

Fully Alive People!
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Fort Hill Presbyterian Church

Prayer: O Lord, you gave your only Son not to condemn the world, but to save it. Speak to us now through your written word that we might be reshaped into the image of Christ, and so be His Body on earth for this world that you love. Amen.

Our reading for today comes from the Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus. We call these pastoral letters, because they teach and challenge us to be who God calls us to be. The very first conflict in the church of Jesus Christ, was the blending of two kinds of people, Jew and Gentile, into one body of Christ. In fact much of Paul's letters are about the bringing together of different kinds of people to work together and witness to Jesus as head of the church and Lord of their lives. As most of the New Testament shows us this was no small task only possible by the power of God at work.

This portion is one of the great foundations of the Protestant Reformation, by grace we are saved through faith alone. This is the work of God, for we cannot save ourselves. But we are saved for good works as God created us to be.

Ephesians 2:1-10

2:1 You were dead through the trespasses and sins

2:2 in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient.

2:3 All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.

2:4 But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us

2:5 even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ--by grace you have been saved--

2:6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,

2:7 so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

2:8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God--

2:9 not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

2:10 For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Proclamation of the Word

For a few years, our family lived in the suburban Atlanta town of Snellville. Snellville may have had all the amenities of city life- even boasting a Super Target, but it still held onto its small town Georgia

charm. It was most apparent in the town's motto, "Snellville- where everybody's somebody." We joke with our kids that they are somebody because they are from Snellville.

I think all of us want to be a somebody- to have our lives matter, to have purpose, to be loved.

I recall a book I read as a youth "The Search for Significance" the premise being we find our true significance in the love of God in Jesus Christ.

In our reading from Paul's letter to Ephesians, Paul gets straight to the point saying, "You were dead!" Wow, Paul! it may have lost its sting, but put yourself in this statement.

You were dead....Laura

Bob

Andrew

Marcia

You were dead INSERT YOUR NAME--to be dead is to be nothing- void, empty. That is far from "Where everybody is somebody!"

Paul says, "You were dead!" It is a startling thing to hear. If I came up to you and said, "You were dead, Maggie." Maggie might steer me to counseling and would probably avoid me. It is strange to hear.

Or maybe it feels right on the money to you. Some of us have felt dead- no life or energy or purpose or stuck and unable to move forward. In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson describes dead this way.

It wasn't so long ago that you were mired in that old stagnant life of sin. You let the world, which doesn't know the first thing about living, tell you how to live.

You filled your lungs with polluted unbelief, and then exhaled disobedience. We all did it, all of us doing what we felt like doing, when we felt like doing it, all of us in the same boat. It's a wonder God didn't lose his temper and do away with the whole lot of us. (Ephesians 2:1-2)

You were dead. Sin and evil exists. Our faith is honest about that. We cannot say, basically all people are good, because Scripture helps us see the reality that we are helpless sinners. We cannot save ourselves. We are dead.

This week I heard a story about dead peopleⁱ, well sort of.

In the Bishopville, SC, we have a penitentiary (where people go to do penance- have you ever thought about that?).

Each year a band from New York, *DeCoda*, comes and works with the inmates of Lee Correctional facility on writing and performing music. Why would a New York band come to a SC penitentiary?

Well the leader Claire Bryant is a native of Camden, SC. What they are doing is changing lives. What has happened is that one man, Terry who plays keyboards, violin, and guitar, started composing. The men work all year long and now when Claire and *DeCoda* arrive, they are refining, rehearsing, and performing the music. Terry says, if you think about it, it affects more than just a song.

"The next man's idea of life is different than yours. He can throw his perspective in that song that you would have never thought of so if you look at that way, you're actually growing with someone and learning someone."

Claire sees them working together and problem solving, life skills they can use. She believes that music has the power to transcend borders and language, to transform lives because music is the ultimate communicator. But what struck me was when King, another musical inmate said,

"Being back here, you're more or less dead- dead to society so just to know that someone on the outside can hear your voice and you can communicate is a dream come true."

Sounds like he feels like a somebody again, a person with value and purpose. He was dead, and now is alive.

One does not need to be physically dead, to be dead. There are plenty of dead people walking around, like zombies, weighed down with the burden of fear, anger, or hate or burdened by circumstances of poverty, abuse, injustice, for example.

For those of us who follow Jesus, music may make us feel alive, too, but Paul reminds us that that it is the work of God in Jesus Christ that really makes us fully alive! God wants fully alive people whose lives are transformed by the love of God in Jesus. God is a God of resurrection life! While Jesus teaches us the way to eternal life, eternal life can be experienced here and now.

"Eternal life refers to a kind of life, not its length," says William Sloane Coffin

What kind of life are you and I living?

God desires a quality of life that has little to do with our being somebody the way the world defines it: successful, a winner, perfect. God desires a kind of life that makes people fully alive and sharing that aliveness with the world in good works. A life of significance is defined by the God who created us.

But first, to be fully alive in Christ, we must confront sin and evil and its power in this world. Sin and evil look like disobedience and disordered life- and it can be systemic and personal, but it is usually subtle.

