

## “Resting on Grace”

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2nd Second Sunday in Lent

Romans 4:1-3;13-17 and John 3:1-17

Many of my sermons are written with my toddler, Andrew, playing next to me. Armed with this knowledge of how faith and fatherhood connect for me, a friend sent a cartoon recently of a support group meeting in a church basement.

An older man stood up to address the group and said, “God saved me also from the addictions of my life....I was once hooked on phonics.” Those of us struggling to get our toddlers to communicate may appreciate that.

All of us may appreciate the man’s confession that “God saves.” The search for salvation is central to man’s search for meaning, and central to the Christian faith. It’s central to the Bible and central to our first lesson from John.

It was central to the Protestant Reformation and its debate over salvation by grace vs. works righteousness – whether humankind experiences salvation or achieves it.

Like the man who flocked to phonics, the Christian church by the 16th century had developed an attachment, an attachment to a system of awarding merits for actions believed to help earn salvation. Martin Luther, John Calvin and others reacted by refocusing on what the Bible said about how we are made right with God. One text they relied heavily on was Paul’s letter to the Romans. And that’s where we turn for our second lesson today. Reading now from the 4th chapter of Romans. ...

Let us pray, God and gracious God, settle our hearts and center our minds so your word might speak to our souls this day. As we go through Lent, help us to realize that your sacrifice releases us from trying to earn our salvation and frees us to live with grace. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

The season of Lent began as a time for the church to prepare new converts to Christianity for baptism. The 40 day period of Lent came with good Biblical precedent - Noah withstood 40 days and nights of rain, Jesus was tempted for 40 days and nights as we read last week, and then he prepared for 40 days in the desert before beginning his ministry. New converts to the early church studied the fundamental tenants of the faith for 40 days before receiving the sacrament around Easter. And so the pattern of a 40 day period of preparation known as Lent began.

During our Lenten journey we focus on the fundamental tenants of our faith. It doesn’t get any more basic than our first lesson from John’s Gospel, “God so loved the world that he gave his only son...” Or our second lesson from Paul’s letter to the Romans which explains that we do not earn our salvation through our works or our adherence to laws of God, but through our faith, as a gift of God’s grace.

The concept of salvation by grace through faith is no less important for us today than it was for Christians during the Reformation.

But perhaps the central issue of salvation in Pauline theology during Paul's time was not how but whom - whether being part of Christ's kingdom was only for Jews or was for gentiles as well. Jesus' followers differed on this issue.

Paul came down on the side of the broader inclusion of non-Jews. As a Jewish Pharisee, Paul was clearly interested in the conversion of Jews to become followers of Christ. That is how the whole movement got started. Yet he was also concerned about non Jews as well.

When you read the New Testament, you notice that Paul wrote his letters not to churches in Jericho or Bethlehem or Palestine, but to increasingly diverse cities outside the greater Jerusalem area. As Christianity spread in the early years of the church, the epicenters of the faith began to spread with it. So by the time Paul was writing today's lesson to gentiles in a church all the way in Rome, he was writing to a people who were very different from the Jewish converts back in Jerusalem.

This provided a challenge. How could Paul unite these diverse groups, unite these gentiles and these Jews under the banner of a Jewish man named Jesus who was called heir to God's covenant with Israel? How could he bring into the movement gentile converts who didn't want to follow Jewish food codes and weren't circumcised as Jewish law required?

We see Paul's answer in Romans 4 in his focus on uniting Jew and gentile as heirs to the faith of the Old Testament patriarch Abraham. Paul writes that in his faith Abraham was the "father of us all" in the quality of his faith in God. Paul writes that Abraham was justified, that is "made right" with God, not because of his keeping food codes or being circumcised or fulfilling the law, but because of his faith.

Abraham is kind of like the actor Kevin Bacon. Do you know the concept of Six Degrees of Separation? You might have seen the play or movie by that name. This concept holds that each person in the nation is on average only six degrees of separation from any other person. So anyone in the country can be connected in theory from anyone else by only six people. The Hollywood version of this is "six degrees of Kevin Bacon" - the idea that every actor or actress is linked to the actor Kevin Bacon by no more than six other performers.

In religious terms, Abraham is a great connector. He links many things. The three monotheistic faiths are linked by Abraham. Isaac, Jacob and the 12 tribes of Israel are linked up to him. Not only is Abraham a primary Old Testament figure but many New Testament books, such as Matthew, Romans, Galatians, Hebrews, and James, refer to Abraham to make their arguments.

