

As We Are: This is Real Life

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Our Savior's Way Lutheran Church

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What an incredible story. Have you heard that story before? Usually, it is called *the Story of the Prodigal Son*. We could call it *the Story of the Gracious Father*. We could call it the Story of— what word would you use to describe the older son? Not usually a good word. Which one of these characters do you identify with—the son, the father, or the older son? It is an interesting question. At different times in our lives, we do identify with different ones, but the key in the story is the *gracious father*. Truly, this father loves his son so much that he brings them back to him. He sacrifices what is his and is excited to bring love and grace into their lives. And today, as we hear that story, it is a great way to wrap up this series that we have been talking about for the last couple of weeks called *As We Are*.

We have been looking at how we look at the world. Do we look at the world *as we want it to be*, in which we are all powerful, get to decide what is right and wrong, where we are in control, and have no limits, or do we look at the world *as it truly is*? And do we look at ourselves the way we truly are, people who have limits, people who are not in control, people who are broken?

I have heard comments from many of you over the last few weeks that this has been challenging. This has been difficult to dig into and see how far in our lives we have truly taken this idea that we are really in control. And when we take those few moments to really examine who we are at our core, we start to realize that things are not all as perfect as we thought they seemed.

As we have been going through this, hopefully you have been able to see that there is hope in the middle of this. The point is not to say that all is

lost. Not at all. In fact, when we look at this story of the Prodigal Son, and we hear what Paul has to say in Ephesians we just heard, we start to see that not only is there hope, but there is incredible grace and incredible hope for every person who at one point in time thought that life was all about themselves.

We have this tendency to think that life is all about us, and when we stop, when we realize that that is not what actually gives us the freedom that we seek, it is not what actually gets us the things that we want and the things that we need, we start to ask the question, then where shall we turn? To whom shall we go? And when the prodigal son realized there was nothing left for him, he asked that same question. And when he turned around, he knew that the father was there for him. He knew that the father had always been there for him. He knew that if he just came back, he could at least be fed.

But that is not how the story went, right? When the son returned—the son who had squandered everything—what did the father do? It may seem insignificant, but the father did not wait in the house for the son to walk up to the house and ring the doorbell. He did not wait for the son to walk up to the doorbell and look in the ring doorbell and see him from somewhere else on his property and then go see who was there. The father ran out on the road as soon as he could see that his son had crested the hill coming up onto the property. He ran, and he embraced the son because he had been longing for him to return every single moment.

You see, when we look at ourselves in the world *as we are*, when we realize that *we are broken*, when we realize that *we cannot do the things and be the people that we so desperately want to be*, we do not turn to despair because our Heavenly Father has been waiting for us to reach that moment. And He is there for you with His hands, with His embrace, with His grace. This is the goodness of God for us. We see it so deeply when we are in desperate need of it.

This whole series has been about changing our perspectives on how we view ourselves, how we view the world, how we view the people around us, and our work within it. It has been about saying, “It is less about me.” And as we turn outwardly, we see what God is calling us to do, who He is calling us to be, and if we are people that are so greatly loved by God, what we have to do in this place at this time.

And this is where Paul comes in. He knew this story. He’d heard this story. He knew this God. This was the God who had saved him and turned him around as well, just like he’s turned us around. And he gives us these incredible verses. In Ephesians 2, starting in verse 4, he says, “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses,”—remember, like even when we were broken, when we were nothing, when we realized that we could not do what we wanted to do, when we were not in control, He comes to us even in the midst of our imperfections.

Have any of you ever thought, “Maybe one day I will go back to church if I can just get my life together. If I can just get my life together first, then I am going to go back to church. Then I will start praying again. Then I am going to have this relationship with God”? There is no need for that. God comes to us right where we are. He wants to see you and know you right where you are in the middle of all your doubts, in the middle of your questions, in the middle of even your brokenness. He sees you. He loves you. And with this great love, He then makes you alive with Christ. Every day that you wake up is a new day to live in his kingdom.

Do any of you start the day like when you wake up, you think, “Gosh, this is a great day”? Did anybody start the day off today like that? Sometimes it is a little harder, right? The weather is changing; it is starting to get a little colder in the morning; some of us need to have coffee first thing, and we cannot really make intelligible words until we get that coffee. But truly, every day that you wake up is a day that you are made new in Christ Jesus.

Remember, it is not about us. It is about Him. It is by grace, God's riches at Christ's expense that He brings us into this knowledge.

In our book that we have been following through called *Low Anthropology* by David Zahl, there is this quote at the very end of the book, and it says: *Faith in God begins where faith in oneself ends.* I have heard this quote in different formations throughout the years, and it seems to ring true that once we realize that we are not the "end-all, be-all" of the universe, we start to see that we need someone else, someone else outside of us to do the things that we cannot. We need someone to bring us back to God, and that is the trust that we call faith. When we see ourselves *as we are*, we are able by the power of the Spirit to believe that not only does God see us as we are, but He loves us. And He reconnects us with God Himself.

