

"GRACE—CHEAP AND COSTLY"
EPHESIANS 2: 1-10

March 22, 2009 – The Fourth Sunday of Lent
University Church of Chicago
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The setting for Albert Camus's **The Plague** is a city in North Africa which has been cut off from the world by an outbreak of the plague. Hundreds die each day, and among the living all joy has long since departed. One of the characters looks into a shop window at Christmas, remembering his wife's face and knowing that he may never see her again. Camus provides this reflection by a Doctor Rieux, who witnesses the scene: "[The Doctor] knew what the old man was thinking as his tears flowed and thought it, too: that a loveless world is a dead world, and always there comes an hour when one is weary of prisons, of one's work and devotion to duty, and all one craves for is a loved face, the warmth and wonder of a loving heart."

We live, every one of us, in plague-stricken cities, in prisons of various kinds. Our days are filled with work and devotion to duty. There comes a time, more frequent than many of us admit, when we can barely bear another day of it, another hour; a time when we long only for a loved face, the warmth and wonder of a loving heart.

Before the Gospel is good news, it is the news that we are possessed by a kind of evil imagination in our hearts. Moreover, before the Gospel is good news, it is simply the news that life is difficult and truth very often speaks through a kind of eloquent silence. In the silence we hear the still, small voice that tells us we need more than devotion to duty and work, that we need more than even a loved face, the warmth and wonder of a loving heart. We must pay attention to the bad news, the simple news, before we can hear the Good News.

Do you remember that encounter in Will Campbell's autobiography, *Brother To A Dragonfly*, when Will, Baptist preacher, social activist, Mississippi storyteller and philosopher is riding along with his friend P.D. East? The skeptical agnostic P.D. pushes Will, keeps pushing him to tell him the heart of Christianity. "In ten words or less, what is the Christian message? Let me have it. Ten words."

Will thinks for a minute and then replies, "we're all bastards, but God loves us anyway." "Good," says P.D. "You have two words to spare."

The writer of the Letter to the Ephesians, writes to people much like Will's friend, P.D. Much like you and me. They live in a thoroughly worldly culture saturated with sex, technological innovations, new foods and fashions imported from all over the world and popular philosophies that purport to offer a kind of secular salvation.

This section of the letter sums up Pauline teaching found in Romans: the sinful human situation

(Romans 11:18-3:20) is met by the grace of God (Romans 3:21-11:35), to which the believers' response is good works.(Romans 12:1-16:27).

When I was a kid in the South, the Methodists and the Baptists would argue, actually argue, at recess about Christian doctrine. You have to remember how religious the South was in those days--in many ways, still is--so that as H. L. Mencken famously remarked, "If you threw a rock out of a car window in the South, you would hit either a Methodist or a Baptist on the head." So the Baptist kids would maintain that "once you were saved, you were always saved." Your name was written for all eternity in "the Lamb's Book of Life." We Methodists believed that you had choices about your actions and beliefs, that you could backslide.

In all the churches I have served, I have come not only to believe more earnestly in backsliding but I also found that I couldn't get most of my people far enough ahead for them even to slide back!

The Ephesians have to realize, the writer declares, that sinful human beings can do nothing to attain the life for which they are striving, and when they do, they do not understand their own situation and are not seeking God (2:4). God's act in raising Christ is primary, and since Christians are united with Christ, they too are "risen with him."

Paul, whom the writer obviously mimics, says that the world "did not know God through wisdom," but through "the foolishness of what was preached." What we preach during Holy Week is foolishness by the world's standards, isn't it? A "crucified Savior" is an oxymoron, like "humble Texan," "military intelligence," "airline food," or, perhaps, "compassionate conservative."

When you leave this service today, take a minute to look at those dozens, even hundreds of people passing by University Church. How many of them think of what we're doing in here as foolishness--or, at best, delusion? Better still: on your way to church on Sunday morning, on Easter Day, the crowning day for us Christians in the whole year, take a minute to consider the folks in Caribou Coffee or Starbuck's or having brunch at Chant--reading their ten-pound Tribune, basking in their accomplishments, prosperity and wisdom.

Remember the story of Al Smith, the 1928 Democratic presidential candidate in that little town in New Hampshire on a cold, winter Sunday morning? He and a friend were going to early Mass in a town that purported to be ninety percent Catholic, but almost all the windows were dark in the Catholic homes. They were more "happy pagan" than Catholic. Governor Smith turned to his friend and asked, "What if they are right and we are wrong?"

I used to love to encounter that street preacher at the corner of State and Washington.. Bless his heart, he's out there day in and day out, trying to sell salvation and his tracts. The former is free but he charges for the latter. His message is a bit mixed. Listen to him: "You goin' to hell if you smoke or drink," he declares. Then, "God loves everybody." Well, I have asked him, which is it?

