

Sermon 2008 Ash Wednesday
Text: Romans 6:22-23
Theme: Sin and Grace

Romans 6:22-23

“But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

We live in a culture that is geared toward earning everything. I know that I hear people complaining about an attitude of entitlement – that people today feel that they are owed a living, owed free health care, owed free child care. But our outrage over someone else’s entitlement betrays our keen inclination to believe that everything worthwhile is earned. Is that true? Is everything worthwhile earned?

Well, did you earn your family? Did you earn your health? Did you earn your salvation? It looks like that is not true. It seems that the most worthwhile things in fact are not earned. That tends to rub us the wrong way. If the most valuable assets in life are gifts, then we have no control of them; and we cannot

take credit for them either. As much as we don't like to admit it, that's the part that really bugs us.

That is the dividing point in Christianity really. As human beings continued acting on what Jesus said, along came people who just could not accept this idea of free grace. It did not make any sense that the most valuable thing in life is free and our culture encourages us to believe that, so people came up with things we must do in order to truly have grace.

God loves you and forgives you BUT you have to live a good life. God loves you and forgives you BUT you can't just do whatever you want. God loves you and forgives you BUT you have to truly receive him as your personal savior. Sound familiar? Human beings are always trying to add some strings to the gift because it makes us more comfortable. You want to earn something? Earn death! That one's easy. The wages of sin is death. There you have it.

But then we figure that if the wages of sin is death, then it only makes sense that the wages of keeping God's Law is life right? Only you can't keep God's Law. When are we going to

stop trying to ride that tired old horse? No matter how many times we hear it, we still don't get it. We either live under one system or the other, but we can't have it both ways. If you want to get into paradise based on your abilities, talents and work, then the wages you get is death because nothing you can do can offset the sin you commit. If you want to get into heaven God's way, you're in! Because the free gift of God is eternal life.

The good news is that your place in heaven is absolutely 100% secure. The bad news is that you don't get to take any credit for it. Like Luther said, "We are beggars, it is true." Now having said that, this too is true. The gift changes us.

Sin and grace is the fundamental dynamic tension in Christendom. It is the tension from which all the other tensions flow and so it is also the most productive. The point of dynamic tension is for two powerful forces to collide and in the collision produce something new and wonderful. When sin and grace collide, we are confronted with our inability to control our sinful nature. We are forced to face the fact that while we can make some adjustments in our behavior, we are unable to stop sinning.

When a person is placed into a desperate situation, a rat in a corner, grace is either welcome or rejected. A savior is either sought or rejected and salvation either becomes a life altering event or a goal that can never be attained.

If you choose to live life as though it were a scale, then your goal is to add up more good stuff than bad stuff. The aim is to outweigh sin with good works. Except, Jesus warns us that if we break even one little part of the law we are guilty of breaking the whole law. So no amount of good can ever outweigh any bad. If however, you choose to live life as a miserable sinner who has been bought back, redeemed by the blood of Christ, then all the sin in life simply becomes times of learning and growing.

We live in the oasis, but we venture out into the desert where we grow from our challenges knowing that the oasis is a never ending source of forgiveness and grace. Then, on the last day, the desert will be resurrected along with all creation that has been groaning under the weight of sin and our whole world will be the oasis. Sin will no longer seem fun and we will fully understand so that we will see that not everything we called good

was good and not everything we called bad was bad. Then we will live in complete joy and peace.

Until that day we live in the midst of the storm as sin and grace collide all around us and the best we can do is look for the lessons that are being taught and to forgive ourselves and others as freely as God forgives us. That is the true passion of Christianity. That is the reason for evangelism – not that some people are wrong and we are right, but that some people do not know the joy and freedom of living under grace and we do.

AMEN.