

Practicing Grace

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Some were sick through their sinful ways and because of their iniquities endured affliction...

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and God saved them from their distress.

Ephesians 2:1-10

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.

The reading from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians falls into three sections. The first is this: *You were dead through the trespasses and sins 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. 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.*

I think Paul is pointing to something all of us have experienced in one way or another--spiritual deadness. We know what it means to be lost in an addiction, to struggle with depression, or to reap the hard consequences of poor decisions. We know something about what happens when we base our lives on empty values of greed or the desire for recognition or power. The still-unfolding, ugly story of corruption and greed in corporations is exactly what Paul was talking about on a societal scale. It happens when persons get swept away by the what Paul calls the "course of this world." "The ruler of the power of the air" and "the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient"—whatever Paul was referring to in his day, we can surely translate into our day. Certain dominating mentalities capture our society and culture, and they catch us up in them. Before we know it, we are awash in a sea of emptiness and spiritual death.

When Paul talks about our living "in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses," he is not talking about sex. That would make it easy. Then we could, as some religious groups do, limit sin to certain sexual behaviors, condemn things we ourselves don't engage in, and feel very righteous. The word Paul used here is *sarx*, meaning flesh or fleshly existence. He meant living as though we are not God's children, living without reference to our relationship with God. And this leads to all kinds of destructive and self-destructive things—sex that merely uses others as objects; material greed; speech aimed at hurting or demeaning others; seeking our own interests above the interests of others; violence of all kinds; and so forth. The other word Paul uses is *soma*--body. It is our whole life, including our bodies which are created by God. Paul is saying that we can live in two basic directions. One is "fleshly" existence (*sarx*), and that leads to emptiness and spiritual death. The other is *somatic* life, living in and out of our relationship with God.

Paul is not saying we are sinful by nature. He is saying that sometimes we get so lost, we wander so far from who we really are as God's beloved children, that we become spiritually dead. Here Paul is speaking particularly about what we bring on ourselves by the decisions we make, by our caving in to the "spirit of the age" or the dominant cultural mentality. He is talking about what the psalmist describes as being lost and sick through our own sins. We do it to ourselves, and yet sometimes we just get so lost, our lives become such a mess, that there is no way we can think or act our way out of it. Life becomes so unhappy, pointless, or painful that we can't see or make a way out.

Then Paul writes: *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, so that in the ages to come God might show the immeasurable riches of God's grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.* For Paul, God's mercy and unconditional love was fully present in Jesus. Jesus is the incarnation, the embodiment of God's love for us. Jesus' life was an "event" of God's love that has affected us, has opened the door for us to be who we were truly created to be and to live as we were truly made to live. We have been saved (restored, healed, liberated) by grace, and grace means a gift of life that we can only receive. It is not something we can earn or need to earn. It is there for us simply to be accepted.

God's love for us is not limited by or dependent upon how we act. Paul says that the great love that God has for us is there even when we find ourselves spiritually lost and dead. Just when we feel that there is no way out, that there is no way that anyone or anything could love us, that there seems to be no hope of turning things around, that is precisely when we hear this word of grace, of God's richness of mercy. We become aware of a love, a mercy at the heart of life itself that is always there, regardless the mess our life has become. And that is the turning point.

It is here we begin to learn the true meaning of "faith." We have been "saved by grace through faith," writes Paul. Our wholeness, our health, our healing comes not first of all by making an effort to be good or spiritual or moral. The restoration of our

lives comes as we begin to accept the gift of God's love for us, as we are. It is not a matter of fixing ourselves up so that we are worthy of love. It is opening our hearts, our spirits to love as a gift that comes to us precisely in the mess our lives have become.

Finally, Paul writes: *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, so that no one may boast. 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.* It is not that Paul thinks there is nothing we can do, that “works” are not important. He is just saying that our relationship with God has nothing to do with works, with what we do. How we live IS important. It is simply not the precondition of God's love for us. The life of faith is not built on works, on our being good, or righteous, or whatever. It is built on God's unconditional gift of love.

