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Romans 3:19-24; Luke 18:9-14

SHOULD'S, COULD'S, AND GOD'S GRACE

Today we commemorate two important events. The first thing we commemorate today is All the Saints of God. Part of how we commemorate All Saints Day is through our remembrance of loved ones who have died. But the other aspect of this commemoration is recalling that every single one of us is simultaneously both saint and sinner. Each and every one of us is attired in the dress of both saint and sinner. More on that later.

The second event we commemorate today is the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. On October 31, 1517, the German theologian Martin Luther wrote his famous 95 Theses in which he confronted abuses within the Catholic Church. These statements became the catalyst for a larger movement of reformation and led to great conflict with the Church's hierarchy. Ultimately, however, the reformation movement created a schism within the Church, resulting in the Protestant and Catholic branches of Christianity which exist to this day. And so it is more appropriate for us to speak about our *commemoration* of the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation rather than a *celebration* of this anniversary, since any division of the Body of Christ is always regrettable.

However, we do want to commemorate this anniversary as the work of Martin Luther led to some important insights that have benefitted the Christian faith and our understanding of God. Luther was a brilliant thinker and writer. He translated the Bible into German so that ordinary people in his country could finally have access to the scriptures themselves. Previously, only the Church priests had access to read the Bible. Luther wrote beautiful hymns. And he courageously took on the Church hierarchy in a stubborn resistance to practices and beliefs he

argued were not biblical or faithful. But Luther was also a terribly flawed human--which makes him an ideal poster child for our All Saints commemoration. He was very earthy for a guy who used to be a priest: he loved beer, and sex, and vulgar jokes. And tragically, he was also anti-Semitic. Centuries later, some of Luther's anti-Semitic writings were used by the Nazis in their justification for their Final Solution for the Jews. We can try to understand the historical context for such narrow-minded ideas, but in the end, how can there be a justification for hate? So here we have this man: both saint *and* sinner. Luther's own life embodies, really, one of the core principles of the Protestant Reformation, one of the core beliefs of his own teachings: and that is the belief in God's grace.

What do we mean when we speak about God's grace? The word *grace* has many meanings in the English language. Grace can mean that prayer we say before a meal. And grace can mean the poise and elegance with which one moves: she moves with such grace! But when we talk about God's grace, we mean that every one of us has been kissed by God with love and forgiveness. And here's the part that Luther was adamant about: not one of us can do anything in our lives to earn God's love and forgiveness. It comes to us as a gift.

Luther went back to the Bible, to passages like what we read today from Paul's letter to the Romans, to formulate his understanding of human sin and of God's gift of grace. The Apostle Paul wrote in our reading today, "*all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

Now this is a radical idea when you think about it. We do a lot in our lives to earn our good standing with others. Maybe you grew up in a household where you felt you had to earn your parents' love or approval. And then later we go on to have to earn our boss's approval. There are all kinds of standards that seem to exist that we have to try to meet if we are to be

considered good people, decent people, commendable people. Get a good education. Stay out of trouble. Pay your taxes. Get a good job. Those are sort of the usual standards we are expected to meet. And then there are newer standards of decency: recycle your plastics and paper; use compact florescent light bulbs; shop at the Farmer's Market. These standards that we strive to meet in order to be considered decent, commendable, worthy people are all the *should's* that exist in life. Do these things . . . and then you will be a good person.

We take this concept of *should's* and we also apply them to our relationship with God. What are those things that God requires of us in order for us to be right with God? What are the things we have to do or those things we have to be careful *not to do* in order to please God, in order for God to love us, care for us, and in order for God to let us into heaven?

People have been trying to figure out the *should's* regarding God forever. The Apostle Paul in his letter we read today spoke about "the law." He meant the religious laws of the day that spelled out the things Jewish people should do to honor God, to be faithful to God. None of these things were bad--they were good ways of honoring God. The problem as Paul saw it arose from when people saw these actions as things they had to do to *earn* God's favor.

Jesus offers us an example of this kind of thinking in the parable we read from Luke today. The religious leader looks over at the tax collector and prays to God, "Thank you that I am not like this loser!" And then the religious leader names all those *should's* that he is faithful in doing: how he fasts twice a week, how he gives a tenth of his income. And he is confident that these actions have earned him good standing with God. Look at what I've done! I'm so good!

