

Life Sunday Sermon 2016

Ephesians 2:1-10; Mark 12:28-34; Isaiah 43:1-3 “A New Heart, A New Life”

Rev. Paul J. Frank, Hosanna Lutheran Church and School (LCMS), Mesa, Arizona

www.lutheransforlife.org

Imagine for a moment, standing right here: Amy. She's 21 years old, a senior in college. The future she thought was about to come to be has changed. Amy grew up without a word of encouragement. She never felt valued nor deeply loved, just tolerated and taught. It's not that her family hadn't loved her, they just never really said they did, didn't show they did. Life was mechanical for them. Say “please” and “thank you,” get good grades, be ... helpful, and that's all there really is to life. So, throughout her days in college, Amy has searched for a sense of value and validation through casual dating, catching the attention of, being wanted by any young man she'd meet in the bar. And it's happened again. Another night of bad decisions. She knew it was wrong, it was a mistake, and there are always regrets and guilt, but now, this time, there will be a baby.

She briefly thinks of an abortion—but her childhood connection to God's church and Word still give Him a voice in her heart so she dismisses the thought. But she is racked with guilt, regret, and fear. What will her parents think? What will her friends think? The child's father? What does God think? Has she messed up too much? Will He still value her? She's about to go home and break this news. She's a young woman in need of grace.

Over here, picture Steven. He stands at the back of a church and wonders how his life came to be what it is. He spent twenty plus years chasing after what he thought he wanted most of all—the high-figure salary and the power and influence—climbing the corporate ladder and all that goes with it. Now he has it and yet he's discovered that what he really wants is what he sacrificed for the illusion. It all comes clear when he stands at the back of the church watching another father walking his daughter down an aisle to give her hand to a young man he doesn't even know. He missed every first day of school, every Girl Scout meeting, every tea party, and

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every softball game. He missed the heartaches and the growing pains, the first date and the prom date. He left them behind when he was too busy chasing after HIS heart's desires, too busy to see what his heart really should have desired. He wondered if she can forgive him, and if God might still want him. Three marriages later, watching his child's wedding from the back row, the spectator's row, the guilt and sorrow and regrets all swirl around. He is a man in need of grace.

Over here, picture Margaret. She's alone now, at least she feels that way. Illness took her husband away a few years ago, and she's never come to terms with her new situation. She wants to blame God, cry out to God, or even lean into God—but instead she just feels numb. The friends they had together don't seem to be there anymore. The kids have all moved around the country. She doesn't want to burden them by moving in or even moving near. She feels like a fifth wheel at the card games and date nights. So she stays at home and watches TV. Loneliness has become the weight she can't carry around any longer. She wonders if God sees her, loves her, holds on to her still. She's a woman in need of grace.

Picture Christopher. He is in his second year of high school—and he hates most of his life. He suffers from depression. He feels awkward and geeky, blocked out of the “in” crowd. He's a computer whiz, with too much acne and teeth a little too big for his head. His friends are found on the other end of cell phones and Xbox games. He never learned social skills. He can't talk to girls. He's an introvert, afraid to say “hi” to almost anyone. His family assures him that he'll mature and grow and things are better in college for most people—they say. But he'd give anything to simply hang out with the so called “cool kids” for a while. He feels invisible. He wonders if the world knows he's here and if God can even see him at all. He's a young man in need of grace.

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Wasted years, bad decisions, broken hearts, and broken spirits. We all find ourselves in a mix of emotions in the various trials and seasons of life—and God answers all our needs with grace. We might question our own worth in the world, but God answers our questions through grace. We talk a lot about grace in the church and in our lives. We say grace before a meal. We enjoy a grace period from the bank. Dancers are graceful. Donors are gracious. We love the way the promise of grace fills the right verse in a hymn. I begin every sermon by offering, “Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” But do you know the fullness of God’s grace? Can you explain to the non-Christian friend what we mean when we talk about grace? Do we really grasp the magnitude of God’s gift of grace? You see, grace is what grabs hold of you. It shakes you around and wakes you up in your very soul. Grace transforms your very life. It re-shapes you, re-makes you, re-forms you into the likeness of Christ. By grace, God gives you a new heart.

