

March 18, 2012 / Fourth Sunday of Lent / David L. Edwards

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.

John 3:16-21

God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

The portion from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians was not my favorite of the readings for this week, but it offered a good challenge and some important things to reflect on. The essence of what I want to say is that we are created and meant to live out of what Paul calls grace(*karis*)--the absolutely free gift of God's love for us and the world. The familiar words from John's gospel say it perfectly: God LOVED the world so much that God sent Jesus as the manifestation of that love. God LOVES the world that God created. God does not HATE the world. If we can ever really get that into our souls, how different it would make the whole way we look at things and live. Also, John says that Jesus came NOT as a condemnation of the world, but as a way of salvation, which means healing and wholeness. God is love, freely given, only to be received and lived out of. What a wonderful message! What a wonderful teaching! But what we need is to PRACTICE that love toward others, the world, and ourselves. The reading from Ephesians seemed to offer a chance to look at what I call "practicing grace".

The reading falls into three sections. First: *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.

Paul touches on something all of us have experienced in some way--spiritual deadness. We know what it means to be lost in an addiction, or a bout of depression, or the sometimes hard consequences of poor decisions we make. Spiritual death happens when we base our lives on empty values of greed or the quest for recognition or power. As persons, organizations, societies, or governments, there are times when we get swept away by the what Paul calls the “course of this world.” Whatever Paul was referring to in his day, we can translate into our day. Certain dominating mentalities, or cultural “winds”, catch us up. Sometimes without even knowing how we got there, we are awash in a sea of emptiness and spiritual death.

When Paul talks about “the passions of our flesh” and so forth, he is not talking about sex. That would make it easy. Then we could, as some religious groups do, define sin as certain sexual behaviors, condemn other people, and feel very righteous. The word Paul uses here (*sarx*) means flesh or fleshly existence. The deeper meaning is living without reference to our relationship with God, ignoring or denying the spiritual dimension of who we are. This leads to many kinds of destructive and self-destructive things—sex that uses others as objects; material greed; speech aimed at hurting or demeaning others; seeking our own interests, as persons or a nation, above the interests of all people and the earth itself; violence of all kinds; and so forth. Paul uses another word in his writings that translates “body”(*soma*). It is our whole life, including our physical bodies, in our relationship with God. Paul is saying that we can live in two basic directions. “Fleshly” existence (*sarx*) that leads to emptiness and spiritual death, or *somatic* life, living in and out of our relationship with God. One way means spiritual death, the other awakening to who we really are.

When Paul says that prior to Jesus we were “children of wrath,” I don't think he is saying we are sinful by nature. Or if he is, I take issue with him, and do so on the basis of the rest of scripture. The great Jewish scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel said that nowhere in scripture is there such a thing as “original sin,” and I think we can take Heschel as an authority on the subject. We do, however, become terribly lost from who we really are. We can drift or wander far from the original goodness in which we were created. Paul is speaking mainly 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.

Then Paul writes: *But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which God 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 to us and for us in Jesus. Jesus’ life was an “event” of God’s love that 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 simply to be accepted.

Paul says that God's love for us is there even when we find ourselves spiritually lost and dead. Just when we feel that there is no way out, 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 that love and mercy are at the heart of life, always there, regardless of the mess our life has become. And that is the turning point.

Here we begin to learn the true meaning of “faith.” We have been “saved by grace through faith,” writes Paul. Faith is accepting, opening up to, and learning to trust God’s ever-present love. Then it becomes the life of faith as we begin to practice that grace, to live out that love.

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.* Paul is not saying that “works” are not important. He is just saying that our relationship with God is not based on works, what we do. How we live IS important, but as the expression of God’s unconditional gift of love.

We have been created, or we might say re-created, in Jesus, says Paul. The ground has shifted. Our lives were once lived on the basis of law, of how we act or perform. But we’ve experienced the failure of that. Even the best of us gets lost.

God's love in Jesus 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 self-worth, it never works. We end up living out of fear, resentment, guilt, and anxiousness. If our standing in life is liberated from the necessity to prove ourselves worthy, 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 is the core of the spiritual life. It is meant to be put into practice, to become real in our lives. What has long interested me is not just the idea or doctrine of God's grace, but how we experience and practice the reality of 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. Being still, sitting quietly, taking time for our inward journey sometimes 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 keeps us in touch with the reality of grace, God's gift of love and life. It reminds us that the foundation of the spiritual life is our ability to be passive, to be receptive to God's unconditional love for us.

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 inward work helps us see where we are suffering under the patterns of thinking and the ingrained "voices" that tell us we are not good enough, or successful, or beautiful, or whatever it is that keeps us from being who God created us to be. We see the attachments that makes us think we are not loved or lovable unless we have this or that thing or person or some other possession. This is practicing grace toward ourselves, and if we are not doing that, everything we do or attempt to do for others is more out of our own needs than being a channel of God's love moving through us.

Our outward journey, what we then do, needs to flow out of love, joy, and a free and generous heart, not out 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 arising out of our being rooted in God’s love. What we do and how we do it flows out of who we are in our relationship with God. It takes the shape 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 called to be a community of receiving and responding to God’s gracious love, a community in which the outward flows out of the inward. 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. We are called to be a contemplative community, which 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 ground of our being—the grace of God’s love that alone can bring us healing, wholeness, and the life of good works for which God made us.