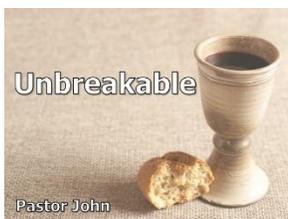


"Unbreakable"

March 11, 2018

Ephesians 2: 1-10

¹ *You were dead through the trespasses and sins 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. 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. ⁴ But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵ even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ - by grace you have been saved — ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — ⁹ not the result of works, so that no one may boast. 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.*



In today's passage we find one of the cornerstone beliefs of our faith: *"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God"*. We are

saved not through any work of our own, but only by the grace of God. This basic belief separates Christianity from all other religions of the world and one could even argue that it differentiates some Christian faiths from others. There remains even to this day, somewhere deep in our collective psyches, the idea

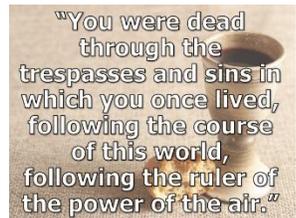
that somehow we still need to atone for our sins, that we somehow need to do something to earn God's forgiveness. Although most denominations and most clergy long ago gave up the theology and preaching that tried to guilt people into behaving and that attempted to scare people into faith, there is still an undercurrent of these thoughts out there that we somehow have a role to play in our own salvation. That simply is not true. We are saved by faith alone through the grace of God. Let us pray.



The 1986 movie, The Mission, illustrates well mankind's struggle with forgiveness. The main character in the movie is a soldier name Rodrigo, played by Robert De Niro. Earlier in his life, Rodrigo would often ride up into the mountains to capture natives that he took back to the city to sell into slavery. One evening a little later in life, he gets into an argument with his brother, over a woman, and he kills his brother in a fit of rage. Rodrigo then seeks refuge in a Jesuit monastery, begging to be put in a cell where he can be left to die for his sins. Despite the priests' best efforts, he refuses to be forgiven. He will not accept God's forgiveness, but instead Rodrigo does agree to do penance. The penance assigned by the head priest is to join the Jesuits on their arduous climb up into the mountains to share the good news of Jesus with the natives that Rodrigo had once enslaved. Rodrigo agrees to the penance, but only on the condition that he can drag his weapons and armor behind him in a massive rope net, in order to make the journey even more painful and difficult. This sets the stage for the scene in the movie that we are about to watch. Please turn your attention to the screens.

[Play movie scene – "The Mission".]

I think a part of Rodrigo would have preferred to simply die along the journey. Even though he could not accept God's forgiveness, he was doing what he thought he could to show God that he was sorry for his past. And if he survived the hard, physical effort of carrying this burden, the vestiges of his former life, on a journey to his certain death at the hands of the natives, well, that was all his guilty soul could hope for. Rodrigo had lived out the opening lines from our passage today: *"You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air"*. He was dead in his soul and he simply wanted to do his penance and die. I believe that some people live in this same place today. Like Rodrigo, they think that either God could not ever forgive what they have done or that they could not ever do enough good to outweigh the grievous sins from their past. And like the scene in the movie, they need someone to cut that rope that binds them to their sin so that they can be freed to accept God's unconditional love and forgiveness. You and I, my friends, can cut that rope.



"You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air."

For most of us, though, we do not carry a sin or sins so grievous that we think ourselves unforgivable. Yet at times, we can get a bit stuck in our sin - or at least in the guilt or the shame of it. In these times, it is not that we feel we are unforgivable, it is just that we feel like we need to sit in our stink for a bit. We feel like sitting in the guilt or shame for a while is somehow good for us, that it will maybe make us less likely to commit said sin again. It is the idea that enough punishment is a good deterrent from future misbehavior.



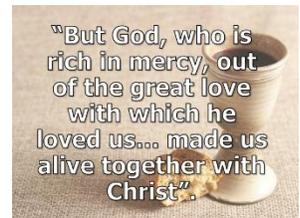
But the reality is that living in guilt or shame or punishment is not the way that God intends us to live. As I shared last week, God desires for us to live an abundant and joy-filled life. So, how do we come to live that abundant and joy-filled life?

We begin by acknowledging that we cannot live a life of faith on our own. No matter how hard we try, my friends, we will always remain tied to our sins. On our own we cannot ever defeat the power of sin and death in our lives. We will remain captive until we trust in the comprehensive and unbreakable promise of God's love for us. Verse three from our passage today reads, "*we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else*". Left on our own, we are children of wrath. But, thankfully, God's love does not ever leave us alone.

God's love is a love that pursues us, that woos us, that scoops up our imperfect lives, and becomes one with us. This is what Paul is writing about in verses four and five: "*But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us... made us alive together with Christ*".

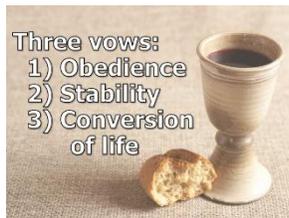
Life with Christ is an abundant and joy-filled life. It is a life that in turn responds to God's enduring love with an enduring

love of our own. It is an enduring and unbreakable love because it is the love of God in us. It is through this love that we realize that God, in Christ, became one of us. It is through this love that we come to faith in Jesus as our Lord and Savior. It is through this love that we find grace. And it is through grace alone that we are saved.