Paul continues. He says, look, you have been saved by grace through faith, and God has "raised us up with [Jesus] and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace and kindness towards us in Christ Jesus" (vv. 6-7). Now Paul gets a little bit long-winded. What are the immeasurable riches that you are being shown? Frankly, it is *this*. It is *today*. In the coming ages, well, that is *now*. You have been shown such great grace that Jesus has come to you, loved you, saved you, and brought you back into a relationship with God that you might, right here where you are, with the people that God has placed around you, in the community in which you live with, the connections that you have, help other people see this same grace.

Have you wondered lately where God is calling you to be? Have you thought maybe that the answer is simply just right where you are? He gives us incredible work to do right where we are, not because of how great you are. Not because of that, but because of who He is. So, then we get to verses eight and nine. These are the Lutheran verses in the Bible because they encapsulate the beauty of God's grace for us, that it is all about God,

it is all about Jesus, and what He does for us, and reminds us of our place in His kingdom. Let's read together. "For by grace, you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." That speaks exactly to what we have been talking about for the last few weeks. We do not get to boast about the things that we do because they do not get us where we want to go. It is not about us. It is about who God is for us. By grace God's riches at Christ's expense, we are saved. Because of Jesus alone on the cross and His resurrection, He gives us new life, and we are made new in that each and every day.

Now, these are the Lutheran verses, all right, which next week is Reformation Day, so it is a good thing to get ready. But, there is one more verse that we leave off, and I would encourage us never to leave this off. In fact, I am going to make a petition and send it to the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and say we need to add a third verse to the Lutheran verses because I think it is important.

Verse 10. *Because of all this, we are God's masterpieces. He creates us anew in Jesus to do good works, which God has already prepared beforehand that we should simply walk in them.* This verse encapsulates all of who we are. In fact, this verse encapsulates the hope that we can hang on to. When we realize that we are broken, that we are not in control, that we have limits, what is there for us? God says that you are His masterpiece. There is nobody like you. He has created you uniquely with your gifts and skills in this time, in this place, with the people around you to be you. He asks you then, He calls you to see that you are created new every single day because of what Jesus has done for you. He takes away your sins, and He gives you forgiveness and frees you from shame and from guilt every single day. And then, to top that off, His Spirit is with you to help you walk in the ways that God has already prepared beforehand.

Some of us might feel a little bit overwhelmed by that. We have enough to do in life. We have to-do lists. We have places to take our kids. We have so many things to do. And so, to hear that God has already prepared this path for us to walk can give us a little more stress. Are we on the right path? Are we doing the right things? Are we doing this all the right way that God would have us do?

I encourage you to see this a little bit differently. What God has done is He has made you, you. And He has made you new in Jesus to walk the way that He has set before you. And all He asks you to do is to take a step. That is all He asks. You do not have to know where you are going, how you are going to get there, how to be prepared to do it. He says He has already prepared the way for you. Just take the step.

This verse reminds me when I feel broken exactly who I am. When I am not sure of what direction to go, it reminds me, *God's got that taken care of*. I just need to take a step. He reminds me that when I am in a community like this, we are here for a reason, at this place, in this time, to help other people see that they are masterpieces, that they have been created new, that they have kingdom work to do. This is truly the hope that we have when we look at the world *as it truly is*.

Jesus makes us new. We are made His masterpiece, and we get to do the good things of the kingdom each and every day. I find great encouragement in knowing all of this, that Jesus loves me, that He has saved me, and that He gives me kingdom work to do every day. And that in the midst of my failings, He's still going to do all of this. When I need forgiveness, it is always there. And when I need somebody to talk to about all this, He has given me all of you. This is a gift of the Lord.

So as we close out this series, I hope that encourages you as you look at yourself, and you shift from looking at the world and yourself as you want it to be to how it truly is, and you move into this space of looking at

yourself in the world as Jesus does as one in which He gives us incredible kingdom work to do that He's already set up before us. With great hope, with expectation, with great love, together, we just take a step.

Let's close in prayer. *Heavenly Father, we thank you for bringing us here today. It is no accident that we are together in this place. You have called us to be your people right here in this community, at this time, so that we would be able, by the power of your spirit, to share your goodness and love with the people around us. We ask, Lord, that through the things that you have called us to do, you would allow more and more people to connect with you, to believe in you, and to have faith that in Jesus there is life forever. When we fail, Lord, remind us of your great forgiveness, that you will run to the ends of the earth to find us again. When you welcome us back with a hug, let us let our guilt and our shame dissipate. And let us take that next step to build your kingdom right here on earth as it is in heaven. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.*