Please pray with me as I paraphrase Paul's prayer that you just heard. 

“As we approach you in prayer, O God, pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.” Amen.

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Paul's prayer is my prayer as I stand before you this morning speaking with boldness about one aspect of belief which is not shared by all Christians …in fact some might say it is heretical. The good news that I want to proclaim to you this morning is that we…you and I…and all of God's children are created good, not created sinful.

Now this basic existential theological question may never have been an issue for some of you, but having been “born and bred” in the Presbyterian Church, having attended a Presbyterian Seminary, and then serving as an ordained Presbyterian pastor for over 20 years, I have been steeped in the belief in the overarching sinfulness of humankind.

Beginning with Augustine’s doctrine of Original Sin, our forebears, including our own John Calvin, preached that sinfulness (beginning with Eve and Adam) is the root of our human condition. But throughout my ministry, I haven’t felt comfortable with this doctrine, and I want to suggest another way to look at who we are as human beings…one that also originated long ago with other theologians…whose beliefs emphasize Original Goodness rather than Original Sin.

If I were to write my own systematic theology, I would start with Genesis…parts of which you heard this morning. As God created everything…including man and woman…God saw that it was good…that it was even “very” good. Because we believe that God is good, we…created in the image of God…are also, by nature, good. But, because we are created in the image of God, and are not God, we are not perfect. We are finite, imperfect beings living in a less than perfect world. Therefore, we are subject to multiple forces that separate us from our Creator and each other. And because we are created with free will…we have the freedom to make choices…some good…and some bad.

So…just because I believe in Original Goodness doesn’t mean that I don’t believe in the reality of sin. I do. In fact, as a child, I had to memorize the Child’s Catechism…a shorter version of the Westminster Catechism. To the question: “What is sin?” I dutifully responded, “Sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God.” The reason this sounds “rote” to you is because that is the way I memorized it…not really knowing what the words meant. Now, if I said, “Sin is not conforming to or actually going against the law of God” you would better understand the intended answer and perhaps agree with it.
So…not only do I believe in the existence of sin, I believe it is so strong and so pervasive that it can threaten to cover over our innate goodness. You know…something like barnacles on the bottom of a boat.

Those of you who enjoy boating are familiar with those pesky crustaceans. If you happen to keep your boat in the water most of the time, then you know how barnacles make scraping the bottom a tiresome, arduous chore. Barnacles look like small clumps of clay shells…innocuous and lifeless. But they are really live organisms that, when placed underwater, open to feed on particles of calcium carbonate increasing the size of their inner cavity…expanding and multiplying. Barnacles have both male and female organs, but they don’t reproduce themselves. The eggs must be cross-fertilized by another androgynous barnacle. Therefore, living in community is necessary for their survival. And, having an affinity for settling in areas previously occupied by other barnacles, older barnacles attract the young to the same areas, thus perpetuating their species.¹

Now, even though I am comparing barnacles to sin, we must remember that these crustaceans are a part of God’s good and creative creation! They are not themselves sinful. In fact they are living out their part in God’s wonderfully crafted ecology. But we can learn from them in examining their rich inter-relatedness. I can imagine sin clinging to us just like those barnacles cling to the surface of a boat or a dock, and feeding on all kinds of particles surrounding us, growing and multiplying, threatening to snuff out our goodness within. Sin…like barnacles…also flourishes in communities of like-minded sinners, breeding through cross-fertilization…the older preying on the freshness…the innocence…of the young. Sin, like barnacles, abounds!

Some barnacles we invite in…some are given by individuals or families…and some are thrust upon us collectively through social, political, and even ecclesiastical systems. And they are not always visible. Barnacles can collect and grow on the soul, corrupting self and others quietly…often with a cloak of goodness. They can turn successful financiers into greedy executives, faithful followers into zealots, or visionary politicians into puppets of powerful lobbyists.

That’s the bad news. But the good news is that through the gift of choice…given by our Creator…barnacles can be removed! We don’t have to allow them to rule our lives, nor blame them for ruining our lives. And once removed, the surface can then be prepared to repel them by using something like an anti-fouling paint. Isn’t that a wonderful image…to have a substance to help keep away those foul particles of sin that threaten our goodness!

How can we do this? Well…first we have to want to…we have to make the choice to remove them. We need to look deep within and discover the goodness that is there and see how barnacles…our sin…are distorting the good person God originally created each of us to be. Often during our times of worshipping together…especially sharing communion…we are encouraged to look within our sinful self and contemplate how we can change. But think about it…how many of us are motivated to explore our inner souls if we have been taught that deep inside we are basically sinful? And more importantly, if we truly believe that we are all bound up in original sin…then that influences the way we view the person
sitting next to us in the pew...or our neighbor next door...or the stranger at our gate.

