

Grace

Ephesians 2:4-10

April 8, 2018

Craig Driver, Jo Tefft, Leah Reisinger, Steve Peters. This is who we are, the people gathered in this particular room at this particular hour, each of us bringing our own stories: stories of finding our way, some of us having an easier time of it, some of us a harder time; stories of making a living and making a life, of falling down and rising up, of gaining and of losing; stories of leaving our mark and of being marked by the people who come into our lives.

This is who we are. But when we gather here in this particular room at this particular hour, we are something more. We are together a community, a people, a church, and when others come into this room at this particular hour, they won't come looking for Craig or for Jo or for Leah or for Steve or for me. Who will they come looking for? Will they find what they are looking for? Will they find God here?

They will find God here, if they find grace. Because where there is grace, there is God.

Grace. It's all about grace. That's what Jean Kimball liked to say: "It's all about grace." And she was right.

Our story, the story of God and of God's people, the story remembered and retold in our Old and New Testaments and told over again in every generation, is not the story of people looking for meaning, people looking for God. It is the story of God on the move, God taking the initiative, God making something out of nothing for the sake of joy, God pursuing the love of God's people for the sake of joy -- God's joy and ours!

It's a story of grace from beginning to end. The world doesn't have to be. That's the meaning of creation: the universe is, because God. We are, because God. What is is because of God, because God intends it, because God is delighted in it, because God has purpose for it if only to bring delight.

We are made. God has made us what we are. And God creates us in freedom. It is by God's grace that we are given freedom, made not merely to be ornaments or playthings, but made to stand on our own, to stand over against God, to choose as we will choose, to be as we will be, and in choosing and in acting and in being, being like God. What extraordinary generosity! What extraordinary sacrifice -- to give up control, to give away power, to let go, to let be -- for the sake of what we creatures may become.

Extraordinary sacrifice, extraordinary generosity, extraordinary grace, because look what we have done with our freedom! We have been give a precious gift, the most precious of gifts, life itself, life with each other and with God in this wondrous world, but we have spoiled it and misused it and made a mess of it, sometime just by being careless and distracted and preoccupied, and sometimes out of pure malice.

But grace never gives up.

God's mercy is so abundant, and God's love for us is so great, that while we were spiritually dead in our disobedience God brought us to life with Christ.

Great love. Abundant mercy. Amazing grace. God never stops pursuing us, coming to us, rescuing us from our enemies, rescuing us from ourselves, sending us prophets to point us in the right direction us, giving us kings to defend us, giving us Jesus -- God among us, God with us, God sacrificing everything for us. In Jesus Christ, God has brought us to life. God has made us what we are.

God has made us what we are. Say it: "God has made us what we are." Let the words fill your minds. Let the words reverberate in your spirits. God has made us what we are. Which means?

Which means we are indebted. We are indebted to God for our very being. It's gift, all gift, that we have life at all and that the life we do have has meaning, has possibility, has purpose, has a future, has hope.

But it is a gift given freely, a gift given out of love, and that is the most powerful claim of all. Think about it. What does it mean to be loved wholly, unconditionally, no matter what? What does it mean to know that someone has given up everything for you? Can you walk away from that? Can you shrug at it, consider it of little matter in your life? When it is your life?

God has made us what we are. What we are! Think of the power of human language, verbal and nonverbal, the wonder of human emotion, the wonder of human love, our capacity for making beauty, our capacity for solving problems, our capacity of doing good, for doing great good -- with each other, for each other. God has made us what we are.

Which ones? Which ones? None of us have made ourselves, so we have nothing to boast about, but God has made us what we are, every one of us, so we must give honor and dignity to each one, to each one and to ourselves. How can we disparage anyone? How can we disparage ourselves?

God has made us what we are. For? For a life of good deeds, for a life of doing good, for a life like Jesus who went about doing good, for a life, like Jesus, filled with grace.

Filled with grace. Do you know what it is like to encounter a person filled with grace, a grace-full person? A person who takes genuine interest in you, who has time for you, who is not threatened by your appearance or ideas or idiosyncrasies? A person who has nothing to gain by you except simply to enjoy being with you? A person who acknowledges both your finer points and your flaws, but does not overly praise you for the one or judge you for the other? A person who lets you be what you are, but encourages you and helps you to become what you shall be?

Do you know what it's like to come into a church filled with grace, a grace-full church? This is why it matters! It's all about grace! When a church builds walls, turns its back, judges, divides, censures, when a church is arrogant or proud or merely indifferent to anyone outside its self-drawn boundaries, it has failed, utterly failed, the God who brought it to life.

To be grace-full is to be like God: to do all we do for delight, not for gain; to let people be who they are, to welcome people in as they are, letting go our need for control, but never to confuse giving up control with indifference, instead listening, engaging, paying attention, encouraging, exhorting, helping, forgiving.

When people come here, what will they find? Will they find grace here? Will they find God here? Will they find a place where they feel safe, but know they cannot hide? Will they feel loved, not merely treated with courtesy, but loved? Will love change them? Will being loved make them want to change?

Where there is grace, there is God. May you, may we, all of us, be filled with the grace of God! May the grace of God transform us. May we know that God and God alone has made us what we are.

I often tell couples in premarital counseling sessions that the best thing they can do for their partners is to take care of themselves, physically and emotionally and spiritually. You cannot give what you don't have. You can't love when you don't love yourself.

The best thing we can do for our neighbors, the best way we can begin to love our neighbors in the way they need to be loved, is to let ourselves be loved, to live in and by and for the sake of grace. It's all about grace!