

## **Not without effect**

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

April 8, 2012

*By God's grace I am what I am ...*

That's what Paul wrote, and it was more, so much more, than a tossed off religious platitude. Paul knew from the depths of his soul, Paul knew deep in his bones, that he was who he was only by the grace of God.

He had been a fierce enemy of the way of the Lord, a terrible persecutor of the church, ranging far and wide throughout Israel and even into Syria to root out the followers of Jesus, arresting them, jailing them, and threatening them with death.

But God changed his heart. God changed his life. As Paul made his way along the road to Damascus, Jesus appeared to him. The living Jesus met him on that road and confronted him: "Why are you persecuting me?"

God opened his eyes. The light of Jesus, the light that is Jesus, pierced the darkness that blinded him. Paul was privileged, by the grace of God, to be a witness, the very last witness, as he puts it, to the resurrection of Jesus.

The living Jesus came to him and called him into a new life. And the one who had worked harder than anyone to tear down the fledgling church became the one who worked harder than anyone to build it up. The one who had done his best to erase any public memory of Jesus traveled throughout the known world preaching that Jesus was the Son of God and that God gives us life through him. And the one who had burned with pride and rage now embodied Jesus' way, the way of love, the way of humility.

*What we see now is like a dim image in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. What I know now is only partial ... [but what I do know is this], these three remain: faith, hope, and love; but the greatest of these is love.*

*By God's grace I am what I am ...*

Peter didn't write it, but he could have. Or maybe he would have said it with an even more personal flavor: "I am what I am because Jesus forgave me."

Because Peter's offense was personal. He denied the one he had vowed to defend to the death. He disowned the one he said he loved more than life itself. At the moment it mattered, he utterly failed Jesus. When it really mattered,

he utterly failed himself. He failed to be the believer he claimed to be. He failed to be the man Jesus called him to be.

He was devastated by grief and by shame, a hollow man with nothing left to live for, but Jesus came to him. Jesus didn't scold him. Jesus didn't shame him. Mercifully, tenderly, Jesus asked him three times, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?," giving Peter three opportunities to say "Yes, Lord you know that I love you," giving Peter the opportunity one by one by one to unsay each of the three times he had denied knowing Jesus at all, to say nothing of loving him!

And when it was done, Jesus told Peter to get to work: "Take care of my sheep." Go and do the work I called you to do. Go and do the work I prepared you to do.

And Peter did. He left his fishing boat a second time for Jesus and never turned back. He was the rock on which Jesus built his church, a courageous witness to the living Jesus he knew and loved, a man who brought the tenderness and gracious welcome of Jesus to all sorts of other people who never would see Jesus themselves, but who did see Jesus in Peter. Peter followed Jesus all the rest of his life, without fail, all the way, some say, to his own death on a cross.

*By God's grace I am what I am ...*

Absolutely. I am.

I am not Paul and I am not Peter. I have had my own journey, but it has been a journey, too, with twists and turns and detours, of getting lost and of being found.

I have made my own mistakes, I have turned my back to Jesus in my own way, sometimes just through distraction or inattention or preoccupation, but sometimes knowingly, sometimes deliberately, shutting my ears to him, shutting my eyes to him.

But Jesus came to me. Jesus spoke to me and called me back. Jesus came to me and took me back. Jesus brought me home. And Jesus told me: "Take care of my sheep."

And I have. Not perfectly, not with perfect discipline or unwavering attention or unfailing judgment, but I have made it my purpose to serve Jesus and serve his people as faithfully as I am able, with all the passion and all the compassion and all the wisdom I can muster. And I do my best to listen, to listen and to watch, not relying just on what I think I know, on what I have

already seen, but listening and watching for what Jesus still has to show me, for what Jesus still has to say to all of us.

I know, from the depths of my soul, deep in my bones, that the grace of God is the source of all that matters most to me: my wife, my church family, this church family, my job, my calling.

Almost every Sunday when I take my robe from the office closet and stick my arms through the sleeves, I say to myself, "What a privilege!" Or rather, I pray in thanks to God, "What a privilege to be able to do this, to be able to speak of things like this, to stand in front of all of you, to be with all of you, as we lay our lives out in the presence of God and listen for God's voice together!"

*By God's grace I am what I am ...*

And you?

Try saying it out loud: "By God's grace I am what I am ..." Does it ring true to you?

What are you? You are a creature of bone and muscle, of flesh and blood and spirit, a creature living to survive and surviving to live with as much beauty and pleasure and meaning as you can find, a creature with unique abilities and talents as each of us are, a creature subject to illness and aging and accident and temptation and sin and decay and death as each of us are.

But Jesus died to redeem your life -- this life! Jesus was raised from death to give you life -- here and now! The resurrection of Jesus is God's victory, the victory of light over darkness, of life over death, of grace over sin!

There is nothing any more that can separate us from the love of God. There is nothing any more than can keep you from fullness of life. By God's grace you are what you are.

*By God's grace I am what I am, and the grace that God gave me was not without effect ...*

Not without effect!

The grace God gave Paul was not without effect. God changed his life and gave him a new purpose and he worked hard, harder, he said, than all the other apostles, though he acknowledged it was not his own doing, but God's grace working with him.

The grace God gave Peter was not without effect. Jesus gave him a second chance, a fresh start, a new life, and Peter made the most of it. Peter was the man God made him to be, the man Jesus knew him to be, the faithful witness, the friend of God.

The grace God gave me was not without effect. My life is what it is, but underlying all of it is the conscious desire to please God and a persistent sense of purpose in everything I do, which, in spite of any difficulties or disappointments along the way, bring me fulfillment and gratitude and joy.

And you?

By God's grace you are what you are.

Because God is gracious, because Jesus lives, there is nothing that can destroy your life, nothing with the power to turn you away from the life God intends for you: no addiction, no predilection, no pressure, no temptation, no disability, no incapacity, no mistake, no failure, no threat, no enemy.

By God's grace you are what you are! Now let that grace have effect! Let God's grace make of you what you are made to be! You have a choice. You are free. Christ has set you free. You are free ... to live. So live! Live the life Jesus gives you! Embody his way, his truth, his life! Embody him!

Today, on Easter Sunday, we declare again that Jesus has been raised. Jesus is alive. And we remind ourselves that Jesus lives in us. We are the living, breathing proof of the resurrection. May the resurrection of Jesus not be without effect among us!