

**“Home”**  
**Coming Home to God, Part III**  
**1 John 4:7-12, 17-21**  
**10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**July 22, 2016**

I'm going to show my age here a bit, but I still remember listening to Paul Harvey on the radio going to school with my mom when I was little. I always looked forward to hearing that perfect radio voice come over the speakers, tell part of a story, and then add, “And now....the rest of the story.”

The last couple of weeks, we've been exploring our journey with God using the image of a house. We began at the porch, with God's “prevenient” grace, grace that comes before, grace that is prior to any knowledge of God or response to God on our part. God's initiative, that prevenient grace, leads us – with prayer, Scripture reading, worship, through Christian friends and other means - towards a recognition of our need for God, and thus to repentance and faith. That part of the journey is what we called the door of the house, justifying grace, grace by which Jesus, the Great Physician of our soul sets us right, and makes us whole.

It would be easy to stop here – with God's prior love and with forgiveness. If I'm made right with God, isn't that enough? What more could there be? Indeed, it is easy to live that way – easy to accept God's grace and stop there, and do nothing else with it. Now, a lot of churches and theologies, a lot of visions of the Christian life, basically end right there. They get to the altar, to the decision, to the sinner's prayer, to conversion, or baptism – and that's it. But we know there is more to the story, because we aren't even home yet. So today we are going to look at what Paul Harvey would call, “the rest of the story.”

The rest of the story is summed up in a saying from Gregory of Nyssa, a 4<sup>th</sup> century Bishop and theologian with a mystical bent, wrote “Sin is what happens when we stop growing.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer had another way of naming this: he called it the difference between cheap grace and costly grace. This is how he described “cheap grace”

“Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession...Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.” He goes on to say that “cheap grace is the deadly enemy of the church,” and what we are after instead is “costly grace.” Grace that has hands and legs, grace that is living and active.

Notice, then, that 1 John 4 does not stop with prevenient and justifying grace. It increases both the quality and the quantity of the grace we are to share in

response to what God has done in Christ. “<sup>11</sup> Beloved, (don’t you love that – God’s Word calls you ‘beloved’!) since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.<sup>12</sup> No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.”

In response to God’s love, we are called to love one another – this is a mark that God “lives in us” and that love is “perfected” in us. The love of God continues to expand out and in – loving others as God has loved us, and increasing the love of God in us until it is what 1 John calls “perfected.”

Perfect love? That sounds impossible. Every time I encounter that phrase, I think of a Denzel Washington movie. Remember the Titans was based on a true story about an integrated football team that struggled to overcome the racism of their community on the field. At one point early in the movie, coach Boone, played by Washington tells his squad, “We will be perfect in every aspect of the game.” There will be no fumbles or missed tackles. The team, the Titans will be perfect. A high bar, to say the least. It sounds impossible. Maybe even unfair?

I have a similar gut reaction to the passages in 1 John 4 about perfect love:

“<sup>18</sup> There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. <sup>19</sup> We love because he first loved us.”

Love that’s been perfected – perfect love that casts out fear – and all because God loved us first. It sounds almost impossible. But God is just, in addition to loving, and He would not call us to something that is impossible or unreasonable.

It might surprise you to know that for generations, every Methodist pastor has had to answer these two questions before they are ordained: “Are you going on to perfection?” (followed by) “Are you earnestly striving after it?” This is because Methodists have always taken God’s grace seriously – we always want more of it – and we even take God seriously when we are told in 1 John 4 that love can be perfected in us.

Another way of saying this is to say that we can be made holy.

Holy, for you, might conjure up images of judgment and frowns; it’s hard for me to think of holy with out “holier than thou.” Perhaps you have tended to associate holiness with Christians who think they are better than everyone else. But the Bible is clear that God loves us so much that He always wants more and more of His love to live in us, that God wants to give us the gift of holiness – to be like him, perfect in love, not just loved, not just forgiven, but transformed by God’s grace.

John Wesley – I sometimes call him “Papa John” for short – founded the Methodist movement that eventually became our church and many others. He once wrote that Methodists have three main doctrines, or teachings: repentance, faith, and holiness: “The first of these”, he said, “we account, as it were, the porch of religion; the next, the door; the third, religion itself.”

In other words, the whole of our faith, the whole purpose of Jesus, the whole reason for the Christian movement is this right here: holiness. All of this is so that we can be not just recipients of God’s love, not just forgiven by God’s love, but transformed so fully that we perfectly reflect God’s love in holiness.

Wesley went on to say that the whole purpose of Christianity is “no other than love; the love of God and of all mankind; the loving God ‘with all our heart, and soul, and strength.’” This is what it means to come home to God – this is the summit of the great adventure that is the Christian life – made holy, perfected in God’s love by God’s love.

This is costly grace. This is grace that transforms, grace that continues to move in us, transforming us, making us new and whole, healing us and making us new creatures. C.S. Lewis pictured holiness – appropriately! – like renovating a house:

“Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.”

Often times we – I shouldn’t say ‘we’, I should say I, and maybe you’ll identify with this – I find that I stop short with God, that I fall into low expectations. I resonate with Lewis’ picture of increasing in holiness. I would like very much for God to work on certain parts of my life – to stop the leaks here and put a fresh coat of paint on there – but God doesn’t work that way. God longs to give us more of God’s love and God’s life. There is always more of God that we can enjoy, more of God to transform us and make us something new. We might be content with God just upgrading the plumbing, but the truth is, God is after everything. God wants to make our cottage a palace. God longs to perfect us in God’s love, to make us into living palaces where God and God alone is on the throne.

This perfect love is expansive, it can't help but move out to others. God's grace is not to be hoarded, but instead it propels us out to our neighbors: "20 Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. 21 The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."

The ongoing journey from justifying grace to sanctifying grace always involves others – because love for God pushes us to love others. The Christian life is never just "me and Jesus," because Jesus has friends. In fact, Jesus says in Matthew 25 that we see him especially in the hurting and the lost and broken, the hungry and naked and poor – that to serve one of what he calls "the least of these" is to serve him personally. Love for God and love for others are bound up together. Coming home to God means finding out that God has other children and God calls us to love and serve them in radical humility, to extend the grace we have freely received, freely to others.

It's easy to be cynical in the world today. Our headlines are too full of people being killed, senselessly, tragically, unjustly. I find it difficult to watch the news every day. I saw a cartoon, some of you may have seen in on facebook, with two people talking and one says to the other, "My desire to be well-informed is at odds with my desire to remain sane." I resonate with that these days. But at the same time, as followers of Jesus we are not given the luxury of resignation, we are not allowed to check out. We are faced with two choices: we can shout at the darkness, or turn on a light. How can you turn a light on this week? How can you show a little of God's grace to someone else? What would it look like for you, in Ghandi's famous phrase, to be the change you want to see in the world – a world desperate for the perfect love revealed in Jesus and made possible in and for us by God's grace?

That is the rest of the story. To be holy is not to be above it all, but to be more deeply engaged in the lives of others. To be holy is not to float among the clouds arrogantly removed, but to be transformed by God's grace so that sin, hatred, and fear are so driven from us that all that remains is a perfect, full love for God and for our fellow human beings. This is why God sent the Son in the power of the Spirit. This is what our whole faith is about. This is the very center of the message of the Bible and the purpose of the church: to be so transformed by God's grace that we can perfectly love God and love God's people. That is costly grace, grace that continuously grows and expands and matures in response to God's love. That is what it means to come home to God. How will you grow in God's grace this week?