

“The Porch”: Coming Home to God, Part I

Matthew 18:10-14

Grace UMC

8th Sunday after Pentecost

July 10, 2016

Near the end of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice is on trial and facing the White Rabbit. The White Rabbit has some new evidence to read, and asks the King, overseeing the proceedings, where to begin. The King replies:

'Begin at the beginning, and go on till you come to the end: then stop.'

Today I want to begin at the beginning. Here we are in a new relationship, this to me is a new church and a new worship space, a great new band and a new choir wonderful new people - it only seems right for us to begin at the beginning. So in this series we will go back to basics. What is the nature of our relationship with God? How does that relationship begin, and what is its goal? We're going to use a particular image to help with this - the image of a house, or, if you like, the idea of going home. And if our relationship with God is pictured as a journey home, a good place to begin is on the porch.

I always loved a wraparound porch. Growing up, at one point we had a house with a big wraparound front porch complete with rocking chairs, and it was always fun to rock in those chairs out there when the weather was nice. The porch is also a place of welcome. It's where strangers become neighbors, or perhaps where neighbors become friends - on that small bit of land that separates the home from the outside world.

In the coming weeks, we will journey from the porch, to the door, to home. This is a series about different aspects of God's grace, and at each part of the journey with God, we will explore a different aspect of God's grace. We will begin at the beginning - and at the beginning of my story, the beginning of your story, the beginning of all our stories, is God's grace. Let's unpack that.

Different Christians believe a variety of things about God's grace. Some believe that grace is something you only receive if you are baptized, or if you are an especially good person. Some believe that God's grace is only for a select group of people, while others believe God's grace is for everyone. Some well-meaning Christians believe that God's grace is irresistible, that if you encounter it, you no

longer have free will; others believe that grace is empowering, that as we cooperate with grace, more grace comes.

That brings us to the parable of the lost sheep in Mathew 18, a story that I think gives us some insight into God's grace. It is almost as simple as a parable gets. A shepherd has 100 sheep. For Jesus' time and place, that was a medium size flock; a large flock could be up to 300 sheep, a smaller flock as few as a dozen. This shepherd with an average flock loses one of his hundred. In the rocky hill country and mountains of Israel, this would not have been hard to do - one sheep just wanders off. In this case, what does any reasonable shepherd do? He goes off and finds that lost sheep.

Jesus uses this in the context of a larger conversation about "little ones," about children. Jesus has already lifted up children earlier in Matthew 18 after the disciples asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom?" Jesus brings a child forward and tells the disciples to become like them; he goes on to explain how his disciples should care for the little ones: not putting stumbling blocks or barriers in front of them, not despising them, being humble like children. The parable of the lost sheep is therefore part of a larger explanation about God's care for all people, every single person, especially the little ones, the children. Jesus then circles back to that original question and sums up his teaching with this beautiful line in 18:14:

"So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost."

It is not the will of the Father that one of these should be lost. Not one. Not one of a 100 sheep. Not 1 of 7 billion people on the planet. Not you. Not your worst enemy. Not the person you think is most lost in the world. God's will is not to lose any of his children.

This text confronts us with the proactive love of God - an active, seeking grace that goes out and finds the lost, that does not accept even one lost sheep.

The English poet Francis Thompson had this quality of God in mind when he wrote a poem called the Hound of Heaven. It describes someone who tried to run away from God, but God, like a bloodhound that's caught a scent, kept pursuing him, how God would not give up on him. The poem concludes by a saying that to drive God away is to attempt to drive away love itself.

The Psalmist says something quite similar to this in Psalm 139 beginning with verse 9 - as an aside, I love the heading for this Psalm in the NRSV, the little kind of summary description before the chapter begins. These are done by the translators, they are not original to the texts themselves and sometimes they are not really helpful but in this case I like it a lot, the heading is, "The Inescapable Love of God." Verse 9 picks up:

Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day...

Begin at the beginning - that's what we said a few minutes ago. And Scripture is clear that our relationship with God always begins not with our seeking, not with our longing or our need, but always with God's grace reaching out to us before we ever know a thing about who God is or what God is like. This is the God who runs after lost sheep, the God whose love is inescapable.

To drill down to specifics, the formal term for this particular aspect of God's character is 'prevenient grace.' John Wesley's used the term, "preventing grace," as in, grace that prevents us from being apart from God. Prevenient - notice the similarity there to a word like "preview" or "prefix" - just means, the grace that "comes before." It's a way describing God's love as a love that is prior to any knowledge or response on our part.

In other words, God always initiates. God always reaches out first. Before we ever know a thing about God, God is reaching out to us in the power of the Holy Spirit to draw us in and woo us with God's love.

When Wesley described God's grace, he began with prevenient grace. He described the Christian life as a journey into a house, or, if you like a journey home. That journey begins at the porch, just outside the door - a place where everyone is welcome. The porch reminds us that there is, as the old song goes, "a wideness to God's mercy." Everyone is on that porch. God's seeking love encompasses everyone, no matter how lost the sheep, no matter how hard we try to run from God.

Frederick Buechner put it this way:

"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."

The radical, relentless, seeking love of God is most especially revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In the life of Jesus we see that God is not content to remain apart from us, that God is not content to watch us wander away like lost sheep, and in being born to Mary in Bethlehem and entering the mess of humanity, God in the flesh, Jesus seeks us out - and as Scripture says, "while we were yet sinners" Christ died and rose again that we might be made whole.

Prevenient grace. Grace that comes before. The seeking love of God.

This, by the way, is one of the main reasons we (United Methodists, and most other Christians) baptize infants - because we believe that God is already at work in the life of that child, and we as a church and the parents and family of that little one promise nurture that child in faith towards a mature, fully orbed Christian faith.

And I don't know about you, but I need a reminder that regardless of all appearances, regardless of how known or unknown God might be, regardless of how unjust or lost we might be, God is at work. We've seen too much evil at work in the last week and in this last year. We've seen too many innocents die. We've seen too many people made targets for the color of the skin, too many people who didn't get to go home to their children, people whose job is to protect and serve violating that trust and people whose job it is to protect and serve dying needlessly in the line of duty. In the midst of all that agony, the pain of so many people whose experience and day-to-day life I cannot possibly imagine, I need a reminder that God's grace is present even when it seems absent.

In Romans 8:38-39, St. Paul reminds us, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Nothing can separate us from God's love. Not our sin or our stubbornness, not our pride or our indifference, not our hatred or our fear, not even death itself. God is already seeking you. And me. And your children. And your neighbor. In Jesus Christ, God has come near to us as one of us, and even now God's Spirit is on the move reaching out, wooing us with the gentle tug of prevenient grace.

We have begun at the beginning. We have shared a part of the good news, but we are just at the porch, we are not yet home, so there is more good news to share. Next week, we will move from the porch to the door, and see where this prevenient grace leads us. But for today, for this moment, let us remember and celebrate and ask God in his mercy to show us that God is alive and active in each of us and in this church and in this community and even in those people

and places that seem furthest from God's will. That's good news. That's worth celebrating. Amen.