

Message for Jan 15, 2012
Ephesians 2:1-14
Dig Deep
The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller

A small airplane was making a routine flight from New York City to Boston. The four people on board were the pilot, the world's smartest politician (go with me for a minute here), a Boy Scout, and a devout Christian. In mid-flight, the engine stalled and wouldn't restart. Unfortunately, there were only three parachutes on board. The pilot said, "I've got a family. I need to live so I can take care of them." He grabbed a parachute and jumped out. The world's smartest politician said, "I've got an election coming up, so I need to live so I can win it." He grabbed a parachute and jumped out. That left the Boy Scout and the Christian on the plane. The Christian said to the Boy Scout, "I've lived a long life. I'm prepared to meet my maker. You take the last parachute." The Boy Scout replied, "There are two parachutes left. The world's smartest politician grabbed my backpack."

When the going gets tough it's easy to make bad decisions and grab the wrong thing. That's what the Bible tells us. Not only that, but it says that we can't help but make bad decisions no matter what the situation, good or bad. It's in our nature to grab the wrong thing. We are human. We are sinful. It's in our DNA.

I remember my first year in the parish. I was trying to understand people. I've been trying understand people ever since. People fascinate me – always have and always will – probably because I'm a people too. So during my first year I asked a pastor friend named Ed, if he thought people were basically good or basically evil. His answer shocked me. Without missing a beat he said, "Evil – without a doubt – we are evil. At the core of our being we are sinful."

Then Ed said "But, that's why Jesus came into this world to conquer sin and death for us. That's why we need him in our lives." Ed pointed out that if we were good then Jesus didn't need to come and die on a cross.

One day this guy came up to Jesus wanting to know what good things he could do to earn eternal life. Jesus says well first of all only God is good. Let's get that straight. No one is good. That means anything we do falls short of being good. And second there is nothing - absolutely nothing - you can do to earn eternal life. It doesn't work that way. Jesus tells this guy. Instead, Jesus says trust in God's grace and live everyday by God's grace.

That's what Paul is saying in our reading from Ephesians for today. He writes:

(Read Text)

I love how Paul tells it like it is when he describes our human condition. He says we're dead. Not hurting, not injured, not lost, not blind or any other term to describe how sin affects our lives. Nope. We're dead. Paul says.

Not only that, but we deserve God's wrath! Dead and condemned from the get-go, Paul says. Game over even before we get started. Like jumping out of an airplane with a backpack instead of a parachute, we're doomed from the get go.

Paul wants to be crystal clear about this. You and I, by our nature, from the moment we came into this world are the living dead. Sin is real for us. And it has us in its grip. In the Bible sin and death are one and the same. Sin and death separate us from each other and from God.

That's our starting point for understanding people. Because of sin and death there is not one good person in the world, not one, and we are separated from God and each other because of sin and death. That explains a lot...

So I wonder -- what can we do about our sinful, separated situation? Jesus says there is nothing we can do about it. Paul says there is nothing we can do about it. My friend Ed says there is nothing we can do about it. The plane is going down and there is nothing we can do about it.

BUT – Paul says in verse 4. But God can and God did and God continues to do something about it. Listen again to how Paul puts it: *But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in sin — it is by grace you have been saved.*

That's the wind beneath our wings. That's what keeps us flying high in the air at 30,000 feet in the faith. Paul paints an entirely different picture with Jesus on board the plane. *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God— not by the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.*

There is a lot going on in these few verses: Here are 7 things I invite you to consider:

1. God loves us. Nothing can change that.
2. God's grace saves us from our sins because we cannot save ourselves. Nothing can change that.
3. God's grace in our lives is a gift – not something we earn. Nothing can change that.
4. Jesus' faith saves us. Nothing can change that.

5. Jesus' faith in us equips us to do what we have been created to do. Nothing can change that.
6. We've been created to do the work Jesus started. Nothing can change that.
7. Jesus came to put all things in a right relationship with God. Nothing can change that.

Jesus died so that we might live. The only thing we boast about then is the new life we share in Christ Jesus. He is our way of life. For us it's all about Jesus or it's about nothing at all. Because of Jesus we have hope. Because of Jesus we have life. Because of Jesus we have peace. Because of Jesus the walls and the barriers of hostility between us have already been torn down.

We have been saved by grace... for good works... in the world... for Jesus' sake. We live by God's grace. With Jesus what seems impossible is possible. With Jesus what seems unredeemable is redeemable. With Jesus what seems unforgivable is forgivable. With Jesus what seems dead is now full of life.

Bill was sitting on a commercial airplane. He used to be deathly afraid of flying. His job required that he fly all around the country on a regular basis. He had to "drug up" just to get on the plane. Bill decided to do something about his fear of flying. He took flying lessons, got his pilot license, and addressed his fear in a healthy, proactive way.

Bill was sitting on a commercial airplane half way back in the cabin. He heard that dumb statement from the flight attendant. He's heard it so many times before. "Before helping someone else with their oxygen mask, put on your mask first."

In the past Bill would tune out this message. But on this day for some reason, he didn't. He listened to the message. He thought about the message. He considered all the reasons why airline personnel are so paranoid about putting on your mask first.

Bill realized that not putting on his oxygen mask first could be a fatal mistake. If the person next to him needed help with his or her mask, something else must be wrong -- too weak, too confused, too hurt, unable to put on their mask by himself or herself. And if Bill took the time to help them first, he may pass out in the process and that could be fatal indeed.

The reason we need to put on our oxygen mask first is so that we have the strength to help others. Bill realized that day we can't give what we don't have.

God's grace is the oxygen for our spiritual lives. I wonder then how we can find a way to put on our spiritual mask and breathe in the rich oxygen of God's grace in this place. We can't live without it. And we can't give it if we don't have.

Jesus saw the need to put on his oxygen mask first. He would retreat by himself in prayer. Whenever he felt drained he took time to be alone with God. When he had a tough decision he turned to God in prayer.

Jesus took care of himself spiritually. He had to if he was going to give us what we needed. When Jesus faced the cross he asked God to give him strength to glorify God in what he was about to do. He didn't pray for others or for the world or for his disciples. When the going got tough Jesus prayed for himself to do the right thing. He prayed for God's strength to do God's will.

We are living in some troubling and challenging times in our own lives, in the church, in the world. We are living in some tough times right now. Might I suggest we do what Jesus did? He turned to God. He put on his spiritual oxygen mask first.

I invite you to do the same. I invite you to pray for yourself this week. That's right! Don't pray for me or for the church or for the world. Get connected with God in prayer for yourself. Pray that you will remain connected to Christ Jesus and do the right thing in whatever situation you find yourself in every day this week.

Pray for the strength to do what God created us to do – to live for Jesus and do what he did. He died to himself and to the ways of the world to change the world for good with God's love. So be it in us and through us! Amen.

Prayer: Help me to do your will this week in this place with grace, O God. Thank you! Amen.