

Wild, Precious Forgiveness  
May 15, 2022

Those of you making Profession of Faith this morning may not know this, but back in the day – like when I was in high school, many, many years ago – it was all the rage to include a clever or inspiring signature line at the end of emails. You know, that line at the bottom of emails, usually in a faded grey font, that just magically appears in each email you send – you don't have to manually type it out each. Most people now just use that spot to include their contact information. But it used to be more common to see quotes there, or jokes, or elongated descriptions of the sender.

And my very clever, deep, meaningful, signature when I was 17 years old was a line from the clever, deep, meaningful movie, *The Dead Poets Society*. Specifically this line from Professor Keating, who quotes a Walt Whitman poem to his students: “That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse. What will your verse be?”

Another popular email signature I've seen is a line from a Mary Oliver poem: “Tell me what it is you plan to do with your one wild and precious life.”

Both quotes ask roughly the same question. You have this one life, this one chance, to contribute, to add something to the world, to do something lovely, and wonderful, and good? What will that thing be?

This was the question I was asked, along with every other college student at Calvin University, at the beginning of my university experience. As we talked about this idea of our vocation, and our calling, and our purpose in the world, we heard over and over again this quote from Frederick Buechner: “Your vocation is where the world's great need and your great passion meet.” Off we went into our four

years of education to discover just where that meeting point would be. To figure out what we would do with our one wild and precious life. What verse we would contribute to the play.

And that's not a bad endeavour. They're all good questions to contemplate.

But these questions come with an awful lot of pressure.

What if, when scanning the horizon of my life, I miss the glowing dot where my great passion and the world's great need meet, and I head off in the wrong direction?

What if I don't contribute anything particularly meaningful? How will I *know* if my contribution is meaningful?

And what *will* I do with this one wild and precious life? What if I wake up one day to find it's slipped by?

What if I fail at all these things? What if I fail Professor Keating, and Mary Oliver, and my college professors?

What if I fail the people who have loved me and invested me?

What if I fail myself?

What if I fail God?

That last question...I think it's a worry, an anxiety, that sits with us rather a lot. Not just about our vocation or purpose in life, but as we think about the whole of our lives.

What if I fail God?

Because...I do. I do fail God. All the time.

I fail him when I don't listen to what he's saying to me.

I fail him with my unkind words, and unkinde thoughts.

I fail him with my stubborn pride and insistence that I know best.

I fail him with my “meh” attitude towards spending time in his Word and in prayer.

I fail God all the time. I fail others all the time.

My one wild and precious life is filled with a whole lot of stumbling and missteps and wrong doing. I’m not sure my contribution is worth all that much, when I really think about it.

And if you’re like me, that thought weighs pretty heavily.

We don’t measure up. We have failed, and keep on failing. To quote the apostle Paul in Romans 7 – we keep doing the things we don’t want to do, and don’t do the things we do want to do.

When God looks at this one wild and precious life he gave us, he must just shake his head and sigh.

If the story was about us, and all the ways we mess up, and aren’t obedient, and disobey the commandments on a daily basis, it’s that sigh that we’d expect to follow the “therefore” at the beginning of Romans 8.

Therefore, God heaved a great sigh of lament. Therefore, God wept. Therefore, those people have absolutely zero hope of God ever loving them.

But that’s not how verse 1 reads.

Because this story isn’t, first and foremost about us. And what we have or haven’t done.

It’s about God.

And what he definitely, decisively, did.

“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering.”

For a long, long time, God’s law – the 10 commandments, the books of Moses, the Torah, everything God had told his people about how to live – were held up to them as a standard, a measuring stick, the thing they needed to follow to be right with God.

And for a long, long time, God’s people failed to live up to the requirements of the law. And the law itself couldn’t save them, it couldn’t make them right with God, it couldn’t make people follow the law. All the law could do was convict God’s people of their sin, remind them of their guilt, of how far they had to go.

And so Paul calls it the law of sin and death – not that the law is sinful, but that it is the law that shows us how broken our lives are. Just like a Mary Oliver quote about a wild and precious life, beautiful as it may be, can make us feel as though we can never quite live up to that Mary Oliver quote.

And again, that’s where God could have left us. Struggling to keep up, to be good, to be obedient, and failing, constantly, dragged down by our sin and then even worse off as we carry the weight of the guilt of our sin.

But he didn’t. He set us free.