I think about the man I know who dated a girl from a well-to-do family. Her mother did not want them to marry because quote, "She didn't want her grandchildren to wear polyester clothes." So the man took that to heart and has worked most of his life to prove her wrong- to show that he is somebody.

And that driven-ness manifests itself as becoming a work-alcoholic, and at times anxious, angry, and depressed. It has caused rifts in his marriage at times. He seems to never felt really whole, loved, at peace.

or I think of the college girl who so wants to be skinny in order to feel like somebody, that she doubles up her ADD medicine so she will not be hungry. She so desires to meet the expectations of body image, and so she can feel loved, worthy.

Jean Vanier who started Christian communities called *L'Arche*, or the ark, for people with disabilities wrote:

This journey, our pilgrimage of love, begins and deepens as we hear God murmur within our hearts: 'I love you just as you are. I so love you that I come to heal you and to give you life. Do not be afraid. Open your hearts. It is all right to be yourself. You do not have to be perfect or clever. You are loved just as you are. As you become more conscious that you are loved, you will want to respond to that love with love, and grow in love.'

Being found beloved, we respond in love towards others. But ask any undertaker one thing we know about dead people is that they cannot do anything for themselves. So it takes a God who does the work. Or as Paul puts it,

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ--by grace you have been saved--and raised us up with him...(Ephesians 2:4-5)

St. Irenaeus, the great second-century theologian, expressed the essence of Christian faith with the pithy adage "the glory of God is a human being fully alive!"

There is an important phrase, "But God." God does the work. Being fully alive in Christ is knowing we cannot save ourselves, we totally helpless sinners, but by God's amazing grace we are saved. And we are saved for a purpose- to manifest the glory of God, to be fully alive. We realize we are created for good works- this is our purpose. Our significance is in God's purpose. Saved by grace- created for good works.

God's first word is love, but then we are expected to live as God created us to live- with good works. With that word of grace and comfort comes responsibility, a calling.

We are created to do good works, but maybe the hardest place to start is here at home. Fort Hill is a congregation made up of different kinds of people. On the surface we look somewhat similar, but we are different, perhaps not Jew or Gentile, but called to one body even with our differences. We sometimes struggle with being united in Christ. And the truth is we are totally incapable of being unified, only God in Jesus Christ does that. Only God's amazing grace makes our life together possible.

We are called to work things out together, especially when it is hard. Our current highly divisive culture and fractured world makes it hard, but no harder than Jews and Gentiles worshiping God together, I imagine.

Yesterday in our Session retreat, I witnessed disciples of Jesus seeking to be faithful together. We had a very difficult conversation. What I witnessed gives me hope. I saw people with differences speak to one another in respect, kindness, courage, and consideration seeking to discern the will of Christ together. We, as Christ's body, are commanded to love one another in our speech and actions. Christ is our Lord of our lives and Head of the Church. People saved by grace practice mercy and forgiveness.

Perhaps the best hope for our world is when Christians can show the world how to love another in spite of differences because we allow Jesus to shape us, teach us, and change us. This is God's doing through the cross and resurrection. Our good works are made possible through the power of the Holy Spirit. I want you to know our church is in good hands with those you have called and ordained as ruling elders to be spiritual leaders.

Of all the news you hear, let this good news be what defines and guides us. Scripture tells us better than I can. Imagine Paul speak to us, speaking to Fort Hill church, today *The Message* Ephesians 2:11-22

¹¹⁻¹³ But don't take any of this for granted. It was only yesterday that you outsiders to God's ways had no idea of any of this, didn't know the first thing about the way God works, hadn't the faintest idea of Christ. You knew nothing of that rich history of God's covenants and promises in Israel, hadn't a clue about what God was doing in the world at large. Now because of Christ—dying that death, shedding that blood—you who were once out of it altogether are in on everything.¹⁴⁻¹⁵ The Messiah has made things up between us so that we're now together on this, both non-Jewish outsiders and Jewish insiders. He tore down the wall we used to keep each other at a distance. He repealed the law code that had become so clogged with fine print and footnotes that it hindered more than it helped. Then he started over. Instead of continuing with two groups of people separated by centuries of animosity and suspicion, he created a new kind of human being, a fresh start for everybody.ⁱⁱ

¹⁶⁻¹⁸ Christ brought us together through his death on the cross. The Cross got us to embrace, and that was the end of the hostility. Christ came and preached peace to you outsiders and peace to us insiders. He treated us as equals, and so made us equals. Through him we both share the same Spirit and have equal access to the Father.

¹⁹⁻²² That's plain enough, isn't it? You're no longer wandering exiles. This kingdom of faith is now your home country. You're no longer strangers or outsiders. You belong here, with as much right to the name Christian as anyone. God is building a home. He's using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what he is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now he's using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts

together. We see it taking shape day after day—a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home.

The word of the Lord...

ⁱ Tut Underwood, *Program Brings New York Musicians to Write and Perform with South Carolina Prisoners* March 5, 2018, www.npr.org/podcasts/406774259/south-carolina-focus

ⁱⁱ Ephesians 2:13-16 (NRSV) ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. ¹⁵ He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile both groups to God in one body^[c] through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.^[l]