larger story of what God in, through, and as Jesus Christ is doing in the world and in the midst of your stories even now.

Some of you might be thinking to yourselves, "I don't feel like my story is a part of God's story. I'm not worthy enough for that to even happen. God couldn't use me after all I've done in my life, the mistakes I've made." You might be thinking some variation of those things and I'm telling you to let them go. The Christian life is not a life of guilt, shame, fear, or carrying around a sense of moral failure to live up to God's demands and beating ourselves up over it. We're human. It happens. The glory that Paul opens us up to is the richness of God's mercy and grace; it's the glory of a God who looks upon us in the depths of our brokenness and makes us alive together with Christ – filling us with his life and saving us by the power of his grace and mercy so that in Christ we might know the healing of our brokenness, the power of Jesus' love, and the transformation of our guilt and shame into a renewed sense of purpose and direction empowered by the Holy Spirit. In the midst of all our other stories, this is our story.

Young or old, we all play a part in God's story; by virtue of our union with Christ we participate in God's on-going story and ministry in the world. What difference does that make in our day-to-day, ordinary lives? Will we go about the way we do things a little differently? What does it mean for the life of this church and our continuing mission and ministry within this community? If nothing else, it means that we reflect the richness of grace and mercy that we have received. We could go around acting self-righteous, pushing people away through our abruptness and indecency, but that wouldn't be God-bearing; that wouldn't bear witness to the

mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. No, if nothing else, we reflect the grace and mercy we have received so that through our stories and through our lives someone else might be encountered by the Lord our God and come to know his power in the world. Our stories, joined to God's story, can serve as a witness to the depths God goes to redeem his creation, the rich grace and mercy made known in and through Jesus Christ. And even in the midst of our day-to-day lives, we can be reminded that our lives are shaped and characterized by the continuing story of Jesus' mercy and grace. Praise, glory, and honor be to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; now and unto ages of ages. Amen.