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## The Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 27, 2022

### Against the Rock of God's Grace, Condemnation Is Crushed.

God never turns off his grace and love. No matter how bad the sin or how arrogant the sinner, God is there to forgive. Two sons interact with their father in this Sunday's worship. One has drifted far away and returns in shame. The Father welcomes him. The other looks down on his brother and resents his Father's love. The Father reaches out to him. Neither is condemned because the Father's grace crushes condemnation. And for us? "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

#### Romans 8:1-10

**Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.**

Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God.

You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness.

#### A Robe, a Ring, and a Fattened Calf

"I once was lost but now am found; was blind but now I see." It could be the melody is what makes Amazing Grace so popular with people, but I think it's more the sentiment. It kind of warms your heart when a lost soul comes home. Even when you're down and out, there's always a chance for redemption. It's like the story Jesus tells in the Gospel today. You don't have to be a theologian to get the point. The prodigal son once was lost, but he came home and now he's found.

Sometimes we pay so much attention to the lost son that we kind of lose sight of the loving father, and the loving father is really the main character in this story. Some of us know from experience that it isn't easy to welcome a prodigal son home. Truth is sometimes it just doesn't work out. Too much history and too much hurt. When this dad saw his son walking up the driveway, he could have closed the door and gone back inside the house. At best he could have assigned him to the servants' quarters; that's all the son really asked for. But that's not how the story goes. **But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him, and kissed him. He said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'** So they began to celebrate.

Well, the father is God; you know that. And we're all the lost sons and daughters and so is every lost soul who ever lived. You know that, too. No matter what we've done wrong, even really bad stuff, God always welcomes us home, he always takes us back. He's always there with a hug and kiss. He always provides a robe and a ring and a fattened calf.

The robe and the ring and the fattened calf kind of get lost in this story. We see ourselves in the son, we see God in the father, but what about these gifts? That's the part of the story we want to talk about today. St. Paul talks about these gifts in the Second Reading for today from Romans chapter 8. He shows us the gifts that God gives his prodigal sons and daughters. He'll tell us what Jesus means when he talked about...

### **A Robe, a Ring, and a Fattened Calf**

**1.** Paul wrote his letter to the congregation in Rome to set down the details and intricacies of God's plan to save us. It's impossible to summarize what Paul wrote in a sentence or two, but if we had to do it, maybe these two passages from chapter 3 would work: First, **All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.** And then: **We maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.** Everything Paul wrote before those words leads up to them and everything he wrote after those words leans back on them. So what Paul has to say about a robe, and ring, and a fattened calf leans back on those truths.

At the bottom line the Christian religion insists that human beings cannot get themselves right with God by doing stuff. Obeying rules or keeping commandments don't work. You might say that we're all prodigal sons stuck in pig styes. The pig sty we're stuck in Paul calls the **law of sin and death**. You can't get clean in a pig sty. You can wash and scrub and disinfect, but there's always mud someplace. Trying hard won't do it. Obeying the laws of God can't get us clean, Paul wrote, **because** any effort at obedience **was weakened by the flesh**. The trouble is that as long as people live in the pig sty they think they're doing fine. The pig sty is all they know. We don't live there anymore, but sometimes we catch a whiff of the old familiar odor and we start to think that maybe we can do this salvation stuff ourselves. I'm not so bad; I go to church, I fill my envelope, I'm nice to my family, and I'm certainly better than the guy who lives next door. Doesn't work. When you're stuck in the pig sty you're going to die in the pig sty. Unless somebody pulls you out.

Somebody did. The Holy Spirit did. Paul wrote, **through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.** The law of the Spirit of life is a different place from the law of sin and death. When we were baptized, when we came to faith, the Holy Spirit lifted us out of the sty and placed us into a palace that was spotless and squeaky clean. God made this new palace squeaky clean, Paul wrote, **by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us.** OK. We know this story as well as know our own names. We've heard it over and over again since we were children. God sent his perfect Son to our planet to be like us—flesh and blood and bones and muscles. God's Son came to do what we couldn't do. God said to us, **Be holy for I the Lord your God am holy.** So Jesus was holy in our place. God said, **The soul that sins shall die.** So Jesus died in our place. He didn't get rid of our sins—we still sin every day—but he covered them up so that God would overlook them. Now God looks past our sins and sees Jesus' life and death instead and so—and this is what Paul wrote: **Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.** We have a new status with the Spirit.

This is what we have in this place, this palace, this temple, which Paul calls **the law of the Spirit who gives life**. Here the Spirit covers us with the **robe** of Christ's perfection. Here the Spirit slides on our faith that **ring** that marries us to Christ. Here the Spirit forgives us by the **Lamb of God** who takes away the sins of the world. The father in the parable opened his home to his son and gave him a robe, a ring, and fattened calf. Jesus wants us to know that his Spirit welcomes us into his home with greater gifts than these.

**2. So they began to celebrate.** Plenty of noise and music and dancing. That's all part of the parable. It's part of what Paul wrote, too. There's a huge difference between life in the law's pigsty and life in the Spirit's palace. Paul wrote, **Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance**

**with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.** In the pig sty people learn to love the mud and they love to wallow in it. We see their mud all around us and sometimes we see specks of mud even on us. But with the Spirit we come to love God's law. Loving God and loving neighbor is never a burden for us, never a challenge. It's natural, it's automatic. **We love him because he first loved us.** Paul wrote, **The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.** In the sty we're stuck in the mud and we'll drown in the mud. But in the Spirit's mansion we focus on life with God. With God the guilt goes away, the fears subside, our courage is fortified, the future is steady. Paul wrote, **The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God.** In the sty everything is bad no matter how good it feels; I mean, the mud can at least be warm. But think of people who are stuck in that slop. **You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh,** Paul wrote, **but are in the realm of the Spirit. And if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness.** For us life takes on a completely different perspective. We know life doesn't last forever. We know our bodies are going to wear out; some of us can feel it happening already. But it's different when we're sure where we're going. We enjoy life down here and we ought to live our lives with gusto. But then we remember the white **robes** of glory, the golden **ring** of eternity, and the **marriage feast of the Lamb** and we say to ourselves, "O that we were there; O, that we were there."

"He once was lost, but now is found; was blind but now he sees." That's the prodigal son and that's you and me, too. In his indescribable love God removed us from the mud of sin and death and brought us into the palace of the Spirit where we gain forever the robe, the ring, and the fattened calf—the best gifts Jesus gives.

Through many dangers, toils, and snares I have already come;  
Tis grace has brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home.

When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun,  
We've no less days to sing God's praise than when we'd first begun. Amen.