

1-17-2021 BY ANOTHER ROAD: Turned Towards Grace
Mark 1:4-11; Acts 19:4-7; Ephesians 2:1-10
First United Methodist Church - Auburn, Indiana
January 17, 2021 The Reverend Dr. Mark Owen Fenstermacher

IRELAND: Stay on the Left

It was mid afternoon when we picked up the rental car at the Dublin airport. A friend had flown us there so that I could officiate at his wedding in a small town called Ross's Point on the northwest coast of the Republic of Ireland.

We put our suitcases in the back of this tiny Fiat. We got in. I sat behind the wheel on the left side of the car, reached down to get the feel of the gearshift on the floor to my right and we pulled our seatbelts tight. I remember taking a deep breath, turning the key in the ignition and the engine started right up. It sounded like a three cylinder powerplant. *(Or maybe two and one half cylinders.)*

I pulled the car forward to the traffic light that, when it turned green, would allow us to leave the car rental area and enter the main road that ran around the perimeter of the international airpor. I remember watching the heavy traffic flying by on the perimeter road.

As I waited for the light to turn green, I kept whispering to myself, "Stay on the left. Drive on the left." The light turned green, we moved forward, and instead of swinging out into the right hand land going west, I turned tightly into the nearest lane and headed off. "Stay on the left, drive on the left," I would whisper to myself -or think to myself- all week long as we traveled from east to west and then north around Ireland. We did okay. Maybe just two or three near-misses that week...just two or three near-death experiences.

But you had to be intentional about your driving. Flying down those highways that resemble one of our county roads, you had to remind yourself, "Stay on the left, drive on the left."

That experience of driving on the left in Ireland came to mind this week as I considered the profound, Jesus-shaped mystery we call grace. I thought about driving on the left because driving on the left, like accepting and living out grace, doesn't come easily or naturally to most of us.

We live in an "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth" world so living by Jesus-shaped grace requires thought, intentionality, practice and courage.

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BY ANOTHER ROAD

We're in the middle of a three-week series of messages exploring a few, distinctive, core truths about the Christian faith...the Jesus movement. At the end of Matthew's account of the visit of the wise men from the East, the Gospel writer tells us that these visitors -warned in a dream about murderous King Herod- went home by another way or another road.

So we thought it would be a good thing to spend some time, at the start of the year, exploring what is -or should be- distinctive about the Jesus way of living together. We will live, as individuals and as a faith community, in the way Jesus teaches us and shows us. So we will often operate by a set of values and priorities that may make no sense to others who don't know the Jesus way or want nothing to do with the Jesus way. We may be different. We may be considered odd by many. This series we decided to call *By Another Road*. We're taking another road. We're living another way. Jesus is our sovereign. **Love is our banner.**

As soon as this series of messages is done, we're going to step into a three week series about a very particular way of living out the Christian faith called Wesleyan Christianity. A short, brilliant, somewhat neurotic, passionate English priest by the name of John Wesley -who lived in the 1800's- dreamed of a church where Christ was lifted up and God's people were passionate about meeting the real needs of people... making the world better...more just, peaceful and loving. So, after this series *By Another Road*, we'll spend three weeks exploring what it means to be a part of the Methodist renewal movement to share God's love and heal the world.

Last week we talked about love as a core truth of the Jesus way of living life. It's a non-negotiable truth for us: to be on the road with Jesus -which is what membership in the church really comes down to- is to be courageous and persistent about living out the command that we are to love as we have been loved by the Carpenter.

GRACE

This week we are looking at beautiful, mysterious concept of grace. Grace, like love, takes intentionality because we live in an "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth world." More than that, though, we live in a world -and in a culture- where you are supposed to get what you deserve. You are to get what's coming to you. You're expected to earn every raise, every award, every advance, every promotion: you're even expected to earn grace.

But grace isn't something we earn. Grace isn't something we deserve. Grace is something we receive as a gift from the hand of God and -often- from the hands of others. Grace is receiving more than you asked for from God or from the person standing right in front of you. Grace is receiving more than you expected to get and more than you deserve.