A few years ago there was a young man named Chandler. His heart was broken—I mean, it was physically broken. He was a young man with what seemed to be a lot of life still ahead, but his heart was broken. He was weak and fading, unable to live the life he dreamed of and, well, without a new heart he wouldn’t live too much longer at all. You and I had the same sort of need in a spiritual sense. We were in need of a new heart. We needed God’s heart or we wouldn’t really be able to live. We couldn’t live the life God had in mind for us.

As it turned out, Chandler received a new heart; in fact, he received Lauren’s heart. Lauren and her family were a part of the church family in a small town in western Iowa. She was seventeen and full of life. Her mom, Mary, led the youth group. Her dad, Rob, was head elder. Lauren was pretty regular in church attendance, and a bit of a wild child, energetic, hard-headed,

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outgoing, faithful, and challenging—exploring all the possibilities life held in store for her. She loved country music and goofing off and hanging out with her friends. There was so much life ahead for Lauren.

But, sometimes, we’re reminded how fragile these bodies really are. The car she was driving was hit by a drunk driver. Lauren suffered a major head injury. The helicopter got her to the hospital. Surgeries were tried. Prayers were said. Lauren spent eight days in a coma, her family at her bedside, her friends in sorrow. Finally, the tough decision had to be made. “Do we suspend life support?” they asked. “What does the church think of organ donation?” God gave us all the words to share in answer to those questions. And then He created some good from such a tragic moment. God still brought life.

How deeply did God value her life? He loved her so deeply that, centuries before, He had entrusted His own Son to the care of another young woman named Mary. God so loved Lauren that He gave His Son Jesus to live and die and rise again for her—and for you –and for Amy and Steven and Margaret and Christopher. God loves us all so deeply that He gave us Jesus who redeemed us and made us His own.

God loves Chandler, the young man in need of a new heart. God loves Chandler through Christ his Savior. God loves Chandler through a tough decision Lauren’s parents, Mary and Rob, had to make. They didn’t know who might receive the gift of a new lease on life when they made that hard decision to donate her organs so others might live. But as it turned out, Chandler received Lauren’s heart, a young, strong, life-giving heart. And eventually, when their hearts were ready, they sought Chandler out, he sought them, and when they finally met, Mary and Rob got to hear the sound of their child’s heart still beating and giving life.

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Doesn't God the Father do the same? You see, God knew we were in need of new life.

We needed a new heart. That's what grace does. It is by God's grace that you have been saved. It is by God's grace that you're made new. It is by God's grace that you've been given new life. In fact, God had promised that new lease on life some 700-plus years before He fulfilled that promise. He spoke through His prophet Isaiah saying, “He who created you, O Jacob, He who formed you, O Israel: ‘Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine ... I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior’” (1b, 3b ESV).

God created you in the womb. He formed your very being. He called you by name for His great plans. He made your life new through the Holy One of Israel. God gave you a new heart through Christ. God has loved you so deeply—and He gives you the gift of life so deeply—that He gave you the heart of Christ. HIS heart beats within you. THAT is God's gift of Grace.

Amy is terrified of what the world will think, what her future now holds. She bears the weight of regret, guilt, and fear. But by God's grace she's still saved. God still loves her AND her child. He created them, redeemed them, and He calls them both into the life He will guide them through.

Steven can't bear what he's done with his life—what he did, and didn't do, for his family. He needs a new start, a new set of priorities, a new discovery of the power of love. By God's grace he's been saved. By God's grace he is being transformed. He is created, redeemed, and called to live with a new heart beating for Christ.

Margret needs to know she's still loved. She needs friends and family and people around, and she needs to know God's still with her. By grace she is saved. By grace she's been created, redeemed, and called to live in His peace beyond all understanding.

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Christopher needs to know that he's valued and blessed, that he's a beloved treasure of God. By grace he is saved. By God's grace he is loved, created, redeemed and called to live in the light of Christ his Savior.

And so are you. You might think you've made mistakes that can't be forgiven, you've been broken beyond repair, you've been lost in the eyes of the world. But God has loved you so deeply that He created you, He redeemed you, and He called you to new life through that same Holy One of Israel. Live this new life of faith to the glory of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, today and forever, Amen.