

Sermon

“Saved By Whose Faith?”

A Sermon for Cary Presbyterian Church

Sunday, March 14, 2021

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Prayer for Illumination:

Lord God we come to your text and acknowledge that we are not the first to come — for mothers and fathers of faith have come to this text before us and we are surrounded by the great community of saints who remain in communion with us around this text.

We give you thanks for their courage in wrestling with your Word —

- † **For those emboldened to speak truth to power and who lived at risk for their truth-telling**
- † **For those whose lives were shaped ever-more-fully in gracious ways by their encounter with you in these pages**
- † **For those who renewed their hope and rose up on the wings of your amazing grace to become witnesses to your love in a hurting world.**

May our encounter with your Word today embolden, and shape, and renew us as it has done to so many in the past — that, by your grace alone, we might come to know “the immeasurable riches of your grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus,” in whose name we pray. Amen.

Num. 21:4 From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. 5 The

people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” 6 Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. 7 The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. 8 And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” 9 So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Eph. 2:1 You were dead through the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. 3 All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. 4 But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us 5 even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— 9 not the result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 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.

- I. “I’m not sure that church is for me...”**
 - A. This was said to me not so very long ago but a young adult with whom I was having coffee.**
 - B. We met to talk about the sense of pointlessness the young man was feeling about his life...**

1. **Though he was an accomplished student with a newly minted advanced degree...**
 2. **A fine person who I am guessing everyone thought was a genuinely “nice guy.”**
 3. **A thoughtful adult who was reflecting about the meaning and purpose of his life.**
- C. I, of course, suggested that he attend the church I was serving where I told him he would find:**
1. **A welcoming community**
 2. **Adult faith formation courses which would honor his intellect and not be off-put by his difficult questions**
 3. **Worship which I hoped would draw his attention to a God who was bigger than his individual life, but who cared about him as if he was God’s only child**
 4. **Mission opportunities where he could work for the improvement of the community around him and the world at large.**
- D. He was skeptical — “I attended church with my family when I was a kid . . . but it all seems so hypocritical, if I came to your church what would I have to believe? I’m just not sure that church is for me...”**
- II. My friend is not alone!**
- A. In fact, his attitudes and reservations about faith and the community of the church could well be the sentiments of my own two adult sons.**
 - B. No doubt you have friends like my friend who both feel a desire to connect their lives to something**

(someone) bigger and more beautiful than themselves — but whose experience of religion has not been one which made that connection for them.

- C. Today’s message is a “back to basics” message meant to shed light upon one of the most foundational elements of Christian theology — Grace.
- D. Grace has always held a central place in Christian theology — and became a motto of the Reformation *sola gratia* “grace alone”
- E. Perhaps, like me, you heard from your childhood that we are, “Saved by grace through faith.”
 - 1. Maybe this phrase harkens back to Paul’s letter to the Galatians - or to his letter to the church at Rome...in fact, the close correlation of *faith* and *grace* is found throughout the epistles of the New Testament.
- F. But nowhere is the connection more clearly described than it is here in Ephesians 2.

III. And yet, in the Christian culture of Greenville, SC where I was raised — this phrase morphed into something like this.

- A. By *my faith* I have access to *God’s grace*.
- B. It was *my* acceptance of the right theology, or *my* going down front at the tent-revival and accepting Jesus as my Lord and savior that provided access to God’s love.
- C. I think this way of thinking about grace is what my young friend meant when he said he wasn’t sure

church was for him because he didn't know what he would have to believe..."

IV. We can't be the first to have struggled with the concept of grace as a freely given gift.

A. No doubt the very careful and explicit language of Ephesians chapter two is given in response to exactly the kind of misconstrued thinking about grace which I learned in my childhood.

Eph. 2:1 You were dead through the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. 3 All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. 4 But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us 5 even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— 9 not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

B. Here we see that it is *God's faithfulness in offering grace* which saves us — and that salvation is not of our doing . . . it is *gift*.

C. My young friend feared that by returning to church he would be judged and found lacking...

- 1. That he would have to pass a test of his orthodoxy before he could belong**
- 2. That his many questions would be seen as a lack of faith**

3. **That his imperfect life would be the focus of peoples' and perhaps even God's attention.**
 4. **And all of these things which were keeping him from returning to a community where he would be helped and supported in his quest to live a kind, and meaningful life grow from the initial misunderstanding about the nature of grace which is at the heart of the teaching of Christianity.**
- D. By the standard of Ephesians 2 — we are not here because:**
1. **We have our act together**
 2. **Or we know and accept the best theology**
 3. **Or we live wholly according to the mind of Christ**
 4. **Or because we are in any significant way any better than anyone else.**
- E. We belong, according to Ephesians, because as illogical as it may seem — God chooses to love us freely even in the knowledge of our sinfulness and brokenness.**

3 All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. 4 But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us 5 even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—

F. Paul Tillich, in writing about grace puts it this way:

“You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later

you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!”

[Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*. Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948. p. 162.]

- V. When we get our hearts and minds wrapped around what grace really is . . . we naturally begin to be thankful for our undeserved forgiveness.**
- A. Grandfather McKerley’s caddy and the snow-storm...**
- B. “I need you to slow down and be careful so you get where your going in one piece tonight.”**
- 1. I drove away confused by that grace**
 - 2. And thankful that I would not have to live the consequence of my poor choices -**
 - † either in an accident**
 - † or in a ticket**
- C. Some years ago as I began to study Benedictine spirituality I came in contact with the paraphrase of St. Benedict’s Rule which was written specifically to try to reach people like my young friend.... in the opening pages as John McQuiston paraphrases the prelude to Benedict’s Rule he writes:**

“ . . . live this life and do whatever is done in a spirit of thanksgiving. Abandon attempts to achieve security, they are futile; give up on the search for wealth, it is demeaning; quit the search for salvation, it is selfish, and come to comfortable rest in the certainty that those who participate in this life with an attitude of Thanksgiving will receive its full promise.”

— From the Prologue to the *Rule of St. Benedict*
as rendered by John McQuiston

VI. Grace, by its nature, leads to gratitude and gratitude yields a heart of compassion which compels us to get busy serving others.

10 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.

- A. But it is important that we keep our many important good works as the cars of the train and not the engine.**
 - 1. It is God's grace which pulls us ever-onward toward the new kingdom . . . and our good works which are the natural way of life of those who have experienced God's amazing grace follow after.**
- B. The final two stanzas of the *Pilgrim's Prayer* which I pray daily are my reminder of this:**

*Lead me Lord, by grace to gratitude,
by gratitude to generosity of Spirit,
by generosity to mercy — that I might cultivate a
compassionate heart.*

*Lead me Lord, by your loving embrace,
so that I do not forget or fall away,
but remain steadfast and loyal, joyful and true
on my journey with you.*