

“The Door”
Coming Home to God, Part II
Ephesians 2:1-10
July 17, 2016
9th Sunday after Pentecost

One of my all-time favorite films is the classic Spielberg World War II drama Saving Private Ryan. If you haven't seen and plan to...well, I'm about to spoil it, so...I'm sorry! Tom Hanks plays Captain Miller, a veteran officer who is assigned a strange task: to bring one man, Private Ryan, back from the front line. He takes a small team from DDay beaches across occupied France to find this one man. They eventually find him, at great cost, but have to fight a vicious battle against overwhelming odds to ensure his survival. Captain Miller is mortally wounded in a climactic scene near the end of the movie. He then grabs Private Ryan by his lapel and asks him, with his dying breath, "earn this."

When I first saw this movie, that scene touched me. But the more times I've seen it, and as I've reflected on it, it has come to really sadden me - and not just because of a heart-breaking death scene. More on this later.

Today is part 2 of a three part series called, "Coming Home to God." John Wesley used the image of a home to describe our journey with God, a journey he divided into three stages: the porch, the door, and the house.

We began last week with that porch, and discussed the biblical underpinnings of something called prevenient grace - grace that comes before - God's grace that is with us, wooing us, prior to any opportunity we have to know there is a God or respond to that love. God's love comes first. That is the porch. That is where we start.

But grace is something active, not static; the Spirit's grace works in us, drawing us more towards God. Prevenient grace leads, if we are open to God's leading, towards an awareness. As we draw close to a God whose very nature is perfect, other-regarding love, we come to discover that we have gone astray, that something in us is broken and not as it should be.

Donald Miller in his book Blue Like Jazz describes some spiritual searching he was doing as a young adult. He had a sort of on-again, off-again relationship with God, but he describes a conversation with friend in which he was convinced about the nature of what has gone wrong with him and with us all:

"As a human, I am flawed in that it is difficult for me to consider others before myself. It feels like I have to fight against this force, this current within me that, more often than not, wants to avoid serious issues and please myself, buy things for myself, feed myself, entertain myself, and all of that. All I'm saying is that if

we, as a species, could fix our self-absorption, we could end a lot of pain in the world."

Talking to a friend of his who agrees with him and gives that problem a name: sin.

St. Augustine noted that pride is the root of all sin, a reliance and focus on the self rather than God. Sin literally means, in the greek, "to miss the mark." It names the distance between us and God, between our finite nature and God's perfection, between our moral corruption and damage and God's unchanging love. Paul tells us in Ephesians 2 how God responds to sin:

"⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ... ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— ⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

Paul does not mince words. Sin has consequences. Sin is not to be taken lightly - it causes in us a real spiritual death that can lead to a physical death also. Paul is clear that we were dead in sin until Christ intervened, making us alive in him. This salvation is BY grace and THROUGH faith, yet still a gift of God.

This is hugely important. We are made alive when God's grace moves us towards repentance and faith, turning away from the old way of death and towards life in Christ - and yet always this remains a gift, not by works, so that no one can boast.

And that is the scandal of grace. It can never be earned or deserved. It can only be gratefully received.

It's like that when we respond to God's grace. Our response, our assent, our "saying yes" doesn't for a second mean that we are saving ourselves - it simply means that we have agreed - like someone about to go under the knife - to be operated on.

In the church, the normal way that we signify this "yes" to God in worship is through confirmation and/or adult baptism. Both require a public profession of faith, a public opportunity to join with others in saying "yes" to God's grace - a grace that is active before we even know it is there, a grace that continues to work in us, drawing us toward Christ.

Last month, 39 prisoners in Durham were baptized. They publicly said "yes" to God, and chose to be immersed for their baptism. Christians sometimes fight over what baptism should look like - does a lot or a little water work is the most

common fight. As United Methodists we will baptize someone in every possible way. In the picture we see this man coming up out of the water, he's clearly been dunked. We will happily dunk someone who wants to be. But we'll also sprinkle or pour - not because church is Burger King ("your way, right away"), but because it is God's presence, not the amount of water, that is the most important part of baptism.

For John Wesley, this stage of the Christian journey is called justifying grace. It is the grace of God "setting right"; if you've ever used Microsoft Word or a similar application to write a letter or an essay, you probably had to use the "justify" button to set the paragraphs in alignment. Something like that is what we mean by grace that justifies - it sets right, it aligns us with God, we are healed of sin and made whole.

