“What does Lent have to do with Grace?”

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Romans 5:12-21

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***12Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned— 13sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. 14Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come. 15But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man’s trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. 16And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man’s sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. 17If, because of the one man’s trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. 18Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. 19For just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous. 20But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, 21so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.***

While reading the bible in ancient Greek may be difficult, sometimes I think that reading the writing of Paul translated into English isn’t any easier. I count 21 instances of words like “therefore,” “and so,” “but,” “yet,” “and,” “surely,” “if,” and “so that” in just these 9 lines that Pam read for us today. As a reader, as soon as I think I understand where Paul is going with his argument one of these words whips my brain in another direction. In the end, I really have to struggle to figure out what Paul said.

I imagine Paul, the convert, “regular-guy-just-like-you” trying to convince his audience of his thoughts with as much logic and common sense as he could, trying to pre-empt their questions with what he hoped was a logical next thought. Paul was previously a Pharisee, someone committed to the laws of the temple who was then *converted* to his belief that Jesus was indeed that which had been promised so he was a man with experience from two kinds of religious life. The religious life of a devout temple authority and the new devout religious life of an apostle and evangelist for Jesus. Writing in the more colloquial koine Greek, in large handwritten letters, not like the compact neat writing of scribes who used the more classical Greek language adds to the picture we have of him as kind of a regular guy with an important message.

A text beginning with the word “therefore” makes us think of reading something in the middle of a thought. “Therefore, I ate cake today.” is one bit of information. “Today is my birthday, therefore I ate cake today.” tells the whole story. In order to understand the text for today we have to go back to the 3rd chapter of the letter, where Paul first sets out his main argument for following Jesus. Paul begins his argument *for* the messiahship of Christ with these words, translated into the version of the bible called The Message. In 3:21, Paul writes, “What Moses and the prophets witnessed to all those years has happened.” From there Paul goes on to describe how Jesus’ person and teachings expand on and continue the teachings they already knew of. Here in chapter 5, Paul is considering the facts regarding sin and the law. Paul’s teaching here is not so much a theology of sin, but is a theology of grace. Using as a starting point that Adam being kicked out of the garden of Eden caused all of humanity to be sinners, is not Paul’s main thought, it is only the foundational understanding that he is starting with. Paul wants to use one man, Adam, to equate with the work of another one man, Jesus, as both having an impact on all. Adam and Christ have been equated in many other places in longer arguments, that I am not trying to argue for or against, today, but rather just noting that the comparison suits Paul’s explanation about the relationship between the law and grace.

Paul’s argument says that all of humanity is trapped by sin. The Law as given to Moses was not enough to release that trap. Jesus life, death, and resurrection didn’t *change* sin or the Law, but it releases us from that trap. If one breaks the law, in imprisoned, and killed, they die. But faith in the grace of God in Jesus means that death is not final. One breaks the law, is imprisoned, and even in death, they will still live. Belief in resurrection was not unusual at that time. But belief in bodily resurrection was in question, and how one man, Jesus, could grant that for more than just himself was a big question. Paul used the common belief that one man Adam’s life had consequences for many, so it was logical that one man Jesus’ life and death had consequences for many also.

It would be yet another sermon to discuss what one had to do to get that eternal life. Jesus explained that to a rich young ruler who asked him one day, and we are all still working that out. For Paul, faith in Jesus was the only pre-cursor to receipt of that gift of grace and eternal life that Jesus offers.

None of that makes any sense or even matters, unless we can imagine how our lives and this text intersect. Yesterday, on NPR I was given one idea.

The question you should be asking yourself is, “If I listened to NPR on Saturday, do I still have to pay attention to Deb’s sermon on Sunday?”

This next example will bring up the subject of domestic assault and healing. If you need me to stop, just give me a sign and I will jump ahead. Or if you need to step away, please do.

Yesterday, on All Things Considered, Michel Martin interviewed a psychiatrist named Dr. Judith Herman, professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School for over 50 years, and “a giant” in the field of trauma and recovery.1 Dr. Herman says that “the courts fail to secure meaningful justice for survivors of domestic violence.” This week we heard the news that additional prison time has been added to the sentences of both Harvey Weinstein and R. Kelly for their convictions of rape and assault and pornography and sex trafficking, respectively. The interview discussed the difference between television portrayals of justice and Dr. Herman’s real life experiences with survivors seeking justice. On television, justice looks like the bad guy getting caught and punished and the victims and survivors hugging and fist bumping and giving thanks for the guilty sentencing. While that does happen, says Dr. Herman, her experience has shown that most survivors have a very different view of justice than do the prosecutors and the courts. For survivors, additional years added to the sentences was not meaningful justice.