Christian churches have been guilty of this kind of thinking down through the ages. Too often, Christianity has become a religion of *should's*--teaching people that they have to do certain

things to receive God's saving love: come to church every week, get baptized, take communion, pay your pledge, don't have sex before marriage, don't smoke, don't dance, don't drink, don't be gay. And people have come to believe there is a list of *should's* they have to follow in order to be right with God, to receive God's love, and to get into heaven.

And on the other side of that coin are those of us who are like the religious leader in Jesus' story--who feel certain that our efforts and good works have bought us God's favor. A lot of times this is an unconscious thought but it's still there below the surface. All those years we've been coming to church, all those committees we served on, all those church suppers we cooked for, all those years of devoted service--surely we are in good standing with God! We've earned some credit with God.

Not far behind this belief in the *should's*, lies an attitude of the *could's*. The *should's* are about those things we should be doing or not doing in order to be right with God. The *could's* rest on the idea that we could be better people if only we tried a little harder. If you are one of those folks who grew up trying to earn your parents' love or approval, then you probably know first-hand the burden that comes from always feeling you could be doing more. Come on, you can do better!

Within modern times this concept of the *could's* has infiltrated a lot of our thoughts through a form of humanism--that is, the belief that we humans can make ourselves better if we only tried harder. Let's just dig a little deeper to find that source of goodness that lies within all of us, and then let's haul it to the surface. If we could just dig deeper and bring that innate goodness to the surface, we could solve our problems, end warfare, bring about peace and goodwill. I bet if you think about it, you will find that this kind of thinking has entered your subconscious, because I know it has mine. At times I have been so distressed by the ugliness in

our world, by the cruelty, the racism, the genocides that still take place even today, by the propensity to violence, that I have been astounded by the apparent failure of humanity. We humans seem no better than we were hundreds or thousands of years ago. There has entered our mindset the idea that our learning, our experience, our advancements in science and technology, our literary and artistic achievements, our insights derived from psychology and philosophy, should have all worked toward the advancement of humanity. There is the idea that we could be better people. If we just keep at it, we could become more virtuous as individuals and as a society.

The trouble with both the *should's* and the *could's* is the gap--the gap between who we should or could be, between where we should or could be, and who and where we *actually* are. The gap is inevitable. In our honest moments, we each know that gap exists. The gap is felt when we hurl those hurtful words at our spouse or child, and when we discover ourselves thinking a racist, sexist, or homophobic thought. We confront the gap when, worried about our retirement funds, we realize that we are just not as generous as maybe Jesus invites us to be, and when after a bad day we sit down and consume an entire box of cookies. It happens when we are unfaithful to our most committed relationships, and when we spend too much in on-line shopping. The gap exists when we toss the plastic milk jug into the trash rather than the recycling, and when we look to make sure the neighbors aren't watching us use the toxic weed pesticide on our lawn. And it exists in a 16th century German theologian who taught us about God's abundant love while at the same time speaking hateful words about some of God's beloved people.

We just can't ever escape the gap. We can never completely do right, be right, act right. Our own efforts to do what we should, our own efforts to be better people, our own efforts to

become a better society are always going to fall short. And that is because sin--which is another way of talking about the gap--sin is part of the human condition. Try as we might, we will always "fall short of the glory of God."

The Protestant Reformers like Luther took the situation of human sin very seriously. All of us are sinners. It is part of our condition. The person Jesus commends in his parable is not the religious leader who does all the right acts and performs all the right rituals. Jesus praises the tax collector, loathed by most of society, who prays to God, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

But the Protestant Reformers also took seriously the belief in God's gift of grace. You and me and everyone has been kissed by God with love and forgiveness. And it is unmerited. And it is unearned. God's grace is not something we can achieve. We accept it in faith and simply make room in our hearts for God's action of love and forgiveness to take place. That is what a saint is--not a perfect person, not a person who performs especially good or holy actions. A saint is someone who accepts the gift of God's love, knowing it is an undeserved gift. And the only proper response to any precious gift is to say "thank you"--which is what the saints of God endeavor to do with their lives.