

As We Are: The Gift of Limits

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Our Savior's Way Lutheran Church

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We are in week two of our sermon series called *As We Are*. This week we are going to talk about the Gift of Limits. Have you ever thought about limits as being a gift to you? Some of you, myself included, have felt like we have just scheduled too much this week. When you think about the week coming up, have you just put too many things on your calendar? Do you have to be in two or three places at one time? How are you going to make it all work? Well, somehow it all works out. For some of you, I am making you stressed already. I apologize.

Limits can be a Gift. But how? How can they be a gift? Last week, we introduced this idea that the way that we look at the world, which is just kind of an assumption in our culture today, is we look at the world as we want it to be. Now, not just the world, but ourselves, too. We think, "I do not have any limits. I am in control of what I am, and do, and say, and will be, and I get to decide what is good." This is what we assume of ourselves because we look at ourselves as we want to be, and then we treat others the same way. But what we learned is that, really, the reality of life is as we are. We have limits. We are not always in control. In fact, we are broken. And as we realize those things about ourselves, we start to see the world the way that Jesus sees the world. We start to see ourselves the way that Jesus sees us. This allows us, then, to bring grace and hope to the people around us in a way that we could not have before.

Today, we are going to focus on this first one: *I have Limits*. We have limits. And Jesus talks about this when He talks to the Pharisees. In our Gospel reading today, we heard how the Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus, and they were asking Him about the limits that they had imposed upon the people. Pharisees we often think of as the villains of Scripture. If you have been around Jesus a little bit, you see he always comes in conflict with the Pharisees. But are they really? What the Pharisees

wanted for the people is they wanted them to worship God really well to the best of their ability. They wanted them to follow all of God's commandments as best they could so that they could be connected with God as closely as possible. Does that all sound terrible? Does that sound bad? But the way they went about it is in this world of as we want to be. They created these boundaries that were even tighter than what God asked for because they did not understand the heart of what God was doing. They viewed themselves as limitless in authority. They viewed themselves as without equal. They were the ones who could determine for the people what God was saying. And it caused them to go astray. When we think that we are limitless, that we cannot learn things from others, well, we end up in places where we do not really want to be.

There is a book that we have been looking at by David Zahl called *Low Anthropology*. We introduced it last week. And in this book, he tells a story when he talks about this "Limit" portion. It is a story that I am not sure if it is true. So, the story goes like this. There is a man and his family, and in this household, they received a mailing from Target. You know, like a coupon mailing, and it's a whole coupon book for babies. It's like coupons for diapers. And he feels, "This is really strange because we just have teenagers in our house. We have been out of diapers for a long time." So, he gets a little frustrated, and this thing kind of sticks in his craw. It's not a big thing, but he's really frustrated about it because he does not like that he's being tracked. He does not like that he's being followed. He does not like that they're sending him things. It's a waste of money. It's a waste of postage. So, next time he goes into Target, he brings it in and says, "Why am I getting these mailings?" And the poor customer service, they have no idea. But they do what customer service people do. They say, "Well, we are sorry, and we will see what we can do about this."

A couple of weeks later, he gets the same mailings, more stuff for babies, and more stuff for babies. Until he's just really frustrated, this keeps going on, and he tried to get it stopped. So, he calls up the customer service line, and he starts getting irate with the customer service person. As his voice is getting louder and louder and louder, talking to this

customer service person about, “Why am I getting all these things for babies in this household,” he hears a voice coming from the kitchen from one of his daughters, “Dad, I think we need to talk.”

When we think that we are limitless, when we think that we know everything, when we think that we know the best way, we often are taken aback and shocked and surprised when those limits are forced upon us. So, where does this go to? The reason why this is hard for us is because we do not recognize the true nature of original sin in our lives. Our misunderstanding of human nature stems from our reluctance to recognize the reality of original sin. Original sin is this sin that we just cannot get away from. It’s sin that pervades every part of our life. It’s sin that nobody is exempt from. We are all human. We all have this. We all give in to this.

When we refuse to recognize how pervasive it is in our lives, then we tend to think we are in control. We get to define what is good. We do not have any limits. This pushes us into that world of looking at everything as we want it to be, not as it is. Because the truth is that we do not get to outgrow our sinfulness. We just do not. Any of us here who are in 40s or 50s have outgrown our sinfulness? No? I won’t ask anybody older than that because the point is made. We cannot outgrow it. Now, when I was a kid, I used to think this. I always wanted to have a perfect day. Because I was a kid, I’d always get in trouble. There would always be something that I would get in trouble for. I had a little sister. It was easy. Right? So, I would go to bed every night and just pray, “Lord, can I have a perfect day tomorrow? Can I not get in trouble? Can I not disappoint my parents? Can I not get that sideways glance? Can I not get in trouble at school? Can I not annoy my sister?” And every day, something would happen. So, by the time I went to bed, I looked back on the day, and what did I think about myself? I just could not do it. No matter how hard I tried, I could not have that perfect day. We cannot outgrow our sinfulness.

