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First Presbyterian Church  
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The Heart of the Matter  
Ephesians 2:1-5; Romans 5:6-11

Our world is such a magnificent place. Our family had the good fortune to go to Alaska in early August, a post-bar exam celebration for our son Erik and a post-tuition celebration for Mary Ann and me. We saw the majesty of Mt. McKinley from an airplane, beluga whales romping in Turnagain Arm, south of Anchorage, and a moose which stuck its head out from some bushes when Mark and I jogged past. Fortunately he decided that we weren't edible! We loved the glaciers, the fresh salmon, the pristine streams, and the eagles soaring above Prince William Sound. And we loved being together, cherishing time with our sons. It was a great time!

We are focusing this month on God's surpassing grace. This morning we remember God's grace in creation, how our loving God provided this magnificent world for us, how He enriches our lives through relationships, supplies our needs through His bounty, and fulfills the benediction offered in Genesis 1, "It is all very good."

Our world is wondrous, and so are we human beings. The Psalmist regards us as being just a little lower than the angels, as the pinnacle of God's creation. I've sensed that as I've watched the Olympics. We humans are capable of such love and accomplishment. We marvel at the ability and humility of a Michael Phelps. I was moved by that German weight-lifter quivering as he struggled to lift a massive weight over his head. Then this bear of a man wept as he clutched his gold medal and displayed a picture of his wife, who recently died in an accident. He kept saying, "I did it for her." How much he loved her!

Our most accomplished female hurdler, Lolo Jones, was at times homeless as a child. She spent time living in a church basement in Des Moines, IA. But filled with a competitive fire, she resolved to win a track scholarship. She did, and now here she was in the Olympic final in front of a worldwide audience.

So much about life is wondrous – the beauty of creation, the mystery of human love, the dreams we can fulfill – which makes the brokenness of our world all the more poignant. We see so much that is good, but then we think of the cyclone that swept through Myanmar, and how the authorities blocked aid shipments and rescue attempts, allowing their own citizens to starve or

die of preventable disease. Weeks after the devastation there were areas that still did not have food or clean drinking water.

Or we hear of heartbreaking issues like child pornography or human trafficking, that 27,000,000 men, women or children live in physical or sexual slavery. We know of racial tensions and prejudice. We know of domestic violence, of homes that are battlefields instead of safe havens. The Center for Women in Transition and Safe House, as but two examples, point to broken and hurting lives.

Or we think of a man who has it all, Alex Rodriguez of the New York Yankees. Supremely talented, the leading vote recipient for the All Star Game, the youngest man in history to hit over 500 home runs, the possessor of a \$300,000,000 contract and a \$12,000,000 six bedroom house in Coral Gables, his life is now a mess. While his glamorous wife was home with three-year old Natasha and 2 month old Ella, Alex was seen making late-night trips to the home of Madonna. He's heading for divorce, estrangement from his daughters, and public disgrace. Very tellingly some of his teammates sadly conclude, "He doesn't have any idea who he is."

It's such a contrast – beauty and brokenness, grace and hatred, good and evil. In trying to help us understand this contrast, the Apostle Paul offers a diagnosis, "We are dead in our sins and transgressions." Paul isn't simply trying to offer some ecclesiastical doom and gloom. Some people picture God as a cosmic policeman, who is about as welcome as a state trooper when you're doing 75 in a 35 zone. These people see the Bible as the rules of the road and the church as the traffic court where you hear the verdict and pay your fine.

I heard of a Scottish lad who refused to eat his oatmeal for dinner, so he was sent to bed. A short time later a furious storm broke loose. The wind howled; lightning flashed; deep rumblings of thunder shook the house; sheets of rain beat against the windows. The mother found her son cowering in his bed. Quivering he asked his mother, "Isn't this a lot of fuss for a bowl of oatmeal."

Paul's purpose is not to evoke images of a Jesus who says, "I have come to make your life miserable," instead of "I have come to give you life and life in abundance." Paul's intention is to help us diagnose the brokenness we see around us. He is saying, in part, that some of us see a majestic sunset, the sky tinged with gold and scarlet, and yet give no thought to the Author of that sunset. Some of us can page through the Bible, feeling a bit of intrigue, a hint of curiosity, but then we yawn, seeing no relation between these pages and own lives. Some of us "believe" in God, but live as though He doesn't exist. So we pour their lives into that which has no spiritual value.

Annie Taylor was a 43 year old schoolteacher from Detroit. Widowed and childless, she hungered for fame and fortune. So on October 14th, 1901 she strapped herself into a barrel and plunged over Niagara Falls. She lived. When she recovered from her injuries, she began a lecture tour. Alas, she was so boring that soon no one attended. She died a pauper. Taylor had courage, determination, and commitment. But in terms of her usefulness to God, she was dead. She focused her life on a goal that had no eternal value.

And Paul is also saying, "We cannot save ourselves." A dead person is helpless. A dead person can't raise an arm, take a step, or even breathe. This is the biblical view of human nature. We are dead in our sins. We fall short of God's perfection; we are held captive to our passions and lusts; we are not conformed to the image of Christ. And the outcome is all of the brokenness that we see in our world.