What Paul concluded in thinking about the life of Abraham was that if Abraham's adherence to the law earned him righteousness then he could boast, and only those who could keep a similarly high standard had a chance at salvation. That would exclude not only the gentiles but the early Christians and us today. However, when he studied Abraham's life through the book of Genesis and Jesus'

words under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Paul realized that since salvation actually relied on God's grace, all of us have a chance.

Paul writes that God's promise to Abraham that he would "inherit the world" came to him through faith "in order that the promise might rest on grace. "

"Rest on grace." Now that is something special. Paul knew from his own life experience that when we stop trying to earn salvation and put our faith in God, we can finally find some rest. Paul spent much of his restless life on the go, but when the Holy Spirit converted him and he realized God's gift of faith, he finally slowed down at least for a bit. It would appear from the Bible that during some or many of the 14 years between his conversion and his returning to Jerusalem to engage in significant ministry that Paul finally had some down time.

Abraham's legacy rested on grace. Paul's ministry rested on grace. And as we go through Lent we must realize that Jesus' sacrifice allows us to bask in God's grace. That's why John Calvin spoke so highly about grace.

What does such grace look like in the life of a modern American? Like, say, Kevin Bacon. Joel Sarrault tells the story of Kevin Bacon once recounting how his six year old son saw the movie Footloose for the first time. He said, "Hey Dad, you know that thing in the movie where you swing from the rafters of that building? That's cool, how did you do that?"

Bacon said, "I didn't do that part...it was a stunt man."

"What's a stunt man?" the boy asked.

"That's someone who dresses like me and does things I can't do."

Bacon's son asked, "Dad, you know that thing in Footloose when you spin on that gym bar and land on your feet, how did you do that?"

Bacon replied, "I didn't do that either. It was done by a gymnastics double."

"What's a gymnastics double?" he asked.

"That's someone who looks like me and does things I can't do."

After a pause his son asked in a concerned voice, "Dad, what did you do in the movie?"

"I got all the glory," Bacon sheepishly replied.

That actually sounds a bit like grace as we experience it. Jesus was fully human like us, but did things we can't do. Like taking our sin upon himself so that we could be forgiven and can share in God's glory.

Lent is a good season for us to reflect on what we are and what we aren't. We aren't perfect. It doesn't do us much good to try to earn our salvation anyway and it's a good thing God doesn't judge us only by our works or every one of us would fall short. Mark Twain said it well, "Heaven goes by favor. If it went by merit, you would stay out and your dog would get in."

The only reason we have the opportunity to be part of God's glory is because of God's initiative. God has chosen to save us despite ourselves.

When we hear testimonials about someone's faith on television, it can sometimes seem like their faith was always part of that person's being. And that can be intimidating. But in reality faith usually results from a period of reflecting and wrestling, repentance and regeneration. When we read about people in the Bible like Abraham and Paul, we realize that they didn't always have perfect faith in God. They struggled. Abraham didn't always trust God as he should. He lied about the identity of his wife, Sarah, and God had to tell him to "fear not." And we know Paul spent much of his life persecuting people before he realized his sin and developed faith on the road to Damascus.

So if you are going to arrive in Jerusalem at Holy Week with Easter faith, it helps to spend a little time now reflecting on your own spiritual condition and on Christ's sacrifice for you.

For that Lenten journey towards Jerusalem it helps to travel light. Maybe a journal to write some reflections in. Perhaps a devotional book to help you start your morning thinking about what Jesus means to you.

Perhaps a Bible you haven't read for awhile which helps remind you that God's initiative comes before your faith.

Maybe you'll lighten your load by giving up something for Lent that you find you really never needed to begin with.

When you aren't trying to earn God's favor, you might be able to sit back for once, rest on God's grace and show your gracious side.

It is said that once Mahatma Gandhi was boarding a train and a sandal slipped off his foot and landed beneath the train. The Indian leader did not have time to retrieve it. So Gandhi loosed the strap of his other shoe, removed the sandal and threw it back down the track in the direction of the first sandal. When asked to offer an explanation, Gandhi replied, "Because the poor man who finds the shoe lying on the track will now have a pair he can use." Gandhi lost one shoe and gave up another. You could say he was "foot loose." You could also say he was gracious.

Leaders who are fathers of nations and people like Gandhi and Abraham are folks we look up to. Yet, as Paul discovered, they are no different from us when it comes to impressing God. People don't become close to God because what they do impresses God. We act out of grace because God has impressed it upon us.

So if you are thinking of doing something different this Lenten season, throw your old view of what gets you ahead back behind you, and leave the rest to God's grace.

Thanks be to God, Amen.