He set us free by sending his own Son into the world to become like us – bearing the likeness of sinful flesh. Not sinful himself, but human like us, bearing our humanity, a humanity that in us is all too often corrupted by sin. And this Son – Jesus - came to be a sin offering. In the

temple worship of the Old Testament, the sin offering was given to atone especially for “unwilling sins” – for those things that Paul alluded to in chapter 7, that which we do not want to do, but do anyway, all the things we know are wrong, the things that make us aware of our failures. The people would have to make these sin offerings regularly, to atone for all that they had done or not done, to make themselves right with God, over and over again.

But Jesus was a sin offering just the once. Jesus took all those sins upon himself, and God judged those sins, condemned *our* sins, in Jesus. Just once, but with eternal results. Which means that for those who are *in* Christ Jesus, there is now no condemnation.

The big theological term for this is justification. We have been made right with God.

The Heidelberg Catechism answers the question, “What do you believe concerning the forgiveness of sins” by saying “I believe that God, because of Christ’s satisfaction, will no longer remember any of my sins or my sinful nature which I need to struggle against all my life. Rather, by grace God grants me the righteousness of Christ to free me forever from judgment.”

We have been set free from the burden of our guilt, from the fear that we can never measure up, can never do everything we’re supposed to, from the shame of tripping up and making mistakes and failing God and each other and ourselves over and over again.

We have been forgiven.

And then...Romans 8 continues, and we hit verse 4, and we get a little confused.

“And so Jesus condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but to the Spirit.”

Hold up, Paul. Didn't you just say that the law cannot be fully met in us? That we can't keep the law? Isn't this exactly what we've been set free from?

Well he said we can't uphold the law in ourselves, in our human flesh, captive as we are to the ways of sin.

But those who are in Christ no longer live according to the ways of the flesh, our sinful humanity.

For if we are in Christ, we have been given the Spirit, his Spirit, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of life, the Spirit of power, the Spirit of conviction, the Spirit that does in us what we cannot do ourselves.

We cannot keep the law.

But the Spirit can.

The Spirit empowers us to obey the law, equips us to keep the law, softens our hearts so that we desire to follow the law.

And this, ultimately, is the purpose of Christ's sacrifice for us. He died and rose again not just to save us from our sins, but to make it possible for us to live lives that glorify God.

Christ died that we might be sanctified. Another big theological word, that simply means to become holier. To grow in obedience to God, to grow in faith, to live, more and more, the life that he, through his law, has called us to, for it is a good life, a whole life, a beautiful life.

To live in obedience to the law is not what saves us, but we are saved to live in obedience to the law.

To live in obedience to the law is not the *ground* of our justification, says John Stott, but the fruit of it.

We are not slaves to the law, but in Christ, we are free to keep the law.

And so perhaps the better question is, “What is it you plan to do with this one wild and precious forgiveness?”

What is it you plan to do, not to earn salvation, but because you have received salvation?

What is it you plan to do, not out of guilt or fear, but out of gratitude?

What is it you plan to do, not by struggling to prove your own power, but in surrender to the life-giving power of the Spirit?

What do you plan to do now that you are free from condemnation?

This past Monday, 45 students received bachelor’s degrees from Calvin University. Students from the graduating classes of 2020, 2021, and 2022, all celebrating together due to delayed celebrations the last few years.

These students have spent the last four years in classes, wondering about their vocation, about their calling, about what they will do with their one wild and precious life.

But these students, perhaps more than most students at Calvin University, have thought about this question in terms of what they will do with their one wild and precious forgiveness.

Because this graduation ceremony took place behind prison walls, at Handlon Correctional Facility in Ionia, Michigan. Most of the graduates of these three classes will spend the rest of their lives in prison. But those lives will be radically different now, even if the day to day routine and the scenery stays the same. These lives have been changed by the truth of the gospel.

In 2016 I had the privilege of attending the commencement ceremony at the end of the first year of this program. In that ceremony one student showed a powerpoint presentation he had made in class. It depicted the other students in the program, one by one – their mug shot, and then a picture of them with their families, or enjoying life before entering prison.

At the end was this statement:

“For so long we have been defined by the worst thing we have done.

We are called Murderer. Abuser. Thief.

But now we are defined by gospel.

Now we are called “Child of God.”

“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

Some of these students have since been released from prison, and have found jobs working for renewal in the same areas where they once caused harm. Other students will remain within prison walls, transforming the culture within the prison system, one person at a time.

Behind prison walls, but set free.

Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious forgiveness?

Would you pray with me?

And so, Lord God, we thank you that we have been forgiven.

We stand in humbled awe at the lengths you went to to restore us to right relationship with you, giving your own Son to die on our behalf.

And we pray now that we might not take this forgiveness, this freedom,

for granted. But would live in grateful obedience, bringing honor and glory and praise to the one who set us free.

May we live by grace, and grace alone.

We pray this in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ,

Amen.