In Dr. Herman’s experience, her research, and her surveys she has found that many survivors don’t find meaning in the punishment of the perpetrator. What survivors want is truth and repair. What the survivors would like that would be meaningful would be things like, public acknowledgement of proper blame of the perpetrator and not themselves; they want people who matter to them to believe them; they want an apology from the perpetrator and more often from the enablers – the people who looked the other way.

Dr. Herman found that most domestic assaults happen in families and the human side of the perpetrator becomes front and center for the survivors, adding more complications, more confusion, and widens the circle of people affected. All of the added dimensions affect how the survivor moves forward. Dr. Herman told about one family who finally did press charges on a brother for assault of a sister and nieces. In this case, charges were pressed and prison happened and the survivors were glad of that, at the same time, what survivors often want is for the person to get help. While the brother did go to prison, the healing and meaningful justice came much later. While never overlooking the behavior, the family understood that the brother had been taught his behavior by their father who was violently abusive to all of them. They knew that a cycle needed to be broken. The healing and the meaningful justice came after the father eventually died, the brother got out of prison, and began the long road to engaging in rehabilitation. The family members who pressed charges remained engaged with him in order to be a part of each other’s healing. This is what life after death can look like. Justice was not the punishment. Meaningful justice was the life after punishment.

This story reminds me of Paul’s argument that faith in Jesus as the promised Messiah led to eternal life even after death, because in the case of this family, the Law, the construct that put the man in prison as punishment, did not bring anyone life. The family was broken. The man was broken. After prison, after punishment, nothing changed. For Paul sin through the eyes of the Law was death. Sin through the eyes of grace leads to eternal life, something beyond death. As the family looked to healing and not just punishment, to repentance not just prison, something beyond death became available to all of them.

Sin, brokenness, punishment, law, endings are all part of the human story that people of faith often emphasize historically. Lent, often seen as a time to remember that part of our story leads us to feel small, think less of ourselves, and doesn’t feel life giving. That is not a reason to avoid our brokenness, reminding ourselves that we are not all powerful over our lives. This lesson from Romans today reminds us that God sent Jesus to fulfill the work of bringing God’s unimaginable perfection to the world. Some call this God’s Kingdom. God’s Mission. God’s Love. God’s Power. God’s grace comes unbidden to us, startling us into the knowledge that God wants our well-being. God offers grace to us so that we can be more than our worst mistake. So that we can be brought to life after life brings us to darkness. Lent is a time to remember and reflect on our own inner lives, not so that we can yell “Hurrah, I’m perfect!” But so that we can be even better prepared to work for others. So that we can remember that God has something in store for us.

In an article entitled “Lent through the lens of Grace” the authors write, “If we imagine Lent as an "ordeal" or a time to dread in some way, then we've already pre-disposed ourselves to not get very much out of it.” We can begin now to “start anticipating something wonderful that is about to happen. Our sense of excitement and anticipation will grow more easily if we begin to imagine what God wants to give us. There is something coming that we can truly look forward to. If we get too focused on ourselves and what we are going to do or not do, we could risk missing the gift God wants to give us. We have to keep aware of the fact that grace comes from God. This is about God's great desire to bless us. With this mindset, it is easier for us to imagine that what we really want to do is place ourselves in a space to receive what God wants to give us.”2

This Lenten journey this year can be a journey to discovery. Our first discovery today is that God’s grace gives us far more than we can imagine, especially life even after death. Free from worries about worthiness, we can delight in the knowledge that with the grace of God, we are called to remove any barrier to God’s gifts. Removing a barrier might mean more action; or it might mean ending something. Self reflection with the heart of openness will enlighten us and carry us through our days. May we be ever aware of God working in us and through us.

Let us pray…

1<https://www.kqed.org/radio/program/all-things-considered> **How courts fail survivors of domestic violence FEB 25**

2<https://www.loyolapress.com/catholic-resources/liturgical-year/lent/perspectives-on-lent/articles/looking-at-lent-through-the-lens-of-grace/>