Are we bound for hell or is God's grace readily available?

My favorite street preacher in Chicago's history was the little blind man who preached for years at State and Madison when that location was reputed to be "the busiest street corner in the world"; he was immortalized a number of years ago the inimitable Liesl Mueller. Legend had it that if you stood there long enough, everybody in the world would sooner or later pass by. That man was a preacher *extraordinaire*! The eminent psychiatrist, Karl Menninger, told of walking with a colleague across State Street one day when the diminutive preacher suddenly shouted, "Guilty!" The psychiatrist-friend turned to Dr. Menninger and asked, "How did he know?"

We are saved by grace through faith (2:9), the writer declares. Faith is not a work of merit, but the response to God's grace. "This is not your own doing...It is the gift of God." That is central to our understanding of God's grace.

What I am saying to you, what I am trying to get you to understand is simple: the Good News is out there on that street, the Good News is something we share. "Vital piety," as John Wesley characterized it, must be united with that from which it has so long been divided: an active, living, intelligent faith.

The recent shooting of the pastor of the Baptist Church in Maryville, Illinois reminded me of how perilous preaching can be. On a Sunday several years ago when I was away from the Chicago Temple, a very intimidating street person came into the worship service and began to argue with one of my colleagues who was preaching that day. It was, to say the least, a disruptive moment. The church's ushers, bless their hearts, stood there like deer caught in the headlights, just staring, not knowing what to do. The only attempt to deal with the man came when one of the congregants threw a hymnal at him and scared him away.

I was back the next Sunday, and sure enough, here came the same man: dressed in black, wearing a huge, wide-brimmed straw hat, carrying a staff, walking down the west aisle of the church. Everybody froze. What was going to happen this time? Such experiences enriched my prayer life a lot during my thirteen years here. And that day God answered my prayer for guidance--a prayer God never refuses, if we will only listen. I came down from the chancel, took the erstwhile prophet by the arm and escorted him out of the west door, out by way of the Clark Street entrance. He said, "You can't take me out of here. God told me to preach today." To which I replied, "Maybe God intended for you to preach out here on the corner of Clark and Washington. There are a lot of sinners out here." He looked around, his eyes lit up, and he said, "I think you're right."

I was right. That's where the action is. Out there. In your office, in your cubicle, at Starbuck's, with your eat and meet group.

Why do you come here? I hope not just to feel good, not just to “get your batteries recharged”-- although that’s important. Not just to have a few moments away from all the negativity and worry and fear that possibly pervade your office and your life.

I believe a lot of us have come here today to renew our commitment, to experience the grace, to catch a glimpse, however briefly and fleetingly, about what it means to live in the world--not inside the church, but in the world, as a follower of Jesus Christ.

In *Practice in Christianity*, Kierkegaard draws a clear distinction between two ways of relating to Christ: *admiration* and *imitation*. One can either admire Christ or one can imitate him. A vast difference exists between the two, and only the one relation is truly Christian:

Now, it is of course well known that Christ continually uses the expression “imitators.” He never says that he asks for admirers, adoring admirers, adherents; and when he uses the expression “follower” he always explains it in such a way that one perceives that “imitator” is meant by it, that is not adherents of a teaching but imitators of a life.

A woman accompanied her husband to the doctor’s office and after the examination, the doctor asked her to come into his office. He said, “Your husband is a very sick man, and unless you do the following things he will surely die. One, each morning you must fix him a healthy, low-fat breakfast. Two, always be pleasant and make sure he is in a good mood. Three, make him a nutritious lunch. Four, be particularly solicitous at dinner: fix him a wonderful meal with wine and serve it by candlelight. Five, never burden him with chores around the house. Six, don’t ever discuss any problems with him, because he has enough worries of his own. Seven be intimate and loving at all times and seek to meet his every need.”

Afterward, as they were driving home, the husband turned his wife and asked, “Well, what did the doctor say?” She answered, “You are going to die.”

Well, friends, I hate to tell you the truth, but we are, too. Every one of us. No matter how many times we try to believe the culture’s lies which tell us that if we make enough money, buy enough things, go enough places, tell enough people about our exploits, have a really sharp resume and consume enough food, we will live forever--it is not going to happen.

We are going to die. We are not going to pass Go. We are not going to collect two hundred dollars. We are going to die. No matter how many wakes you attend and no matter how skillful the mortician is in trying to look the dead person appear alive, he is dead.

The message we need to hear is about death. About our death. About life’s realities. But more importantly about the one who has died so that we may have life abundant.

On the heath Lear asks Gloucester, “How do you see the world?” And Gloucester, who is blind, answers, “I see it feelingly.”

I see it feelingly.

God comes to us in Christ so that we can see the world, can see ourselves, can see death itself, feelingly. With hope. With assurance. With courage.