But if this is the diagnosis, what is the treatment? The treatment is the good news of the Gospel. Paul testifies, "As for you, you were dead in your sins. . . but because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead." In a mysterious but wonderful way, Christ, by His indwelling spiritual power, transforms us from spiritual death to spiritual life.

I once made a series of calls on a woman who had spent several weeks in ICU. One day when I stopped at the nurse's station, I was told, "I'm sorry, but Mrs. Smith just passed away." I was stunned. "May I go in to her room to have a prayer." "Of course," the nurse responded. So I slipped into Mrs. Smith's room, touched her lightly on the arm, and prepared to pray. At that point, Mrs. Smith opened her eyes, and said with a hearty voice, "Well, hi Rick!" I jumped a foot in the air. Mrs. Smith continued, "Would you like to sit down?" "I think I will." "Would you care for a drink?" "Yes -- and make it a double!"

Mrs. Smith wasn't raised from the dead. That came when she did die, and was received into her heavenly home. But spiritually when we receive Christ by faith, when we open our hearts to Him, we are transformed from spiritual death to spiritual life. Suddenly we become alive to the things of God.

Being alive to the things of God affects our priorities. The man for whom Fuller Seminary is named, Charles Fuller, wrote to his wife about his conversion on July 16, 1916:

There has been a complete change in my life. Sunday I went to Los

Angeles and heard Paul Rader preach. Never have I heard such a sermon.

Now my life, aims and ambitions are changed. Now my goal is to serve God instead of making more money.

Being alive to the things of God means that we have a new strength to resist temptation. A Welsh coal miner became a Christian around the turn of the century. His friends ridiculed his new-found beliefs. One asked, "Do you believe that Jesus changed water into wine?" "I don't know," replied the miner. "All I know is that, for me, Jesus changed beer into furniture."

Being alive to the things of God means that we see with new eyes. My last two years of college I served as treasurer of my fraternity. About 40 of us contributed \$80/semester for dues. I still remember our fraternity's budget. \$100 went to the Fraternity Council. \$200 went for insurance--broken windows and the like. \$50 went to charity. \$1200 went for bands. And \$1650 went for beer. My Junior year I didn't question those priorities.

But the summer before my Senior year, I discovered new life in Christ. I returned to campus and joined the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. As our mission, we organized a swimming program for handicapped children, helping the children overcome their fear of the water, and to take their first tentative strokes. Within months, all 12 of the children could swim the length of the pool. We finished with a gala celebration. As we celebrated, I remember thinking, "This is so cool!" I found joy not in a raucous party, but in helping others. I now began to see life very differently. I was becoming alive to the things of God!

Hear again Paul's diagnosis: Without Christ, we are dead in our sins! But with Christ, we are made alive --spiritually alive. When we live in Christ, we begin to evaluate our values, priorities and lifestyle. We begin to see the world through new eyes. And what is the proof that the treatment has been successful? We do good! "We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works."

We're tempted to think today, "What difference can I make?" The world is so vast; the needs so pervasive; we struggle to keep our own lives together, let alone to help others. But listen to Paul's reassurance. He insists: we are God's "workmanship." In Greek that word is *poiema*, from which we get the word "poem." But the word means more than a poem, it means a work of art, a masterpiece, something of ingenious creativity. We are the pinnacle of God's creation.

Our world is filled with beauty. Annie Dillard tells of looking at a tree in autumn, truly looking, and realizing that "each cell buzzed with flame." She said she was "knocked breathless," and her heart went up in wonder to God. Yet a tree is not the pinnacle of God's creation.

Our family loved seeing glaciers, snow capped mountains, and bear cubs in the Anchorage zoo frolicking with one another. But none of these are the pinnacle of God's creation. We are the pinnacle of God's creation.

Think of a newborn baby, eyes open in wonder, arms reaching out for life, absorbing every sound, sight, and touch. And think of what that child can become. She can grow to write books, to solve complex mathematical formulas, to herself give birth. She is an unrepeatable miracle of God's great. We are each masterpieces, so St. Augustine wrote,

Men go abroad to wonder at the height of mountains, at the huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of the rivers, at the vast compass of the seasons, at the circular motion of the stars; and they pass by themselves without wondering.

We are God's masterpieces, called to do His work. So we love; we serve; we forgive; we work for reconciliation; we comfort; we pray; we remember that a small deed done is better than a large deed left undone. Each day we arise asking, "Lord, how can I best serve you today?" We heed the promptings of the Spirit, having confidence that as "works of art," we will make a difference. In so doing, our world will find life.

There is so much good and wonder around us; there is so much that is wrong. The summons Christ gives us is to share the good, to let Him help us become new, alive to the things of God, alive to how He is seeking to redeem our world. He summons us to join this work of redemption in every sphere of our lives. He calls us to make a difference, for His glory. Yes, we are dead in our sins and transgressions, but by grace, His Spirit is at work within us. So let's respond to God's grace by doing good – each and every day! Amen.