

4 Lent 2021

Because you are the children of God, you are not the same people you once were. You have been restored, changed, and redeemed. Know that what was once broken has been made new. God has set you apart as his own. Amen.

Pastor Greg Laurie said in "A New Beginning":

"When I look at my life, I don't necessarily see rhythm, orderliness or beauty. And I can guarantee that I don't see perfection. When we see ourselves, we tend to see our flaws. We see so many things that need to change.

But God says, "You are my work of art. You are my poem. You are my masterwork."

God can look at you and can see what you will become before you have actually become it. We look at ourselves and say, "I don't get it. This doesn't look like a perfect person. This doesn't look like a work of beauty."

But you are a work in progress. It is a process that doesn't happen overnight. It is going to take all of your life on Earth. It won't be completely finished until you get to heaven.

Then you will see that you indeed are a perfect work of art -- God's masterpiece." (end quote)

--Greg Laurie, "A new beginning," OnePlace, oneplace.com. Retrieved October 21, 2017.

Most of us go through life thinking that we are not bad or evil, **but just OK**. We do not see ourselves as God's priceless works of art. We tend to see all the flaws and mistakes that we make every day.

While I was at a Red Cross shelter in Belleville, recently, I met with a genuinely nice gentleman who had requested spiritual care. He talked briefly about his past but

focused on recent years when he moved in with his dad to take care of him. His sister and her boyfriend also moved into the home, and according to Don, was stealing his dad's Morphine to get high and not contributing to help pay the bills or take care of their dad. After his dad passed away, Don was physically and emotionally abused by his sister and her boyfriend. A long court battle ensued for his dad's estate, which turned out to be significant. He did eventually get a large inheritance. Now, he was in the Holiday Inn, having been forced from his apartment due to the fire and having a lot of time to ruminate on his past mistakes. His was fixed upon how he had spent the entire inheritance rather than purchasing a new car, which he desperately needed, and putting away money for a new place to live. All he was able to focus on was the mistakes he had made and the bad decisions that led him to where he found himself. He appeared to be minimizing the fact that it was the apartment fire which had put him where he was at now. We talked and we prayed about God's unconditional love for him. Yes, he had made mistakes in his life. No doubt about that. And some of those had consequences. They could not be changed and dwelling on them was causing Don to be paralyzed. I knew that he would not be able to move on if he could not forgive himself.

How many of us focus on the negative aspects of our lives? Just look at the Israelites in our first reading. "They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food ."

All they could do was to complain about the situation they found themselves in.

I can certainly relate. I know that I am blessed with where I am at in life. But also, I am very skilled at remembering the bad times and focusing on the mistakes that I have

made in my life. I can still feel what I felt during those times. If I had only done this instead of that. And I question why I continue to make the same mistakes over and over again? How easy it can be to forgive others and not be able to forgive oneself. Reliving the past takes a lot of emotional energy especially when one continually cogitates on every possible alternative outcome for actions we did and those we did not take.

Paul's messages seem murky at times, and can be difficult to sort through. However, he makes some important points this morning. Every single one of us is a sinner. We have all made, and unfortunately, continue to make mistakes. We hurt God, ourselves, and others every day. We are painfully aware of this. Paul puts it to us bluntly: "You were **dead** through the trespasses and sins 2in 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". Yep, that is us in a nutshell; or so we tell ourselves. But notice that he says, '**were dead**' and '**once lived**'. He goes on, "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."

Like everyone else...So what makes us different? Why do we have hope when others don't? What can we possibly do to make up for all of our mistakes? Of course, when it comes to reconciling with God, we cannot. If we dwell solely on that aspect, we will lose hope. But Paul tells us, "...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—"

God loves us even when we should be unlovable. We can learn from our past, but we should avoid focusing on the negative, to the point that it is all we can see. If all we can grasp is the haziness of despair, we lose all hope. Christians are all about hope.

Nadia Bolz-Weber, in a “Confession and Cancellation: a sermon on Forgiveness,” (August 23, 2020) wrote the following:

“Peter knew what it meant to really screw things up and be given grace. That is to say, he knew about binding and loosing. When he denied his teacher, friend, and Messiah — when he showed a complete failure of nerve the night Jesus was killed — I can only imagine the self-loathing that ensued. I can only imagine how hard it was to make eye contact with Mary Magdalene the next day. How hard it was to even get out of bed. He was in a prison of his own making and needed to be freed. He needed someone with the keys to let him out. He didn't need a therapist or a new elimination diet or a book on the power of positive thinking.

He needed forgiveness.

The church of Jesus Christ could only be built on someone who knew what it felt like to be in that much need of forgiveness.

I just want to make a case for we the church not forgetting that confessing our faith is deeply connected to confessing our need for grace.

Because there is loosing to be done in this world. We are bound by our failures and missteps and the words we said in our worst moments. They form the bars in our spiritual prison cells. And we gotta take the keys out whenever we can and free each other — remind each other that we are forgiven.

We need to be loosed. Loosed from that which weighs us down, our sin, shame, and despair. Loosed from us our pride, anger and resentment and guilt for not being able to live up to even our own values” (End quote).

My friends, there is no doubt that trials will continue to surround us. The last year is evidence for that. We will still have those days that where all we want to do is hunker down in our beds.

God gave the Israelites a way out of their self-inflicted predicament. Those who had been bitten only had to look up at the bronze serpent and they were saved. But the reading says nothing about the serpents themselves being removed.

Despite everything we have done, “...God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life”.

Through Jesus, we have been reconciled to God. My sisters and brothers, this is Good News. As screwed up as things seem sometimes; despite everything we do to mess things up; no matter how unlovable we think we are; **God loves us, and we matter.**

Because of God’s immense love for us, we are able to love and forgive others and to be loved and forgiven by others. We are even enabled to forgive ourselves. There is no way to share the Good News if we do not believe that we are suitable for the Good News.

God’s unmerited love empowers us to gird our loins and to meet the trials, head on, that we will inevitably face in life. We do not need to dwell on the past. For good or for bad, it plays a part of who we have become. However, it does not need to define us because God has already defined who we are and who we will become. And that is good news!

Amen