And yet, the things that we see today invite us to improve ourselves with each little, tiny step that we take. There is the next diet fad. There is the

next exercise fad. There is the next way to go about improving your self-control. Figuring out your daily schedule. How many of you have habit trackers? Those are things that go along with this. Do you believe that you are infinitely improvable? I think we give into this more often than we'd like to think. Every time we try to improve and improve bits by bit by bit, sometimes it works. Take your favorite exercise thing that you do, right? Every time you get a little bit stronger, you can add another five pounds to that bench. But man, you hurt the next day, don't you? Oh, even the day after. It's a little bit of soreness. Eventually, you start to hit a limit.

Are you infinitely improvable? Every time you work out or exercise or do cardio, do you believe that it is making you gain another two or three days in your life? Well, getting healthier is a good thing. Do not hear what I am not saying. It's a good thing to be healthy. It's a good thing to be moving. It's a good thing to exercise. But if you are doing so because you believe that you are going to add 30 years to your life, that you are never going to die, because you are doing this, you have forgotten the key thing about life.

As we are thinking about who we are, we have limits. Believing that we are infinitely improvable is foolish. So, when we give in to this, when we give in to this idea that we can be improved in every single way, that we can improve every part of our life, that we can have that perfect day, That life twists from a hopeful aspiration into a continual reinforcement of not-enoughness. This is like all of your New Year's resolutions in January. By February 1st, you are in that cycle of, "I just did not do it again this year. I just could not make it happen again." And then in that failure, how do you feel?

As a kid and failing in such a way every single day, I felt like I would never be able to measure up. I could never have this perfect day. I so wanted this. But there must be something about me that is not enough. There must be something inherent about me that just does not work right, because I just cannot make it happen. And I started to feel guilty and ashamed because I was not enough.

You see, it seems liberating to think that you are without limits when in reality, every time you butt up against that upper edge of your limits and you fail, and you cannot get past it, every time you feel like you're not enough, it traps you in this cycle of despair, of guilt, and of shame. We start thinking that we are not enough.

And then once we get frustrated enough with ourselves that we are not enough, we carry that to the people around us because we expect the same things from them. And what are they going to do? They're not going to measure up either. And so, your family, your friends, the people closest to you, start to feel like they're not enough. And if you're caught in this long enough, you even start to believe that maybe God is not enough. There have all been times in our lives when we have wondered where God has been. What has He been up to? Why would He allow this thing to happen? And if you're stuck in this idea that everything can get better, that everything can be improved, that there is no limit on anything, then you start to even wonder if God is enough for you.

So, in our Epistle reading today, we see the twist to this. We see the truth of this. *If we claim to be without sin*, what do we do? *We deceive ourselves*. If we believe that we can be perfect, we are lying to ourselves. And the truth is not in us. *But*—here's the thing—if we confess that we are sinful, if we confess that we are not enough, if we confess that we have limits, God is faithful, and He is just, and what is He going to do? He will forgive our sins. He will cleanse us from all of the things that we have done wrong.

You see, what God could have done is He could have given us what we deserved. He could have said, “You are not perfect, so I am going to give you the same disappointment that you extend to other people. I am going to give you the same punishments that you extend to others who disappoint you.” But He does not do that at all. In Jesus, He comes to you with grace. He sees you as you are in your mistakes, in your sinfulness. And says, “I love you; you are enough; and I forgive you for all of those things.”

This is truly, the key to this week. Jesus sees our limitations, and He responds with grace. When you feel like you are not enough, Jesus comes to you and says, “I am enough for you.” When you feel like the people around you are not enough, you remember the grace that God has given to you, and you can respond with that grace to others. This is what it means to live liberated by limits. Exactly what we think might pen us in actually frees us. Understanding that we are not perfect, understanding that we are not enough on our own, frees us to be who God has called us to be: People of grace; People who look at the world with grace; People who extend His grace everywhere. Paul says it like this, “My Jesus, Jesus’ grace is enough for you . . . *‘for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me . . . for when I am weak, then I am strong.*”

When we understand that we are limited, that we have limits, it may seem like a weakness to the world, but it is actually the strength of God working through you, understanding that we cannot all do this on our own, all of it, perfectly, completely. Instead, God comes to us. He makes us enough. And His grace is enough for us.

It took me a long time to make this real in my life, to be able to go to bed at night and go through the day and think about all the things that I had done wrong. Instead of asking God for a perfect day the next day, to ask God to forgive me for all the ways in which I have fallen short. To ask God then to give me another day, to allow me to wake up tomorrow, to be able to share grace with other people, to look at them with graceful eyes, to give them the benefit of the doubt, to share the hope that I have, and when I screw up, to ask for forgiveness. Have I done that perfectly every day? No, I have not, and neither will you. But understanding that this is who God is in the midst of this, as we are, frees us to share that with the people around us. This grace is His freedom.

So as we go through this week, remember who you are. Not who you want to be, but who you are. Remember that when you feel like you’re not enough, Jesus says, I am enough for you. When you feel guilt or

shame, know that when you go to God and confess your sins, He will forgive you and allow you to forgive others. When you are weak, He will be strong through you.

Let's close with prayer. *Heavenly Father, we thank you for reminding us today that we are a limited people, that we cannot do everything that we set our minds and our hearts to, that we are not infinitely improvable. But instead, as people who are sinful, we are given your grace, that Jesus died and rose again to give us this new life filled with grace so that we might not pretend to be others, to pretend to be people we are not in front of others, but to be who we are so that your grace is made real in our lives, it will be seen by others that they might see you as enough for them. All this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*