

July 7, 2019
God Has Been So Kind to Us
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Romans 5:12-21 (CEV)

¹² Adam sinned, and that sin brought death into the world. Now everyone has sinned, and so everyone must die. ¹³ Sin was in the world before the Law came. But no record of sin was kept, because there was no Law. ¹⁴ Yet death still had power over all who lived from the time of Adam to the time of Moses. This happened, though not everyone disobeyed a direct command from God, as Adam did. In some ways Adam is like Christ who came later.

¹⁵ But the gift that God was kind enough to give was very different from Adam's sin. That one sin brought death to many others. Yet in an even greater way, Jesus Christ alone brought God's gift of kindness to many people.

¹⁶ There is a lot of difference between Adam's sin and God's gift. That one sin led to punishment. But God's gift made it possible for us to be acceptable to him, even though we have sinned many times. ¹⁷ Death ruled like a king because Adam had sinned. But that cannot compare with what Jesus Christ has done. God has been so kind to us, and he has accepted us because of Jesus. And so we will live and rule like kings.

¹⁸ Everyone was going to be punished because Adam sinned. But because of the good thing that Christ has done, God accepts us and gives us the gift of life. ¹⁹ Adam disobeyed God and caused many others to be sinners. But Jesus obeyed him and will make many people acceptable to God.

²⁰ The Law came, so that the full power of sin could be seen. Yet where sin was powerful, God's kindness was even more powerful. ²¹ Sin ruled by means of death. But God's kindness now rules, and God has accepted us because of Jesus Christ our Lord. This means that we will have eternal life.

My family has been together for the holiday. My household. My sisters. My nieces. My nieces' husbands and eight of their ten kids. Four of the kids and their parents stayed at my house. Kids played and played; they got in and out of the water; they ate their weight in sugar – which is to say that every night by bath time, they were soaked in that wonderful summertime sticky, sweaty, dirty stink that all kids get. A smell that I happen to love.

I first loved it in 1984 when I was a 20-year-old Baptist summer missionary in inner-city Chicago. It's the smell of happy, healthy, well-cared-for kids. Kids who play hard and who get baths on more days than they don't. 1984 was also the summer I first learned that kids – and grown-ups – who aren't so healthy and well-cared-for smell dirty in a different, sadder way. I can't stop thinking about those kids in the camps – 11,000 of them, give or take. Twice the number enrolled in Monroe County public schools. That

we even have such a sentence as *those kids in our prison camps* is appalling. You know they aren't getting baths and clean pajamas every night.

And no doubt there is a stench – not from the kids, of course. The stench is rising from a nation that claims God's favor while doing the devil's bidding. Where a few profit from the torture of children and the rest of us simply stomach it. An abomination, to get biblical about it, no less than the nation described by the prophet Amos in chapter 5. An *abomination: whatever is vile, shameful, detestable; putrid, even. That which God hates for its opposition to God's purposes, which are: justice, of course, and love.*

Abomination is the \$5 word, while *sin* goes for a dime a dozen. *Sin* is the "gift of Adam," Paul calls it, compared to the gift of God in Christ Jesus – kindness, undeserved kindness, un-earnable kindness – for which the only faithful response is acceptance. Acceptance that, if we are willing to imagine it and then exercise the faith to do it, shall have us Living. Like. Kings.

Shall we pray: *We may fantasize about being powerful, O God, even as we decline the power we have in the moments faith is required, in the situations courage is called for. The beginning is to accept our helplessness, our need of you; to receive you as creator, savior, sustainer, of our lives, of our life together, and to let that be enough. Amen.*

Can the gospel really be this simple, friends? That the kindness of God has undone death. And not by accident, nor by the force of our wishing it so, but rather by design. By the design of the divine creator in the reality where we live and move and have our being. The kindness of God – also called grace – is more powerful than sin, more powerful than death, more powerful than the fear of death.

Not only that, according to the Apostle Paul: this kindness of God enables folks who don't especially like each other to be church together. Folks who ordinarily don't get along so well ought to be able to go to church together. He is trying to make a church out of Jews and Gentiles, folks who believed themselves to be so fundamentally different from the other that shared worship and service seem impossible. *We are just too different. "Two churches will be better."*

Lots of folks are okay with that. Not Paul, who naturally assumed also to be speaking for God. Much of Romans is his philosophical argument with their reasons for resisting his theology of the One Church. *They don't know the Law*, apparently one of the Jewish reasons they could not be expected to keep close faith with Gentiles. *How would anyone know when Gentiles are breaking the Law if they never learned the Law itself?* Paul manipulates their question a bit, it seems to me, to make his argument. But not so much that the text misses its mark.

Sin came a long time before the Law, Paul says, going back not to Moses, or back to Abraham this time, but ALL the way back to Adam. Do you know what the name *Adam* means? In rudimentary Hebrew, “*earth.*” *Ground. Dust. Creature made of dust.* A highly embellished meaning is *first of his kind*, which makes me think of Game of Thrones. Nevertheless, at its most literal *Adam* means *dust*.

