

SERMON: Created for Good Works
TEXT: Ephesians 2:1-10

3-14-21

Many of you know by now that one of the things I love about Cape Girardeau is our location right on the Mississippi River. But you may not know that another thing I love is the trains.

I love hearing the sound of the whistle several times a day from my office at First Presbyterian. In my younger days I enjoyed counting the number of cars; and sometimes I still do. I like to wonder where a train is going and what sort of cargo it's carrying. I like to imagine hopping in an open car and riding along, just to see where I might end up. And I even like the graffiti that decorates the old, rusted, and faded cars.

I know that most graffiti - whether it's on trains or the river wall or an old, abandoned building - is done in the dark of night when there's no one around and there's less chance of getting caught. It is illegal, after all. It's considered vandalism, and it is sometimes linked to greater crimes and gang activity. Most of the time, it's hard to read. Some of the time, I might not want to know what it says. And sometimes the graffiti is a creative and beautiful work of art. When I see this

kind, I find myself praying that the artist would be discovered and supported along a path leading to a career, to putting their talent to good use.

I feel the same way about cons and computer hackers and intelligent criminals of all kinds. They could be such a great asset to society, if only they put their talents and skills and intelligence to good use. It's a terrible shame that they seemed to have missed the message that they were **CREATED FOR GOOD WORKS.**

Today's passage from the letter to the Ephesians starts out in a rather dark place. The author writes to the church at Ephesus, telling them, "You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else."

One commentary described this as the "before," which is marked by "sin, Satan, and self." Regarding sin, "egotism and selfish preoccupation are both so damaging to our being that our spirit is not alive to God and to love. Our actions

are so crippling that our God-intended humanity is dead.” (Ian S. Markham, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 2)

Satan is referred to in this passage as “the ruler of the power of the air,” a name that I don’t remember hearing before. But this commentary explained that it comes from Greek-influenced cosmology, which posited that “the space between the moon and the earth... was dominated by demonic activity.... The role the devil plays, for the author [of Ephesians] is to describe those cosmological forces that are controlling people.” For our time, some examples of such forces would include addiction, “psychological damages from childhood that might still enslave a person, or unjust social realities that do the same thing.” (Ian S. Markham, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 2)

The third feature of our “before” state is a damaged self. While living “in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses” may sound like it makes for a full and exciting life, what it really does is cause damage and eventually death. Again from the commentary, “The point is that we were controlled. We were little more than animals, living by crude and base instinct, in a semi-dead state.” (Ian S. Markham, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 2)

Of course, none of this is what God, our Creator, desires for us. “But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ - by grace you have been saved...”

This is the very definition of grace. We were “children of wrath,” who were dead through sin, controlled by evil forces, and who followed the desires of flesh. You might say we had no “redeemable” qualities whatsoever. But our merciful and loving God made us alive again in Christ. What a great gift! What a great message!

We would be satisfied to put a period there and let that be the end of the passage. Let the rejoicing begin! But it doesn’t take long before we get caught up in the celebration. Having been “raised up” and “seated with Christ in the heavenly places,” we begin to get puffed up, thinking that we must be special. We must have deserved this honor. We must have done something right.

Back to the same commentary, “For the author [of Ephesians] the emphasis in this passage is on the *status shift*. We have gone from being agents manipulated by numerous forces around us to being rulers with Christ Jesus.” Seems to me, being called “rulers with Christ Jesus,” is something that could easily result in a

big head. So, we need to keep returning to the passage to be reminded, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God - not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”

When I was in seminary I had a part-time job as a receptionist for an assisted living residence for older adults. My little office was just a few yards away from the lounge area where several of the residents gathered after their evening meal. I couldn't help but overhear their conversations, and it could be great entertainment when the work was slow. One evening there was a woman who was wheeling a cart of books, making pick-ups and deliveries from the library located in another part of the building. One of the loungers commented as this lady went by. “You're not going to get to heaven by doing all that volunteer work, you know.” “No,” answered the lady, “but it can't hurt!”

Another story comes from a book titled, *Rooted in Faith; Women Who Touched the Lives of Others*. (ed. Evalena Berry) Charlotte White Thompson was a volunteer tutor for the prison system of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. As a young girl she dreamed of becoming a foreign missionary. But her mother fell ill, and Charlotte was needed at home. Three times circumstances forced her to decline

opportunities for the mission field. Eventually, she came to believe that God sent the mission to her.

Having taught English to Vietnamese refugees, followed by working with illiterate young offenders, Charlotte began and later expanded a program for teaching illiterate prisoners to read and write in their own language. This evolved into training inmates to teach their fellow inmates. In 1988, she received a distinguished national award for introducing the Laubach literacy program into the prisons of Pennsylvania.

One of her students worked to become certified as a supervisor for inmates teaching other inmates, making this his life's work while he served a life sentence. Not knowing whether he would ever be released, his work gave others a greater chance of success on the outside upon their release.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God - not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what [God] has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

As individual disciples and together as God's church, may we discover that we have been created in Christ Jesus for good works. May we share this good news with every person we can, that they were CREATED FOR GOOD WORKS. And may we fulfill the work for which we were created, to the glory of God!

AMEN.