

Thank You, Lord, for Faith

Ephesians 2:1-10

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.

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 he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 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 he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

The Apostle Paul. What a life he lived. In a sense Paul's life is a life that is typical of so many Christians, a life that went off track at some point and then comes back on track when we meet Jesus Christ. We're studying world religions in our Tuesday morning class, and as many similarities as we can find between Christianity and other great religions, Christianity is the only one I've found that really stresses this turnaround. Hindus believe that our behavior has consequences in this life and the next, Buddhists understand that a life of spiritual discipline can lead one to Nirvana, Jews believe that we must follow the Law of Moses and atone for our sins when we fail to do so, and Muslims believe in following the code of conduct that the great Prophet outlined for them in the Quran. But Christianity is not so much about *our* behavior but about GOD'S behavior. A Christian would say to the Hindu, "You can be a real scoundrel all your life, but if in the end you place your faith in God's love and mercy you don't come back as a cockroach. Yes behavior is important, but IT IS WHAT INSPIRES OUR BEHAVIOR that is important – LOVE FOR GOD which translates into LOVE FOR OTHERS, because if God loves you he certainly loves all others and we are called to share that love with others.

That was Paul's great realization. At the time that he met Jesus, he had to atone for his actions...or as Ricky Ricardo would put it *he had a lot of 'splainin to do.*" He had authorized the arrest of many of Jesus' followers and had approved of the murder of one of the first followers of Jesus whose name was Stephen. And all the time of his campaign to wipe out this Christian movement Paul was convinced that he was doing the absolute RIGHT THING; these Christians were dangerous and needed to be stopped at all cost. Paul probably saw himself as a religious Navy Seal, going into foreign lands to remove dangerous people by whatever means, to make the world safe for Judaism, and his colleagues probably applauded his efforts to eradicate this dangerous cult from their religion. But all of that changed on the day he met the Risen Christ, and Paul came to realize that he had been committing acts of terror not only against human beings but against God himself – "Paul! Why are you persecuting *me*?"

But here's the thing about the Christian experience; knowing that you have sinned against God and against others makes you feel terrible, but knowing the truth makes you feel great. Paul may have felt tremendous guilt and shame for a moment, but those feelings quickly give way to overwhelming joy and peace. Why? Because even though Paul had committed terrible crimes, he had now met the true God of love and grace. And because of that he knew forgiveness. Paul didn't have to beat himself up for the sins he had committed, and we don't have to either, because the God in whom we have faith, the TRUE God, is a God of forgiveness and overwhelming compassion.

And when we meet that God, our life is indeed transformed. Paul moves forward from that day telling everyone he knows in every way possible, even when at risk of arrest and punishment and death, that this God who he has met is the true God. And he spends the rest of his life saving souls.

That's what the Christian faith is all about. Saving souls from, and I don't know about a heaven or hell in the next life, but I know about a heaven or hell in this life. I know that there's a way to live our life in the here and now that is heavenly – full of joy and peace, and I know there's a way to live that is hellish – full of fear and dread. And a Christian is one who has discovered the heavenly life and prompted by love strives to show people the way out of the hellish life...the life of sin, Paul calls it, following the course of this world – in other words trying to find satisfaction in *things* like money, power, fame, luxury, television, games, or other passing pleasures, rather than finding satisfaction in a relationship with God. Because all those things can not only take away your time and your interest; they end up taking your soul. Those things become more important to people than the lives of others, and they distract us to the point of blinding us to the suffering of others, and when we don't respond to the suffering of others that's called sin. Sin keeps us separated from God and from one another, and that is a life spent in hell. We become children of wrath not because God does anything to harm us but rather because our bad choices end up hurting ourselves. I have seen those whose suffering is immense because they have reached the end of their lives and they've finally realized that their lives have been wasted, that they had been running in the wrong direction for so many years, and now all they have is regrets. Such people are truly living in hell.

And the way out of that hell is the way that Paul goes; despite all the horrible things he had done, he experienced the grace that assured him that God loves him regardless. I'm sure there were people who played devil's advocate with Paul, reminding him of the violence he had committed against Christians, or even more recent sin, **but Paul was unphased by any of that because Paul knew the love of God in Jesus Christ which took away his sins forever.**

And that brings me at last to what I am so thankful for today. FAITH. FAITH in a God who is Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, a God who desires so much to free you from all the baggage of sin so that you can live life joyously and abundantly. "We are saved by grace through faith" Paul writes, "and this not your own doing." God plants that faith in us. We just wake up to recognize it. And when we do recognize it, we no longer need to be slaves to sin – because our love for God drives us to do only what is pleasing to Him – nor do we have to be slaves to guilt – because we that we are forgiven. Other people may dig in the dirt and remind you all the horrible things you've done in years past, but you don't need to hang your head in shame; YOU'RE

FORGIVEN, and the sooner you embrace that truth the sooner you can get in with life the way God intends you to live life.

So we thank God for the faith that frees us from sin and guilt, faith in the True God of love and grace whose desire is for us to live an abundant life, a life of service and a life of joy.

The wrath does not come from God but from ourselves for failing to accept that from God we came and to God we must return. Our time in the spotlight is brief.

“...great love with which he loved us.”

Even when we were DEAD through our trespasses – our self-obsession, our disregard for the needs of others as we were obsessed with our own desires.

By grace you have been saved

Saved is not about a confession of theology: it is having the will and the drive to live a life that pleases God – which is a life that is transformed by God’s love and characterized by love for others. Article in NY Times – “I was saved when I was given a home.” I can’t help but think of the irony of priests baptizing Africans as they boarded slave ships bound for sugar plantations so that their souls would not be in peril if they died en route to their destination. True salvation begins with love...

And grace. Grace is the byproduct of love. When you’re loving, you’re gracious. YOU FORGIVE. YOU ARE PATIENT. YOU GIVE EVERYONE THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT. YOU DO EVERYTHING WITH THE BEST OF INTENTIONS, AND YOU RECOGNIZE WHEN OTHERS ARE DOING THINGS WITH THE BEST OF INTENTIONS. THAT’S GRACE.

And it’s God’s grace that saves us...all of us. Jesus communicates that in his life and even from the cross – “Father, forgive them; they know not what they’re doing.” Have you ever had those moments in your life where you ask yourself, “What have I just done?” or “Why did I just say that?” I do that all the time, and I am so thankful that before I even say something or do something wrong, Jesus says to the Father, “Father, forgive Matt. He has no clue what he’s doing.” That is the grace of God.

And our faith as I said earlier is not in some complicated doctrine, some understanding of Jesus’ divinity and humanity, BUT IN THE GOD WHOSE GRACE IS SO ABUNDANT. THE GOD OF LOVE WHOSE GREATEST DESIRE IS THAT WE LOVE HIM AND WE LOVE ONE ANOTHER AND WE CELEBRATE IN A WONDERFUL LOVE FEST...OR LOVE FEAST, WHICH IS WHAT I HOPE YOUR THANKSGIVING REALLY IS. A LOVE FEAST.