Do you also know that *Adam* isn’t spoken of in the Torah as an individual person? He’s not a person, a character like Noah or Abraham or Moses. In writings outside the Bible, *Adam* is treated as a representative of humanity – that *first of his kind* usage again.* (*Luke Timothy Johnson, Reading Romans, Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys, 2001, p.92)

Paul, on the other hand, treats *Adam* very much as a person in order to compare him to Christ, who for Paul was as much *the first man* as *Adam*. This stretch of comparison and contrast between *Adam* and *Jesus* can be a little maddening. Paul uses a rhetorical device that is frowned upon in preaching, using a negative example to teach a positive truth – *Jesus did good in exactly the same way Adam did bad* – the way coaches and choir directors show players and singers how NOT to shoot or sing. Paul says, *All people have inherited both men’s bequests*: from *Adam*, sin and death; from *Christ*, life and grace. Both of which are done deals.

By the kindness of the creating God, dust drew breath and lived: *Adam* and *Eve*, born into a sinless, perfect world. Out of the kindness of the same God, they were given everything necessary; destined to live without toil; invited to trust the creator to feed them, rather than feed themselves. They chose toil, rather than trust. Toil unto death. Their children followed suit – unto death. In perpetuity, as it turned out.

Jesus was born and drew first breath in a world polluted with corruption and stained with grief. He reissued the invitation to trust the one who created and had always loved them *wholly, completely*. Sticky. Sweaty. Dirty. Smelly. *Christ* – as much the first of his kind as *Adam* ever was – put to death and risen from dust, *so we will live and rule like kings* (my second favorite phrase of the CEV translation of Romans 5, verse 17).

Other translations use the word *dominion*, not nearly as fun as *live and rule like kings*. Who doesn’t, in their own way, want to be a king? or queen? It is the fundamental plot of our favorite stories: lords and ladies; chosen ones; wizards good and evil; poor boys and princesses; even modern American politics. All of them are the same story – a set of characters vying for *the one throne to rule them all*.

And where our own wishing to be king falls away, we are wishing for the perfect king or queen to take care of us. Candidate season is coming around – something like a hundred and fifty people are running for president – not one of them may suit our fancy, but some part of us, of almost all of us, is ever holding out hope in the idea of the perfect one, that

secret confidence that there is a person, somewhere, about to go public with the exact skill set and personality and spotless record, to fix everything that's broken.

Or maybe it isn't a person we secretly are hoping for, but the safe and stable and prosperous world we think that person is going to create. We may not own that fantasy daily, but it's there. For me it's there. Anybody, amen?

How'd we get so far from where we said we'd started, friends? If where we start is faith in Jesus worked out in our life together? worked out in our study of the scripture? worked out in our everyday communion with the Holy Spirit?

Who's been telling us this story, this fantasy, in such a way that we believe it? That some poor weak and broken fellow or woman, one just as screwed up, overwhelmed, and exhausted as you and me, is going to get us out of a mess we've spent generations working to build?

Because **there** is the sad reality of kings. Kings and queens are people, down to the very last one. They get hungry, angry, lonely, and tired on their good days. On their bad, they take children from their mothers and put them into cages. But kingship has a certain beauty too – in its mythical sense, at least. The mythical king or queen cannot ever be overruled. So he – or she – is never overwhelmed.

Imagine such a power as that, friends. A mythical sense of being king is Paul's suggestion to us for how to think of grace, of what it means that God has been so very kind to us – so very kind to us in Jesus Christ. God's kindness toward us cannot ever be overruled. Not by anything or anyone in this world. Meaning, by faith we've no cause for being overwhelmed!

What if we believed that? believed it heart, mind, soul and strength? Believed that, since God has been so kind to us in Jesus Christ, life is something brand new, where we can do anything on behalf of or in imitation of that kindness and never, ever be afraid? For we've nothing in all the world to lose. Nothing worth keeping, anyway.

To believe such a thing, it seems to me, is going to take lots of prayer. The kind of prayer in which what we ask for is to see and hear and feel and smell God everywhere. In the joyful and the broken. Paul's language may be mythical – calling ourselves kings, for heaven's sake! But Jesus is real, friends, isn't he? Death has been defeated and our destiny has been set down – hasn't it?

The last word on this present reality has been spoken, whatever we choose to do. If to our shame we choose to live only unto ourselves, God's kindness holds. Abomination upon abomination notwithstanding, God's goodness to us holds. God's will shall be done, with us or without us.

Still, I think, kindness is the better course to take, kindness that stays on the move, grace ever shifting between and among us, rushing to the most broken places like all those healing blood cells to a wound. Only, only, only ever, friends, you sweet friends of Jesus, only once we are ready to believe that Jesus loves each of us here and now, without a single thing about us changed or different, will our hearts finally, rightly break for all the hate and the hurt in this land of ours.

Only then will we truly lose our stomach for the hatefulness done to our brothers and our sisters in the name of God. Only then will we rightly raise our voice and find our feet and do as Jesus told us and made us able to do. *Suffer the children to come unto me.* Let us pray the day comes quickly.