

Chris Currie
Text: Ephesians 2:1-10
Sermon: Here in the Real World
March 10, 2024

Ephesians 2:1-10

2 You were dead through the trespasses and sins ²in which you once walked, following the course of this world,^[a] following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, doing the will of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else, ⁴but God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ^[c]—by grace you have been saved— ⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— ⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we may walk in them.

When Bryan Stevenson, Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative, was honored by Time Magazine for being one of the 100 Honorees for Shaping Our Future, he said this to say: the mission I want to get in the heads and hearts of kids and persuade them that they can believe things they haven't seen, they can do things that maybe others haven't done before them, that they are more than their worst acts.' Some of Stevenson's own work led to him to successfully exonerate a significant number of African-American men on death row who it turned out, upon further review, were innocent of the crime they had been convicted. And even those who were rightly serving time, Stevenson reminds us and also reminds them, 'are more than their worst acts.'

All of us are more than our worst acts; and mix that in with Ephesians, and we learn that no human being, no matter how frail or flawed or failing, has a reality apart from the God who made us. To be real is to know from whence we came, who made us, and that no human being can exist and thrive apart from God who is at work without end bestowing life and enlivening us through the power of the Holy Spirit. One of the most impactful and challenging aspects of the core message of the New Testament is that each one of us and all of us stand in radical need of God's mercy. We wish church and Christian community could help us secure a better position for ourselves, where all the good people who have it a little bit more together, and that out there in the

real world is where all the varied degrees of humanity are, bad people or at least a little worst people who are a bit more suspect and not quite together.

But over and over again, the New Testament gives us no comfort in that assumption. Instead, throughout the New Testament Jesus seems to welcome all different types of humanity, Pharisees, tax collectors, presumed to be holy people and presumed people of ill repute, people of high status, people low status, people of no status; and in the presence of Jesus they are seen, they become fully human, they are fully alive, they are no longer invisible or pushed aside or ignored or avoided. Not only are they seen and made whole but in the presence of Christ are exalted and given a vocation, a calling, and a purpose. They become living reminders in their own particular ways that we all stand in need of God's mercy and that there are no gradations in God's grace, nor in God's judgment. And they become reminders that every human life or human being can flourish in the hands of God. The gospel of Jesus Christ levels everyone and exalts everyone equally before a holy God. All of us are more than our worst acts, and none of us can ever fall so low that we are beyond the bounds of God's grace and mercy. And none of us are ever so special or good or moral that we ever reach a point that we are not in complete need of God's grace and mercy either.

A generation or so ago when MTV was seeking to diversify their programming from music videos to other forms of entertainment, they created a show called the 'Real World,' in which young adults from various walks of life are selected to live together in some kind of warped intentional community while being filmed non-stop. One of those seasons was even filmed just down the street here in New Orleans. There was not a lot of purpose, other than inciting young adults to combust and then make sure the cameras were rolling to capture all the drama so they could pass it off as reality television, hence the 'Real World.' As opposed to the fictional world of the sit-com or the tv drama, real live non-actors would be thrown together and filmed non-stop as passed off as the 'real world.' But that's just it...is a contrived 24-7 filming of young adults any closer to reality or going to arrive at ny deeper insight into human life than the canned laugh tracks of a sit-com?

Country Music singer Alan Jackson, recorded a song in 1990 called 'Here in the Real World,' which begins with this lamentation: 'Cowboys don't cry and heroes don't die, Good always wins again and again and love is a sweet dream that always come true, Oh if like were like the movies, I'd never be blue,' and then the chorus, 'but here in the real world, it's not that easy at all, 'cause when hearts get broken, it's real tears that fall,

and darling it's sad but true, but the one thing I've learned from you, is how the boy don't always get the girl, here in the real world.' Have you heard what happens when you play a country song backwards? You get your dog back, your girlfriend back, your truck back, and you sober up. 'Here in the Real World' is definitely one in that genre of country songs, but also maybe in some way a bit closer to the 'real world' than the television series. Human beings love and experience heartache. They long for a better world a redeemed world and lament what has gone wrong and is need of repair. But even that more grounded reality is not the real world to which our passage from Ephesians points.

Here in Ephesians the real world is the world where Christ is Lord and where human beings, even though they were dead in their trespasses and worst acts, are made alive together with Christ. The real world, Ephesians is saying to us, is the world where we realize we are being used and used up to do something with our lives that some way and some how reflects the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. The real world is the healing presence of Christ mending what is broken in us and setting us free, the real world is the gospel of Jesus Christ presenting us with a way of life and a type of community radically different from the kind we would create for ourselves, the real world is the world Christ inspires us to become more deeply absorbed into his story. Reality, Ephesians tells us, the real world is that we have been created by God for good works, redeemed by God's grace, and we have been set free to signal, celebrate, and reflect this reality in what is to come.

When we stand at the baptismal font and confess our sins we are not doing so as lost, guilty, and ambiguous human beings who are not sure of our standing before God, no, we come as those who are no longer dead in our trespasses but as those who are already alive in Jesus Christ. That is reality. The real world is that we are fully alive, fully healed, fully whole, fully flourishing human beings through Jesus Christ our Lord. We may not feel like it, we may not always believe it, we may not live like it is true, we may not want to find out what it might mean for us at times. But that is our ultimate reality. Everything else is fleeting. Everything else is transitory. Everything else is dubious. But what is always before us, is whether we want to live in the reality of Christ's grace and mercy, whether we want to enter the kingdom of justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, whether we want to embrace the community of forgiven sinners who are more than our worst and who have been tasked to try and become what they already are in Christ; we can embrace and accept and live with that reality or we can pretend that the real world is the world of kill or be killed, get all you can while you can, be resigned that

there are different gradations of human being and we should be at the top and the point of life is to maximize profit and entertain ourselves and pass on our DNA and nothing more.

No, Ephesians tell us, you are more than that. You have been created by God, not just for your own self-gratification, but for good works for the sake of others. You have been redeemed by Jesus Christ, not just for some kind of personal spiritual benefits package, but so that you might join in Christ's ministry of healing and exaltation of human beings, you have been brought to fulfillment by the Holy Spirit, not in order to reach some state of self-transcendence, but to become part of a community that thrives in communal life together, where you ask for help, say you are sorry, worship and forgive and love and pray together, longing, hoping, and trying each day to once again become in each moment what we already are in the reality of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

In the Spirit of God, in the grace of Jesus Christ, in the mind of God, you are already these things, now the challenge is to become it in the thus and so ness of each moment, this day, the life you have before you. In Christ you are a fully flourishing human being; so become that now. In Christ you are fully forgiven human being; now live like it. In Christ, you are not an isolated spiritual being, doing Christianity alone, but you are part of a community of faith. Now go become that and build that. In Christ, you and every human being stand in radical need of grace. In Christ, you and every human being are seen, loved, and made whole by the grace of God. Now go and practice that.

Will it solve all our problems? No. It may in fact open our eyes to more of them. Will it make our lives easier? No. But it may help us to see that living with less can be more. Will it make us special and superior and select? It might have just the opposite effect, thrusting us into greater solidarity with cast offs and noticing Christ's handiwork in all kinds of people of ill repute; including ourselves. Will it protect us from the troubles of the real world? Just the opposite, it will propel us to more deeply inhabit the real world, and become what we already are in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.