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EPHESIANS 2: 4-10

“BUT GOD.....”

We all sometimes get involved in long conversations where it's hard to pay attention to everything the other person is saying. In those cases, here's something that might help---- if your attention is drifting away as the other person talks and talks, get the habit of at least paying close attention whenever the word “but” is used. Because whatever comes right after the word “but” is often the most important part of what someone says.

Let me give you a few examples..... We've all heard (and probably from our own lips sometimes) statements like the following, where what comes after “but” is what's most important in a conversation----

----“Oh, I'd love to help with that, *but*....”

----“He's such a nice fellow, *but*.....”

----“Well, I don't like to gossip, *but*.....”

----“I hate to disagree with you, *but*....”

Whatever comes after the word “but” is going to give you the real story!

Sometimes it's the same way in the Bible when the English translations use the word “but”. Some key scriptural statements come right after “but”.

Today's epistle reading from chapter 2 of the Holy Apostle Paul's epistle to the Ephesians is an example of that. Our assigned reading this morning, which we just heard a few minutes ago, is verses 4-10. But just before those verses, St. Paul talks about how we followers of Christ used to live in sin.... Quoting verse 3---“Among these we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.” St. Paul says in that verse that sinners are “children of wrath”---on the way to hell because of their sins.

Then, after saying in verse 3 that we deserve damnation and punishment, the Apostle goes on in verse 4-6, the first assigned verses for today, to say this.....”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 (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and made us sit with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus...”

St. Paul's point here is this----- We were lost in sin, BUT God helped us. We deserved hell, BUT instead God has raised us to the “heavenly places”.

----But God loves us even though we don't deserve it.

---But God sent His Son to save us.

----But God forgives us.

---But God has raised us up with Christ.

So the message of this first part of the second chapter of Ephesians is that we are sinners and deserve damnation, BUT God hasn't given up on us.

What lies behind this? God's great love for us. Before we loved God, He already loved us. St. John said this most clearly in I John 4:10 (and notice he uses that little word, "but")----"This is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us."

Our human race was made by God long ago. Then we rebelled, disobeyed, and turned against Him. In essence, we spat in our own Father's face. So did He wipe us out for doing that? No, because He is the perfect Father. He kept right on loving us. And He sent His Son, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, down to our world to find us and bring us back to Him.

There was a young woman named Christina who grew up in a very devout and loving family. But she rebelled against her parents and at about age 18 ran away to the big city not too far away. There she went downhill pretty quickly and ended up as a prostitute before too long. She cut off all contact with her parents but they heard some sad reports about her. The mother decided to go and find Christina. The mother had many little posters made that showed her own picture. Underneath the picture were the words: "Dear Christina---It doesn't matter what you have done. I love you and I want you to come home. Love, Mom." The mother couldn't find Christina in the city but she put up the little posters all over the place. Then she went back home praying for the best..... For several days, Christina kept running into that picture and message from her mother wherever she went around town. Finally, she broke down. She realized how much her parents loved her. She went home and was reconciled with them and all was well. (in "Great Stories", Vol. 5, No. 19, p. 6)

Our race, like Christina, took a very bad turn long ago. We turned against God. We ran away from Him. In Christ, God came looking for us, like Christina's mother came looking for her. One of our hymns for Holy Saturday poetically describes Christ's great love and great desire to "find us." It speaks of how He came to the world to find His child, Adam, who had turned against Him long ago. He couldn't find Adam anywhere and then was told Adam was in hell. So, on Holy Saturday, Christ went even to hell to find His beloved son, Adam, and to bring him home.

And it wasn't just Adam that God's Son came searching for. It was all of us. He didn't have to do that. He didn't have to come to our world and be born as one of us to find us. He didn't have to die on a cross to find us. He could have just let us all go to hell. But God..... But God loved us too much to do that. So He came down to bring us back up to Him.

So how should we respond to all the love God has for us? We should thank Him every day. And we should live totally for Him every day, loving Him back in return for all of His love for us.

And we should trust Him. Sometimes that's the hardest thing. Especially if we're going through a tough time..... If we remember how much He loves us, then we should trust Him to keep loving us. We should trust Him to do what is best for us, to never leave us, to always be working for good in our lives.

But sometimes trusting is very tough. When we are sick, stressed, dying (or watching a loved one fade away from this world), depressed, worried about things---well, some days it may be everything seems hopeless.....BUT God..... But God still loves us and is still in control, even if we can't see how.

In the town of Cifu, Japan they have a unique way of fishing. The professional fishermen go out on the river at night in boats with a fire in a cage burning on each boat. The light of the fires attracts the fish to swim near the surface of the water. The fishermen have a cormorant (a large water bird if you're not familiar with them) attached to their wrist with a cord tied to a metal ring around the bird's neck. Like a leash on a dog. The fishermen lets the cormorant fly out from the boat, attached to the cord, to go out on the river and dip into the water and grab a fish. Cormorants love fish, so the bird tries to swallow it. But the metal ring around the bird's neck is just tight enough that the fish won't go down the bird's throat---so it stays in the beak. Then the fisherman pulls the bird back to the boat. The bird spits out the fish for the fisherman to have and the fisherman rewards the bird by giving him a smaller fish to eat---one that will fit down his throat even with the ring around it. Then the fisherman sends the bird out again to get another fish, then it comes back for the reward, and on and on it goes. Everyone is happy, except for the fish.

An amazing process! But what is most amazing is something else. Some of the fishermen, at least the "rookies", just do this with one bird. But some of the experienced men have learned how to do much more. The very best fishermen handle 12 birds simultaneously! Birds, cords, big fish, little fish---all sounds chaotic but they can handle 12 birds all at once without getting everything tangled up! (Judah's Later History, Adult Teachers' Guide, David C. Cook Publishers, Summer, 1980, p. 70)

Sometimes our lives get so crazy we might feel we're in a boat on the river at Cifu---craziness and disorder! Out of control. But God is the one holding the cords of our lives. He has it all under control. He is working out His divine plan for each of us. He won't let us go or get us tangled. He loves us too much.

We don't deserve such love and such help. Our sinfulness deserves punishment and damnation. But as St. Paul said in today's epistle reading---"*But God....*" We are sinners, *but* God still loves us. Sometimes it seems like all is going wrong, *but* God will take care of us. Sometimes we doubt and we struggle, *but* God stays with us through our doubts and struggles.

Let us thank Him for His great love for us. In gratitude, let us love Him and live for Him. And let us trust Him, trust Him to always love us and help us.

