

Pastor Roy's Sermon from July 13, 2014

Imagine me walking down the aisle and handing out 2 scraps of paper. Keep them for later.

The Word of God. A word of Hope. A discussion among the children of God about how to live faithfully to the faithful God who has drawn us into relationship with this faithful Word. As Isaiah proclaims, this Word cannot fail. The breath of God goes forth, and accomplishes that for which it is spoken. This Word is spoken for communion. This Word invites. This Word Calls. Into relationship with the Divine. Into relationship with neighbor. Into relationship with the alien sojourning stranger in the land. Into relationship with all of creation. The Word of God wills us with life in so many ways.

The Word is wisdom, clear vision, insight, creative response, compassion, faithful mercy, it brings freedom from fear and compulsive behavior. The Word is hope. The Word is fellowship.

All who hear it and receive it will go out in joy, be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

The Word of the Lord is not a word of condemnation but of blessing. The Word of the Lord calls us to hope to overcome all that keeps us down and fills us with dread.

The Word is not mainly about me! This is why as Lutherans we do not emphasize personal salvation as if it were the main goal of our faith. Of course there is a personal aspect the Word. We must experience it, but the goal is not about me, it's about us. For the word invites us to step out from our fear and greed and self absorption and commune with all of creation in which the wind of the Spirit blows.

Paul shares an essential Word with us when he reminds us that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Jesus knew this freedom. He shared it with his followers, and they passed it along. It is not a secret club. Freedom from condemnation is a truth to be shared with all. Here is how God relates to all of humanity and all of creation. No condemnation. Mercy. Justice. Peace. Love.

The Word calls us into this reality and then invites us to practice it for the rest of our lives.

Now the challenge is that we know this. We all do. But we don't always live as if it were true. We remember our past mistakes, things we have said, things we have done that weren't helpful, things we have failed to do which would have been really helpful if we had done them.

Every week we hear the word of absolution—forgiveness—following our confession at the beginning of worship.

But here's the trouble, at times our confession and absolution feels cheap and unreal. If our sin and error bring harm to family, friends, and community, how is it that a few words on our part makes any difference? Even if we really give thought to our confession and mean what we say, what does it mean that the forgiveness of the creator and redeemer is ours? Depending on how badly our words and actions have botched our relationships, we are still broken. We have regret. We feel guilt and shame. Our relationships are scarred by what we've said and done.

This is where it gets kind of complicated. If you've zoned, pay attention now! This is where our confession involves real grief. I'm not talking about grief as what we go through when we lose someone dear, but more of a profound regret.

I'm referring to grief as our response to our own sin which has caused pain and alienation—broken relationships. If we do not recognize the pain caused by our sin, and if we do not grieve that pain, then we cannot discover love on the other side.

Recall the ‘get out of jail free’ card in Monopoly? God’s forgiveness is not a ‘get out of guilt free’ card for us to throw down on the board of life to cover up our sin so that we can casually walk away.

If we do not grieve, we will not be able to, as Isaiah puts it, “Go out **in** joy, and be led **back** in peace,” there will be no release, no freedom, only a talk of forgiveness.

Joy is what happens when we are honest down to the core. It is a letting go of all our pretense. Joy is integrity and it brings a deep satisfaction.

Yes, forgiveness must involve grief. It tells our gut, our soul, that this is real—that we mean what we pray, and that the forgiveness we receive is real too. Grief is learning to love those, including ourselves, whom we have hurt. There is no faking grief. Either we get that we botched it, or we don’t. If we don’t get how badly we’ve messed things up, then there is no hope for us to know joy or peace.

Confession is grief. Grief is confession. Confession is not simply words or a tidy formula. Weekly confession reminds us to be aware of our sorrow and bring it to God.

Yes, there is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. And yes, being in Christ Jesus means we will grieve all the ways we fail to fully live in the mercy of God.

So, I have an assignment. Call to mind something that makes you feel condemned. Write on the imaginary piece of paper I gave you earlier. Perhaps you’ve been trying to forget it most of your life. Own it for what it is--whether it was your choice or someone else’s choice. Grieve it. The grieve part is where most of us get stuck. It is a process. Grieving is always a process, and one which we never fully leave behind.

Now, throw it in the trash can.

The truth is, once we have owned our sin with sorrow and received mercy, we will have much more energy to use the gifts God has given us. So now, how will you use your gifts for compassion and mercy? How will you, how are you sharing God’s abundant love with others?

Now take that second piece of paper and write down what you can do with your newly available energy of mercy. As we are freed from guilt and shame, we find renewed energy to serve in love. This is the energy of resurrection—new life.

Ok, here’s the conclusion, guilt and shame are cheap substitutes for the grace of God. Apart from true confession, we will always end up settling for guilt and shame as our punishment for failing to live in love. Guilt and shame render us dysfunctional, miserable, and unable to love. They devour our gifts and our ability to creatively and lovingly deal with the challenges of our lives.

So let us all set aside guilt and shame, and embrace the mercy and life giving peace of God. Amen.