We have been created, or we might say re-created, in Jesus, says Paul. The ground has shifted. Elsewhere he uses the image of being transplanted. Our lives were once lived on the basis of law, of how we act or perform. But we've experienced the failure of that. We know that even the best of us gets lost. God's love in Christ has plucked us up and transplanted us in new soil, the soil of God's gracious love. And being planted in that soil, our lives can then do what they were meant to do—blossom and grow in good works. It makes a difference. If we are trying to do good things in order to prove ourselves or gain merit or achieve a sense of worth, it never works. We end up living out of fear, resentment, guilt, and anxiousness. If our worth, our standing in life is liberated from the necessity to prove ourselves worthy, if we are rooted and grounded in a love that is there for us regardless of our achievements or lack of them, our goodness or lack of it, our sense of worthiness or unworthiness, then we do things out of a whole different spirit. A spirit of freedom. A spirit of boundless generosity. A spirit of joy. We discover the true Self, the person God made us to be.

This reality of God's grace, God's gift of love in Christ, is the core of the spiritual life for us. However, we have probably heard this word of God's grace for so long that it has lost its effect. If it is only a teaching, a doctrine, a bit of scriptural truth—even THE most important bit!—it might remain a nice thought or even an inspiring one. We need to put grace into practice. It needs to become real in our lives. What has long interested me is not just the idea or doctrine of God's grace, but the question: How can I practice this grace so that it is a reality in my life?

How do we practice grace? We do it through what we call here the inward and outward journeys of the life of faith. The inward journey is the actual time and attention we devote to prayer, self-understanding, inner listening, study, and so forth. It includes our learning silence, being still. This is hard for all of us. We are active people. We want to DO something that will benefit others and the world. Being still, sitting quietly, taking time for our inward journey is sometimes hard for us to do. It feels like “doing nothing,” and we may even feel guilty about it when there is so much that needs to be done. But this “doing nothing” is an important practice that helps us touch the reality of grace, God's gift of love and life. It reminds us that the foundation of the spiritual life is an ability to be passive, to be receptive so that we touch God's unconditional love for us.

The inward journey is where we become aware of our guilt, our compulsions, our sense of worthlessness, or the wounded ego that keeps exerting itself in harmful ways. It is where we simply become aware of all this, and as we become aware—not judging, not turning our inner life into a battlefield—then we become able to let go of these things. We come to understand that our deepest worth does not depend on all the things to which we were attaching it. We begin to touch the reality of grace, the reality of God's love that is always there. We begin to touch the profound joy that comes from knowing life as a gift, beyond our deserving or undeserving, beyond our sense of worth or unworthiness. Our lives become, little by little as we let go of these things, grounded and rooted in what Paul calls the rich mercy of God.

We sometimes speak of our “inward journey work.” It IS work, but not the sort Paul is concerned about. It is work that we each need to do with regard to self-understanding and awareness so that we live more and more out of God's grace and love, not out of obligation, compulsion, guilt, or fear.

Our outward journey, what we then do, flows out of love, joy, and a free and generous heart, not out of hidden motives of proving ourselves or relieving our guilt. Paul puts it beautifully. This new way of living, which we have in Jesus, is what we were made for—living a life of good works. But that life of good works, the outward journey, does not arise out of our own goodness or strength or ability or whatever. It arises out of a life in touch with God and God's love. So what we do flows out of who we are in our relationship with God. It arises out of the gifts God has given us and what God has truly given us to do to touch the needs of the world in a life-giving way.

The Church of the Covenant has felt itself through the years called to be a contemplative community. That does not mean that we just sit around being quiet and thinking about God all the time. Far from it. It means that what we do needs to arise from who we are in our relationship with God. It means that the ministries God wants to give birth to through us must arise from our authentic selves, the actual gifts God has given each of us and the deep longings of our hearts to meet the needs of the world in some particular way. Being a contemplative community means that action arises out of prayer, inner listening, out of our relationship with God. It means being persons and a community always going back to the new ground of our being—the grace of God's love that alone can bring us healing, wholeness, and the life of good works God made us to live.