Consider this. If I think that you are basically sinful, then you become less valuable, more expendable. Why should I worry about your welfare if you are just another rotten person like I am? I may even want to get rid of you if I think you are more evil than I am...and I may even believe that's what God wants me to do.

But... if I believe that you are essentially good, just as I am, then we can see each other as valuable persons...with intrinsic worth...and may then be more motivated to work together toward a common good. Yes, we all have our share of barnacles, but, because we are created in the image of God, those barnacles don't have to snuff out the original goodness of each individual.

Look at the person of Jesus of Nazareth. We have been taught that he was fully human as well as truly divine. In Hebrews we are told that being human, he was “tested as we are, yet without sin.” What a wonderful example of God’s good creation in perfect form...a human being without barnacles...a model of what God intends for all God’s children! But how was the human Jesus able to do it...to resist having those barnacles stick? Certainly sin was all around him and he was tempted, but he still held firm.

How? I believe it was because Jesus was so connected to the source of his being...the source of his goodness...his God...that he was able to resist all those outside forces. Through his faithfulness to his Creator, he reflected the light of God and became the true light that shone in the darkness for all humankind. And by recognizing the essential goodness in all people...even his persecutors who mocked him and hung him on a cross...even to them he was able to say, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” Not words that would come easily to me under those circumstances. Perhaps one reason he was able to protect and show forth his goodness even unto death was by shielding himself from barnacles with what Paul calls “the whole armor of God.”

In Ephesians, Paul uses all kinds of descriptive words to describe sin...the wiles of the devil, the cosmic powers of this present darkness, and the spiritual forces of evil. But using the image of barnacles, we can also cultivate a way to shield ourselves with this armor of God.

We can stand and fasten the belt of truth around our waists, for the truth shall not only set us free but also keep us free. We can put on the breastplate of righteousness...not to be confused with self-righteousness (which is a barnacle in and of itself!)...but we can put on the true sense of righteousness which is being in a right relationship with God. We can ground our feet with shoes that will “walk the talk,” proclaiming the good news of the gospel...the good news of peace. We can take the shield of our faith to protect us from falling into temptations that we know are wrong, and adorn our heads...our minds, our intellect...with a helmet of knowledge of God’s saving grace.

These images of the belt, breastplate, shoes, shield, and helmet are all protective agents. Paul also tells us to take “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God,” but he’s not clear about what to do with it. Is it to be used defensively or offensively? I think it can used both ways. The defensive sword
helps us to deflect sin; the offensive sword helps us to fight sin...by shaving off those barnacles...even if it’s only one barnacle at a time.

And we can do that every Sunday morning at worship. Believing that we are essentially good, and trusting that Jesus has given us the way to preserve our goodness, we can acknowledge and confess our sins with the assurance that our sins are forgiven. Then through the word read and interpreted, we are challenged to live as forgiven people...as essentially good people...but always subject to sin. When we partake of the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, we trust in the promises of God given to us in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God...that through him we are redeemed and restored. It almost sounds too easy, doesn’t it? This person Jesus can remove our barnacles, and Paul has shown us a way to coat ourselves with anti-fouling paint!

Now consider this (but not too seriously). Whenever we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we ask God to forgive our “debts” as we forgive our “debtors”. But you know, we could just as easily substitute the word “barnacles.” We could say, “Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our barnacles as we forgive those who inflict their barnacles on us!”

And wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could really believe that beneath all those barnacles is a truly good, loving human being...a beloved child of God? Jesus came to declare to us that our common denominator as human beings is not our barnacles, but our goodness. Not only is he the model of this goodness, but he is also the redeemer for all our sins. In every sense, Jesus came to restore us to our Original Goodness. He has set in motion the destruction of the barnacles that invade us, forgiven our sins and our neighbors’, and has given all of us a way to protect ourselves from the any future sin that would cling to us. Why can’t we believe this?

You know, if we could...or really would...believe this good news and direct our lives accordingly...we just might see God’s world...and all of God’s creatures... in a more positive way! Won’t you join me?!

Again, using the words of the apostle Paul...from the third chapter of Ephesians, let us pray:

“I pray that, according to the riches of (God’s) glory....that (we) may be strengthened in (our) inner being with power through (God’s) Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in (our) hearts through faith, as (we) are being rooted and grounded in love....so that (we) may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

Amen.

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2 Hebrews 4:15
3 Luke 23:34
4 Ephesians 3:16-19