In the movie clip that we saw earlier we heard of the work of the Jesuit priests. Their calling in life was to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to the native people of the region. Jesuits, at their core, are missionaries who seek to bring Jesus to the lost and to those on the fringes of society. In our Lenten study book, What Makes a Hero?, we are introduced this week to a different order of monks. Author Matt Rawle was once blessed to be able to spend some time at a Benedictine monastery near the church he was serving. The vows that they make and the way that they live in community was very intriguing to him and to me. Reading from chapter four:

"Benedictine monks make three vows when they enter monastic life:



obedience, stability, and conversion of life. They do not take a vow of poverty. Instead, the brothers hold everything in common. Holding everything in common sounds like it might be easy when living together, when

working together... But this is not always the case. If a disagreement escalates dramatically, the vow of stability means that leaving is not an option... They are not to avoid, escape, or ignore one another. Forgiveness takes on a whole new meaning when there is nowhere to go".

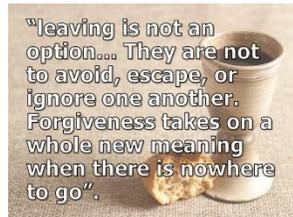
As I pondered this section of the reading in light of the unbreakable nature of God's love that we read about in Ephesians Two, I saw how these three vows and the implications they have can really impact how a group of people would live out faith together in a particular time and place. In many ways, as

Christians and as members of a faith community, we take very similar vows. In the act of surrendering our lives to Jesus as Lord and Savior, we are making what amounts to a pledge of obedience to follow Jesus' teachings and His way of life in all we do and say.

The monk's vow of stability is their commitment to live in and to support that monastery and each other for the rest of their lives. It is a very similar vow we take to the larger Methodist church and to a local church when we join its membership. The words in our membership liturgy read, "*we renew our covenant faithfully to participate in the ministries of the church by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness*". This covenant sounds very much like the vows a Benedictine monk makes to his monastery. The third vow is to make a conversion of life. In Methodist lingo, John Wesley called this the "journey towards perfection" and we know it today at the processes of justification and sanctification. Put more plainly it is the never-ending journey to become more and more like Jesus Christ. As we grow in the faith, we seek to love as Jesus loved, to serve as Jesus served, to see as Jesus saw, and so on. In very practical terms, as followers of Jesus we are always on a journey to be more obedient, to walk more faithfully, and to grow to be more Christ-like.

Rawle writes about how the monks hold everything in common. This makes sense for a group committed to living out the rest of their lives together. However, as he learned from him time there, life in a monastery is not always happy and peaceful. To picture how this can happen, picture the tenth hour of a

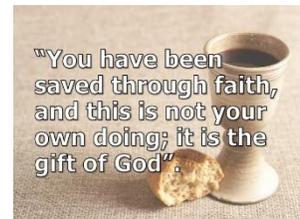
twelve-hour car ride with three of your siblings in the back seat of your parent's car. The first hour or two were fun as you were excited to go on vacation. Then you tolerated your brothers and sisters for the next couple of hours. Then hours four through nine got a little more testy and a little more testy. You get the picture. Living year after year in very close proximity to the same men, although they were very godly, at times got to be difficult and challenging. This is where that vow of stability would kick in. For the monks, it meant that *"leaving is not an option... They are not to avoid, escape, or ignore one another. Forgiveness takes on a whole new meaning when there is nowhere to go"*. This idea harkens back to the idea of a covenant. In covenant, I promise to love you no matter what. So, in the monastic setting, forgiveness is a necessity as they will love each other no matter what. This same commitment, I believe, should bind our communities of faith together.



But, too often in this world, people take the easy way out. If a marriage gets a little rocky, divorce is the easy option. If your boss starts to expect too much or gets too demanding of your time, we find a new job. If a friend does not do what we want or expect them to do, then we simply turn away from that friendship and we find a new best friend. The sad reality, as well, is that people sometimes treat their churches and their faith this way too.

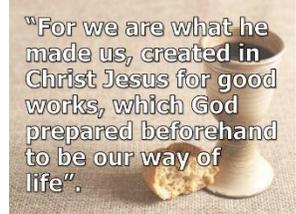


When we return to our passage for today, we see that God's love for us is a love that also says leaving is not an option. It is a love that will never escape, avoid, or ignore us either. It is a love that *"shows the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus"*. True, it is a love that is sometimes hard to measure, is sometimes hard to comprehend, is sometimes hard to explain. But it is a love we are blessed by nonetheless. This perfect love begins and ends with God; it is initiated and sustained by God. It is a love we dwell within as the children of God. It is a love that takes away our burdens and failures and shames and sets us free. It is the love that carried the cross and set us free. It is the love, born out by grace, that says, *"you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God"*. We are saved because He loves us. It is a perfect and unbreakable love.



Our passage today concludes with the consequences or implications of living in this perfect, unbreakable love that saves us by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. In the movie that we saw a scene from earlier, Rodrigo goes on to live out his newfound forgiveness by loving and serving God the rest of his days. It is his grateful response to the grace and love that removed his burdens and guilt and made him into a new creation in Christ. In freedom, Rodrigo goes on to live a joyous and abundant life in Christ. This is what Paul is speaking of in verse ten. This verse spells out the "what then" that becomes our response to the unbreakable love of God that frees us from all that burdens and hold us down.

Hear again verse ten: *"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"*. As followers of Jesus, we are created by God just as He intends us to be. He made us specifically for a purpose. The purpose that we are created for is to do good works. This is to be our way of life. The life of good works is an abundant and joy-filled life. It is a life centered in love for the other instead of love for self. In living a life that shares the love of God through the acts of kindness and works of mercy that we were created for, we will help others to also experience and know the unbreakable love of God as well. May it be so for each of us this week. Amen.



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

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) Which Benedictine vow – obedience, stability, or conversion of life – do you need to grow most in to mature in faith? What is your first step to do so?
- 2) Are there any burdens or shames that you are having trouble letting go? Any that are hard to turn over to God? Pray for freedom, beloved child!
- 3) We are each "created in Christ Jesus for good works". What good work is God calling you to this week? How will it serve someone in need?