Wesley compared this stage of our relationship with God to the doorway to a house. Prevenient grace, the grace before, means we begin at the porch. This grace works in us, it's how God woos us toward him - and as we grow closer to God, we become aware through the Spirit's power about the distance between us and God, of that self-centered flaw we named earlier. This leads us to repentance, to turning around, a new way of life, and receiving the gift of God's grace in a new way. This is called justifying grace. This gets us to the door of the house.

Depending on the tradition you were raised in, it might have involved a particular prayer or an altar call, but essentially it's the same thing we do at confirmation; God's grace works so that we follow Jesus and profess faith in him publicly. This is the door, this is justifying grace. "By grace you have been saved through faith," as St. Paul says - and again, we say yes, but we never save ourselves. It is from start to finish a gift of the gracious God.

Last week I gave you one of my favorite definitions of grace from a fellow preacher and writer named Frederick Buechner. I confess I was holding out on you. I only gave you part of the quote. Here it is in full:

"The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you. (Here's the new bit:) There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too."

Note again what St. Paul said: none of this is our own doing, it is the gift of God. It is not by work, it is not based on anything we did or we deserved, it is a free gift of God. That's grace, by the way, if you really want to nail it down. It's as rare and precious and scandalous now as it was in Jesus' day.

Many of us in the modern West have been raised to earn things, raised to deserve and to achieve, raised to go out and make things happen and get what is ours. It's all about our effort. But all that stops when we talk about grace. For grace is always UN - remember those 7-UP commercials years ago that talked about the UN-cola - grace is always UNdeserved, Unmerited, UNearned. If it is deserved, merited, or earned...it is not grace.

One of Jesus' parables makes this scandal of free grace hit home. In Matthew 20 he tells a story of a man who owned a vineyard and needed to hire out some day laborers to help him. He called someone at the first part of the day and the man began to work around nine. He called another at noon, but that wasn't enough so he got someone else at three. Finally the vineyard owner called over some other workers right at the very end of the day, at five, to make sure all the work got done.

When it came time to pay the laborers that evening for their work, he called over the crew that came at 5 first. He gave them each a denarius, the standard day's wage. This got the earlier workers excited! If the 5:00 guys got a full day's wage, imagine what the 9 am and noon guys were going to get!

But as each person came forward, they got the same silver coin, the same day's wage. The person that started at 9 am and the person that started at 3 pm got the same pay. The earlier workers were furious - didn't they deserve more, if the people that came at 5 got a full day's wage?!

If this were a business textbook it would be malpractice. But this is a parable of the Kingdom, a story about God's grace.

Jesus concludes the parable with this: the owner tells the angry laborers, "I'm not being unfair, you agreed to work for a denarius. Can't I do what I want with my money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (20:15)

That is the scandal of grace in a nutshell: God freely gives grace without a thought to effort, deserving, or fairness. It's better than all of that. It's more radical than all of that, it is grace.

That takes me back to Saving Private Ryan. At the end of the movie we fast forward to private Ryan as an old man, visiting the grave of Captain Miller. He collapses and begins to weep - when his wife asks him what's the matter, he replies, "Tell me I'm a good man...tell me I've led a good life."

He's lived all his life burdened by the death of a man who asked him to "earn it."

Friends, hear the good news: God never asks us to earn it. God will never ask you to be worthy of His love, his grace is not dependent on how good of a life you

live. God does not want us quivering and wondering if we've been good enough; God desires only that we would have faith in his mercy and receive grace as a free gift.

Here is my charge for this week, then: find some time this week - maybe today - and take stock: are you living by grace, or by works? Are you doing good to try to earn favor from God? Do you think that good things should happen to you because you're a good person? Have you been frantically trying to do more for God in hopes that God might finally forgive you?

If you find any of these attitudes in yourself, stop, pray, and listen once more for God's voice. Ask for the Spirit's guidance to be free from the desire to be worthy of God's love. Remember that God's love is always a gift, and nothing we do or don't do can take it away. There will be a time for responding to that love - but we can never deserve it or earn it. That is good news. That is gospel.

That is grace.

Amen.