*Shades of Gray*

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When I was young, there was only one other house visible from my house. This was the farm house owned by my grandparents. It was about a quarter mile away. Both houses sat in the middle of about 80 acres of fields. To the east and west there were “wind rows” of trees separating other fields. To the south a road divided us from a stretch of river bottom fields and woods. To the north was woods which stretched for 3 or 4 miles, bisected by a rail line.

Now this was by no stretch of the imagination wilderness. My uncle’s house was a mile away and within 2 or 3 miles there were three other farms. But to a five-year-old, the 330 acres that remained of the family farm with its fields, woods, and river were a vast country. My cousins and I roamed this “kingdom” at will having many adventures. Our only restriction was the unbreakable rule that we be home before dark.

One game we often played was a form of hide and seek. Unlike regular hide and seek where one person seeks to find the others, this involved a team of people trying to run the one who was It to ground. If you were It, the longer you remained on the loose the greater your prestige. Now, as you can imagine, finding a child in this vastness was quite a challenge for the hunters, especially if the one hiding was very clever.

Late one summer afternoon the game was afoot, I was It and I had the perfect place to hide. In the woods, there was a large patch of greenbrier that looked impenetrable. But on a solo expedition, I had found that with care one could crawl to the center of the patch and be virtually invisible. It was to this place I went with the anticipation of completely outwitting my cousins. To my delight, seekers passed by three times with no idea I was within a few feet of them.

As time passed by, I grew bored and lulled by the heat of the day fell asleep. Sometime later I awoke to the pitch-black world of a moonless night. With great confidence I evaluated my situation and was terrified. The world in which I played daily now seemed a dark and dangerous place filled with threat and I was alone. I don’t know how long I sat in that briar patch until I heard someone calling my name in the distance. Soon I saw some lights moving in the woods. I had been found!

When I had not returned by night fall, my cousins were questioned, and a search was organized. First one uncle, then my father, and my other uncle were with me. The menace of that dark night evaporated with the light of flashlights and presence of my family. I did not get punished for breaking curfew, but for many nights after that, my father took me for walks in the dark. I learned how to move through a dark wood without a light and learned to separate the real dangers of the dark from those of my imagination.

Have you ever been somewhere where there was no light or so little light that you couldn’t distinguish anything around you? Even if you were standing in a room in your own home where you knew everything that was around you, did the darkness “feel” different? Was it even foreboding? Given the choice of walking a mile in the light or the dark which would you choose? Light reveals things, darkness hides them.

Our text today comes from the gospel of John and typical of John’s writing, it is heavy with theology. A case can be made that the Bible stories we all know and remember come from the synoptics (Matthew, Mark, Luke) while our theology comes from John. Today’s text is particularly dense, covering in seven verses sin, salvation, judgment, Jesus mission in the world, why Jesus needed to be crucified, and the human condition. Today, we’re going to talk about John’s metaphor of light and dark as representing good and evil and the implications for our own lives.

God the Father has sent the Son into the world so that through Him the world will be saved and all who believe in Him may have eternal life. Jesus, the incarnate Son, is the “light” of the world drawing all who believe in him unto himself. We are told that those who “believe” are not condemned but those who do not “believe” are condemned already. It would seem that eternal life is for some, not all. But on what basis are these unbelievers condemned?

We go on to see that those who do evil hate the light and do not seek the light. They prefer the darkness where their evil deeds may be hidden from sight. These will not come to the light. They are unbelievers. Those who do “what is true” (good) seek the light of God so that it may be seen by all that they do what God desires. They are the believers. So is it belief or lack of belief that decides someone’s salvation. Are we saved by works? The answer, in a word, is no!

As Reformed Christians we believe in *sola gratia* (by faith alone). In our first reading from Ephesians, we heard “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God not the result of works…”. (Eph. 2:8-9 NRSV) God alone decides the ultimate fate of every living person. When, where, and why this decision was made is not for us to know. This is the doctrine of predestination.

Are we then predestined to do good works without any choice on our part? Our Ephesians reading says, “For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” (Eph. 2:10 NRSV) While God decided that our way of life would be to do good deeds, there does seem to be room for free will. You can’t help but want to do good deeds, but your free will allows to decide not to or even to do something evil. Such is the state of humanity, created for good by God yet capable of being tempted by sin to do evil.

Fine, where does all of this leave us? We started out talking about dark and light, as if life could be neatly sorted into two containers, people who do evil and seek the dark and people who do good and seek the light. But then we threw in free will and if we season it with a human proclivity for sinfulness, well two containers don’t work. We find ourselves in a place of shadows. Looking in one direction we see nothing but darkness. Looking the other way, we see a tremendous bright light. Between us and the dark or the light stretches a vast gray area.

This is our life, lived in shades of gray. When we surrender to the God-given good within us, we move ever closer to the Light of the Lord. When we surrender to the temptation of sin, we slink back into the shadows toward the darkness. But the good news is we are not the ball in a ping pong match. Our fate is not determined by two uncaring opponents. Our fate has already been determined by God and we are saved. We need only concern ourselves with doing what is good, with moving always toward the light.

People say, “It is so hard to always be good and know what to do.” Why? God made us to be good and he has told us what to do. “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Mic. 6:8 NRSV)” Being good is easy, resisting sin’s temptation is the hard work. But if we always try do good, then we are less likely to be tempted by sin.

In the words of the Indian mystic and sage Meher Baba, “Don’t worry be happy.” We are the beloved children of God Almighty who has already granted us eternal life. He is the same God who created us to do good works. He is the same God who dwells among us now guiding, comforting and sustaining us. Seek the Word of God and your questions will be answered.