

March 30, 2003
Fourth Sunday in Lent
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Grace First, Then Works

Ephesians 2:4-10 *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.*

We just sang John Newton's famous hymn "Amazing Grace." As you probably know, Newton became a slave ship captain, came to awareness of the inhumanity and sinfulness of the slave trade, and as a minister in the Church of England, threw his weight behind the abolitionist cause. There is a popular story that Newton was converted mid-voyage while taking a shipload of slaves to the U.S., and turned the ship around to return his human cargo home to Africa. This story is not true. Newton's conversion happened over a period of years. As a young man, his life was marked by aimlessness and a frustrated desire to please his father. Through his discovery of grace, Newton came to his true self and, at the same time, saw the reality of human need and what he could do about it.

I've heard debates over the words of this hymn. Some people are tired of religion telling them they are horrible sinners, loading them down with guilt, and object to the words "a wretch like me." I understand and agree. I can't say that I've talked with anyone over the years of my ministry who suffered from feeling too good about his or her life! Low self-esteem and a painful sense of unworthiness seem epidemic. We don't need to be convinced of our "wretchedness," but of our "blessedness."

However, I've looked into this word "wretch." The word does not mean being a bad or immoral person. A "wretch" is someone driven from his or her native land, an exile. A "wretch" is one who feels who feels lost and in distress. We know something about that. Many of us experience a kind of exile, feeling estranged from others, from ourselves, from life, from God. Listen to these words from Psalm 42:

*My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and behold the face of God?
My tears have been my food day and night,
while people say to me continually, "Where is your God?"*

Those are pretty mild words of "wretchedness" compared to many others in the psalms, all expressing the common experience of being far away from God and from life.

Paul calls this "being dead through our trespasses." Even the word "trespass" doesn't carry the strong moral tone we usually associate with it. It means something like "lapse," a wandering off the path of life. Spiritual deadness. Times when our inner life is flat at best, in turmoil at worst. There are seasons when we've worked at our spiritual disciplines regularly, daily times of prayer, reflecting on our lives, reading scripture and other spiritual resources. But it doesn't seem to help. We are tempted to give up on such practices, feeling that they are not doing us any good, for we are not getting any better. We feel like wretches, exiles. We feel that we have lapsed, wandered off the path of life. And we don't know how to get back on it, how to get home.

Listen to Paul: *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 seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.* God who is “rich in mercy!” That’s one of Paul’s favorite phrases—the richness of God’s mercy! The Greek word means “abundantly rich.” It means “wealthy.” “Filthy rich!” God is “filthy rich” when it comes to mercy. That’s who God is. That’s what God does. Here the New Testament language echoes the Hebrew of the Old Testament. The most frequent description of God in Hebrew scriptures is *hesed*, “steadfast love and mercy.” Forget the false division of the Bible into the Old Testament as the book of law and the New Testament as the book of grace. Whoever came up with that one did not read the Bible itself. It’s the same God whose essence is overwhelming mercy and “amazing grace.”

God’s response to our exile, our wretchedness, our wandering off, is not, “Just try harder!” It’s not, “You’ve got to do better!” God’s response is, “You don’t have to do anything!” Stop doing! Stop berating yourself! Stop trying to pull yourself out of your exile! Paul wants us to know about what he calls *the immeasurable riches of God’s grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.* You don’t have to do anything! You don’t have to be anything! All you have to do is open up to and receive the gift of God’s acceptance of you as you are.

I had a small experience of this the other morning. I went into my office, sat in my chair, lit my candle, sat in silence—my morning ritual. I read the scripture for the day. I tried to pray. My mind scattered like dry leaves in a wind, here, there, and everywhere. Wouldn’t stop for a second. I tried harder to quiet my mind down. But that’s like getting into a power struggle with our young children when they are all wound up. The more we clamp down, the more they fly loose. Finally, I gave up, having found no sense of peace at all. As I got up from my chair, it was as though a voice inside of me said, “It’s all right.” It’s all right. Accept. Accept. Accept. Stop beating yourself up. Accept. That is what God’s grace, God’s steadfast love is about—acceptance. And, if you think about it, that is a good definition of faith—acceptance of the richness of God’s mercy and love that is all around us, all the time. All we have to do is open up to it.

Grace comes first. The foundation and wellspring of our lives is the power that is at the heart of the universe itself—God’s steadfast love. Our lives then become a response to the grace that accepts us as we are. That’s where “works” come in. The problem is that we get it backwards. We fall into thinking that what we do will “save” us, will bring us wholeness, heal our brokenness and fill our emptiness. It won’t, no matter how hard we work or how much we do, no matter how good our works are. It doesn’t matter how urgently we feel about those who are poor, oppressed, being killed, or otherwise suffering, if our “doing,” our “works” are filled with our own anxiousness, anger, or inner turmoil. Grace first, then works.

Then Paul makes this beautiful statement: *For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.* Yes, we are “made for good works,” created by God to express in our lives God’s abundant love, the wealth of mercy that is at the heart of everything. But we must always remember that all-important spiritual order of things: grace first, then works. We need to be always remaining in touch with that “ground of our being,” as Paul Tillich called it, which accepts us as we are. The gospel reading for this Sunday, which we did not read

today, is the familiar passage from John 3: *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, to that everyone who believes in him may not perish [remain in wretchedness and exile!] but have eternal life...God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved [made whole, healed] through him.* Not condemnation, but acceptance. That's the beginning of new life.

God's re-creating love begins always from this unconditional acceptance of us, this amazing grace. And the active life, the works that we do, the missions that we undertake, are a response to that foundational grace. When we get off track and start doing things in order to feel better about ourselves or to make others like or admire us, then we're back to wretchedness, exile.

In the Church of the Covenant we talk about two movements in the spiritual life. One is the outward journey of mission, of using our varied gifts in response to God's call in our lives. It is a call to relieve suffering, to bring healing, to restore community. The discipline of outward journey keeps before us God's call to live for others and for the world. But the outward journey is born out of the inward journey, the continual opening up to and growth in God's grace manifest in Christ. The disciplines of prayer and worship, study and contemplation, are not rules we take on in order to become something before God, others, or ourselves. They are the means by which we remain rooted and growing in God's grace, God's unconditional love. If we become focused on the outward journey alone, cut off from the inward journey, we become scattered and filled with a creeping despair. We take on too much and drift apart from our true calling and gifts. As we are faithful in the inward journey, even through those times that feel dry and flat, when we seem to be getting nowhere, we are still keeping ourselves in that place where God can speak to us the word of grace, of unconditional love. If I had not gone in to sit for my meditation time that morning, I would not have heard the voice of grace. Anthony de Mello, a Jesuit priest and therapist, writes in his book One Minute Wisdom, this dialogue:

Is there anything I can do to make myself Enlightened?

As little as you can do to make the sun rise in the morning.

Then of what use are the spiritual exercises you prescribe?

To make sure you are not asleep when the sun begins to rise.

Paul's message is important for us today. Grace first. Go back to quietness, to silence, to inner listening, and receptiveness. Listen always for the Good News of "amazing grace" that accepts you just as you are, all of you, the broken and the whole, the painful and the pleasant, the parts of you that you want to avoid or reject, and the parts that you cherish. As we live deeper and deeper into the reality of God's unconditional love, God's grace, we will discover our true selves. We are made by God for good works, for expressing in and for the world the love with which we are loved. What we do then becomes an expression of who we are.