

Eternal Grace Isaiah 55:1-5

Under the watchful eye of our Building and Grounds Committee, we have been testing the foundation of our building in the back corner of the Pre-School. We knew there was an issue when one of the doors wouldn't close properly and a crack has forming on the wall. We are testing to see if this is a result of the flood of two years ago... The committee is doing a great job working on this, and the reason they have been giving it steady attention is a solid foundation is absolutely essential for the building to work properly and to literally stay up. The same is true about a thought or belief. If it is built on a shaky or partial foundation, it will never function quite right, or stay up.

As we look at grace and what it is, we have to do some work on our foundation. For many the word "grace" - especially when referring to God's grace - has to do with forgiveness - "Amazing Grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me." Forgiveness is an integral part of God's grace, but we only get part of the foundation if we begin there. Because you see grace - or as the dictionary calls it, "the free and unmerited favor of God" - is not first about forgiveness, but it is first about the goodness of life itself.

We cannot be blamed for starting with forgiveness because much of our Christian theology was built upon a foundation of Genesis 2, the story of the "fall" of humankind. Lots of church fights and rigorous discussions were centered on how we are "saved," and so when we talk of Grace, or talk of God at all, we start with the idea that we are "sinners," who deserve punishment for our human failings. But some modern theologians have found a different part of grace for our foundation in the Celtic strain of Christianity where instead of starting with original sin, they begin with the idea of original blessing.

The first chapter of Genesis is the source of this. The writer uses the word "good" over and over again. God looked at what God created and saw that it was "good." The earth, the trees, the skies, the seas, the birds and bees and us!

The beginning of God's grace to us starts with God making humanity, indeed all of creation, good. Based on a partial foundation we have sometimes read the Bible as if God's primary purpose is judging humans and punishing us. Some think the Hebrew scriptures in particular reveals this kind of God, but right at the very beginning, the grace of God that becomes this good world and our good lives is celebrated and stated. God has given us the gift of life, beauty, sun rises and sunsets, fruit trees, mountains and valleys, flowers, family love, romantic love, chocolate, wine, sleep, the ability to work, the ability to play.... "Come all who thirst," God says. No litmus test of belief or affiliation. "God helps all who are struggling," says the Psalmist.

What would happen if we started our understanding of grace with the idea that God made us and the world "good?" How much easier would we be on ourselves? Oh, not that we don't need acknowledge and seek forgiveness, we are human, and we fail to do the right thing, and instead often do the wrong thing, but what if sin - failing to always be faithful - was a reality we acknowledged in the broader context of knowing God loves us, made us good, and God delights in us? What if that was our Starting Point? How would that change us?

We focus on what we need to do to get grace, having right belief or right action, but maybe the key to living a faithful life is found in learning to simply receive the grace of God - to take it in, to revel in it - not as an intellectual exercise, but by living life to the fullest. Presbyterian Church leader Beatrice Stoner once wrote, "In the church we have overemphasized one's 'responsibility,' the capability and inclination to respond, almost to the exclusion of one's 'receive-ability,' the capability and inclination to receive. A reluctant receiver gives reluctantly, while a conscious receiver is more likely to give generously." Is she right? Are we limited in our ability to give grace, by how little we accept it for ourselves?

What if all the effort at not doing the wrong thing makes us miss the vitality and joy of living. Jesus says “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” When talking to the Pharisees he says, “you strain at gnats and swallow camels.” What if instead of worrying about our sinfulness in the most minute detail and how that might affect our eternal life we instead believed that the entry question to heaven was “Did you have a good time?” And no matter what the answer we entered in?

The Feast of Passover is a celebration of God’s grace. It has beautiful readings, lots of wine, games specifically for children, good food and a relaxing time to be with family and friends at the table. From a few words of Jesus at this event, the Church has given us Communion - “The Lord’s Supper.” Perhaps Jesus did not plan to institute a whole new religious ritual with his words that night. We do not know how he said them - was he reflecting on the events ahead? Was he making a theological statement? Did the disciples, celebrating with wine and food after a long hard week, fishermen and tax collectors who probably knew how to feast with abandon. Did they begin to understand? Probably not, but that is OK, because the purpose of that feast of Passover, and this the Lord’s Supper, is to remember the gift of life and freedom and joy, and to receive these most basic gifts of God, food and drink, as tangible symbols of God’s grace - God’s gifts to us poured out in such abundance we cannot even begin to fathom them.. As they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them, and said, “Take; this is my body.” And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. “Come, all who thirst,” says Jesus, the host of this table....

Isaiah 55:1-5

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.

Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples.

See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

If you were on a big ship in the middle of the ocean, and you fell overboard, what might the captain of that ship do when she or he saw that you had fallen into the sea? What would the captain do? Would she tell you to start swimming and point in the direction of land?

Do you think the captain, seeing that you were drowning in the ocean, might say something to you like: "I'll throw you the life ring but only if you can prove to me that you're really worth saving. What have you done with your life so far? Have you created any useful inventions? Have you won the Nobel Peace Prize or any other important awards?" Would the captain ask that of you while you were drowning?

Do you think that the captain would say, "If you can climb halfway up the side of the ship, then I'll pull you the rest of the way up." Would the captain make you try to work your way up the side of the ship when she can see that you're almost drowning?

Of course not! She would rescue you, right? The captain, or one of the crew, would probably throw you a life preserver or something that you could hang onto to keep you afloat. (You could show your prop at this point or even act out a rescue with one of the children.) Once you had a good hold on that flotation device, they would pull you back onto the ship and thus save you from drowning.