

**Sermon**  
**Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene**  
**Sunday, September 18, 2022**  
**10am**

Text: Ephesians 2:1-10 (NRSVUE)

[prayer]

Today we begin our fall worship series, Gifted for More. For the next five weeks we will be focusing on the gifts God has given us to serve the world, both as individuals and as a faith community.

But before we reflect on *our* gifts, we must ground ourselves in *the* Gift – the gift of God's grace in Jesus. And we cannot speak of grace without first acknowledging the reality of sin.

Our series starts with this passage from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. We are going to be hearing a lot from Paul over the next five weeks, and Paul has a lot to say about sin. According to Paul, sin is the great equalizer among people. Regardless of race, gender, class, or status, every person sins and falls short of God's glory (Rom 3:23).

Each of us is created to reflect that glory. We call this reflection the *imago Dei* – the image of God. When I think about the image of God in me, I think of a piece of polished glass, perhaps even stained glass like we have here in our sanctuary and the chapel. The glass is designed to reflect the light of God inside of me. But sin tarnishes the glass, so that the light is dimmed, distorted, even obscured. Sin makes it so we can no longer see ourselves clearly, let alone God. And when we look at our neighbor, we cannot see them clearly, either.

It is only by God's grace that the image of God inside each of us can be redeemed from sin and restored to the glory that God intends. God's grace is like Windex – it wipes away the layers of dirt and grime on our lives. It restores the glass so that the light of God's glory is reflected clearly back upon the world. As individual members of the body, we reflect a beautiful piece of God's glory. And together we form a great prism of colored light that draws the world to God.

Paul's emphasis on our common sinfulness is not intended to make us feel ashamed of ourselves. Instead, our common sinfulness is meant to put us on equal footing with each other. No person is better than another because every person is created in the image of God. We are equal creations, equally beloved before God. And no person is better than another because every person's divine image has been tarnished by sin. We are all equally in need of God's Windex; we are all equally in need of grace.

Paul describes sin as "following the course of the world" – the ways of the world instead of the Way of Jesus. Sin is any belief or behavior that alienates us from God, from others, and from ourselves. That last word, "ourselves," is crucial. You have heard it said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind; and love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:37-39, paraphrased). We have been taught a lot about loving God and our neighbor. Every time we come to the Lord's table we confess how we struggle to live up to this Great Commandment. But I think one of the reasons we struggle to love God and our neighbor is because we have ignored a crucial part of Jesus' commandment. We struggle to love God and our neighbor because we struggle to love ourselves. We do not see the image of God in other people because we barely recognize it in ourselves.

When I was in the second grade, there was another girl in my class who was always picking on me. I had just started taking ballet lessons and I loved to spend the recess breaks practicing my ballet steps on the blacktop. This girl took pleasure in teasing me about my dancing. Children have very little pretense; they know how to cut right to the quick, you know? I would go home and cry to my mom about how mean this girl was being to me.

"Well," my mom said one day. "She must not feel very good about herself if she needs to pick on you."

At eight years old that comment was not much comfort. But now that I am grown and working to master my own insecurities, I am beginning to understand. As the saying goes, "Hurt people hurt people." Whether intentionally or unintentionally, we tend to turn our pain on other people. And at the root of our hurt is always a sense of alienation. Alienation is the original sin. Alienation from God and God's creation as it was intended to be. Alienation from the people around us. And alienation from ourselves. Pride, greed, selfishness, hatred – name your sin and it

is invariably something that cuts you off from the light of God inside you and inside others.

When we begin to think of sin as alienation – the tarnish on our divine image – then we also begin to understand that sin is not simply something God punishes. Sin is something God desires to *heal*. God wants to remove our sin so that His image in each of us can be restored and shine brightly for others to see.

“For you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world...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” (vv. 1-2, 4-5).

“But God.” These are the two words that grace pivots on. “But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love which he loved us...made us alive together with Christ.” God wants to see us fully alive! God has uniquely created each of us in His image to do good works. And He sent His son, Jesus, to do the work of restoring that image in us, so that when we do the good works God has prepared for us, the world will clearly see the glory of God. Jesus overcame the greatest form of alienation there is: the alienation of death. Is he not then also victorious over every other sin that alienates and separates?

One day our bodies will be resurrected from the grave. But even now God’s resurrection power is working on us, raising us up from the living death that is the alienation of sin, gently brushing off the grave dirt that obscures His image in each of us, lovingly applying the Windex of grace to our tarnished spots.

This grace is a gift from God. It cannot be earned through merit or good works. It is an unmerited, unearned outpouring of God’s love upon each one of us, “so that no one may boast” (v. 9). Sin is the great equalizer, but grace is, also.

As I have grown in spiritual maturity, I have come to realize just how much my faith is based in works-righteousness. The Protestant work ethic runs deep and broad in my spirit. Most days I live under the illusion that if I just work harder, if I just work smarter, I will earn the right to be loved. I will earn the right to be loved by others. I will earn the right to be loved by God. And most importantly I will

earn the right to love myself. This is the particular tarnish on *my* divine image and how I experience the pain of alienation.

But when I take the time to listen to God, I hear Him saying the following: “You are gift to the world – not because of who you think you ought to be, but because of who you already are. You are my creation; you bear my light and my glory. You have been redeemed. And my grace is sufficient for every flaw, every shortcoming.”

Every one of us is a gift to the world, redeemed by God’s grace. This is our starting point.

Our ability to recognize ourselves as a gift, and acknowledge that others are a gift, too – this ability only comes to us through grace. We cannot see and appreciate the image of God in ourselves or others without God’s grace restoring that image and giving us the eyes to see it. Our view of God as Gift-giver and Grace-bestower shapes how we see ourselves and each other. We can appreciate and use our gifts when we see the image of God in ourselves. And we can appreciate and accept the gifts of others when we see the image of God in them.

During communion today you will each be invited to take a piece of colored glass. The glass represents the image of God inside of you. I encourage you to place the glass somewhere you will see it every day and be reminded of the light of God that shines through you, and the grace that redeems and restores. At the end of the series, you will bring your piece of glass back to worship and all the pieces will be assembled into a mosaic cross that will hang here in the church.

Next week we will begin to explore the unique gifts that make up the image of God in each of us. I introduced the EveryGift Inventory in this week’s Messenger – if you have not read the article yet, I encourage you to do so and take the inventory, so you have a sense of your gifts as we journey through this series.

But for this week, may it be enough for you to simply rest and abide in these words from the Apostle Paul: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we may walk in them” (vv. 8, 10).

Amen.