THE ODD MAN DRAWS CROWDS: Turn Around & On the Other Side

One of the Bible readings for the day is from the 1st Chapter of the Gospel of Mark. It is the story of John the Baptist out in the wilderness, on the eastern border of Israel, down on the low ground around the Jordan River. John, this fiery preacher, this odd looking man in his wilderness get-up and his odd diet, is a voice crying in the wilderness: *“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”*

Mark tells us that John was proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. All the people of Jerusalem, Mark says, were going out to John, listening to him preach, and being baptized.

I need to be honest: I’ve spent most of my life wanting to avoid John the Baptist. Jesus, in my mind, was all about Good News. John, on the other hand, was a scold. When I thought of John, I thought about this odd man who screamed his sermons and who just kept listing over and over what everyone was doing wrong.

I see John differently, now. I see people streaming out into the countryside, making the tough descent down to the Jordan River, drawn not just by the odd spectacle of this prophet but by two amazing truths.

The first truth John shares with the nation is that it is possible to stop and turn around. When things are headed in the wrong direction, when things are out of control, when we are out of control, when what we believe in our heart doesn’t match our actions and our words, when injustice and fear and hate are ascendent, it doesn’t have to go on and on. We can stop. We can turn around. We can head a different direction, a better direction, in a direction that leads towards God, towards what is right, towards life.

This was a message the people of first century Palestine needed to hear: their country seemed to be coming apart at the seams, the hills and roadways were threatened by violent, political zealots. The halls of government had too many public servants who were about power and position rather than doing what was best for the people. The religious leaders said one thing and did another, and they would rather sit at a \$1,000 a plate dinner with the king than speak God’s uncomfortable truth.

John tells the people that repentance not only needs to happen, but with God a change *can* happen!

I don’t know about you, but I don’t like the way we’re headed in our country - especially in light of the events of January 6th. We seem to be barrelling down a highway towards even more fear, chaos, violence and division.

You can stop this train, John is saying. You can stop the pain, you can stop the hate, you can address your own personal addiction to power or things or drugs or hate or the need to control, and you can repent. You can stop. You can turn around. You can -with the help of God- turn your back on death and selfishness and injustice and violence and live differently.

Then, second, John tells the people that on the other side of repentance there is forgiveness. There is grace.

So the people come down to the river, they come down to John, because he is saying things don't have to be the way they have been. We don't have to be the way we have been.

When we stop, when we turn around, when we head for God, what we will discover is that we are not going to be shamed or rejected but we are going to be forgiven. We are going to be treated better by God than we deserve...than we expected.

A long time ago, a young man on a church staff I led introduced me to the writing of the late Brennan Manning. A follower of Jesus, and a recovering alcoholic who battled that addiction all of his life, Brennan wrote about grace in his books like *The Ragamuffin Gospel* and *Abba's Child*.

Later, I had the opportunity to meet Brennan, and to attend a conference where he spoke, and through him I had such a powerful experience of grace that I found myself crying. And as I cried, I found myself experiencing a sense of lightness...of being set free. I found myself set free from trying to earn anything from God. I found myself set free from feeling like I needed to pretend that I was anything other than the bird with one broken wing I am.

In *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, Manning writes this about grace:

On a blustery October night in a church outside Minneapolis, several hundred believers had gathered for a three-day seminar. I began with a one-hour presentation on the gospel of grace and the reality of salvation. I focused on the total sufficiency of the redeeming work of Jesus Christ on Calvary. The service ended with a song and a prayer. Leaving the church by a side door, the pastor turned to his associate and fumed.

"Humph, that airhead didn't say one thing about what we have to do to earn our salvation!"

Something (Manning writes), is radically wrong.

The...the gospel of grace (has been twisted) into religious bondage and distorted the image of God into an eternal, small-minded bookkeeper.

Though the Scriptures insist on God's initiative in the work of salvation - that by grace we are saved, that the Tremendous Lover has taken to the chase - our spirituality often starts with self, not god. We talk about acquiring virtue as if it were a skill that can be attained like good handwriting or a well-grooved golf swing.

Though lip service is paid to the gospel of grace, many Christians live as if it is only personal discipline and self-denial that will mold the perfect me. The emphasis is on what I do rather than on what God is doing.

"Justification by grace through faith" is the theologian's learned phrase for what Chesterton once called "the furious love of God." (God) is not moody or capricious; (God) knows no seasons of change. (God) has a single relentless stance toward us:

(God) loves us. (The Lord God YHWH) is the only God (humanity) has ever heard of who loves sinners. False gods - the gods of human manufacturing - despise sinners, but the Father of Jesus loves all, no matter what they do. But of course this is almost too incredible for us to accept. Nevertheless, the central affirmation stands...through no merit of ours, but by (the mercy of God), we have been restored to a right relationship with God through the life, death, and resurrection of (God's) beloved Son. This is the Good News, the gospel of grace.

Here is the revelation bright as the evening star: Jesus comes for sinners, for those as outcast as tax collectors and for those caught up in squalid choices and failed dreams. He comes for corporate executives, street people, superstars, farmers, hookers, addicts, IRS agents, AIDS victims...used car salesmen (and even puffed up preachers and priests).

The Good News of the gospel of grace cries out: we are all, equally, privileged but unentitled beggars at the door of God's mercy!

In our Epistle reading, Paul speaks about grace in Ephesians 2:1-10:

God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Grace is receiving more than you expect or deserve. Grace is receiving the gift of unmerited, undeserved, unconditional love.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR US?

So what does this mean for those of us who dare to claim Jesus as Lord?

First, to see God as a gracious God. Which means we may need to unlearn a lot of what we have been taught about God as an angry old man, eager to point out our faults and shame us when we fail. What would it look like for us to see God as gracious and merciful? The Hebrew Testament, which a friend told me she wants to give up on because she can't seem to find any love or grace in those pages, announces to us in Psalm 103 that the Lord is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

What does it mean to travel the road of grace? We will see God as gracious and let that reality -as the hymn says- our fears relieve.

Second, to travel the road called grace is to accept it for ourselves. To travel the road of grace is to be set free from trying to earn God's love or favor or forgiveness. It is to be set free from the pressure of feeling like we must play a lifelong game of pretend, tricking God, ourselves and those around us that we have it all together. We can be

free. We can be real. We can be authentic...when we accept the astounding Good News that we are loved by God and no failure on our part can run that kind of love off!

Third, to travel the road called grace is to offer this kind of grace to one another. I can't speak for you but I can speak for myself: I can't offer the kind of grace, the kind of love, the kind of forgiveness, the kind of acceptance, that God offers us in Jesus Christ. I know I cannot offer that kind of grace to others...to you...to myself.

And yet I can do better. We can do better. Even in the church, even in the community that is called to live out love, live out grace, we are too quick to give up on one another. There is a wideness in God's mercy, a hymn says, like the wideness of the sea. But sometimes the mercy we offer one another, the grace we offer one another, is more like a small puddle than the wideness of the sea.

We get crossways with one another, and we write one another off. We do that too easily. You could stories, I'm sure, wherever you have been a part of a church, of people expecting others to get it just right, to see things exactly the way others do, and then when its not just right...when the other person disappoints us...we walk or we tell them to walk.

What would it look like if we were to offer one another grace that is as wide as the wideness of the sea? What would it look like if we treated one another better than expect or deserve?

Every now and then, I've gotten it right. And I am so thankful for those moments. A good friend of mine shattered me with a letter long ago. He withdrew his friendship. He replaced kindness with indifference and fierce criticism. Then, when he was being honored near the end of his life, a friend of his asked if I would attend the banquet. If I would be in the room when the man was honored. I said, "Yes." I immediately said, "Yes." I told the rather shocked man, who had asked me to attend, that I still loved the man. And I didn't know what had gone wrong, had never been able to figure it out, but I would be in the room because he still mattered to me. It was a big deal, I guess, but I just showed up.

I'm thankful for the times when I have gotten it right because so often I have not.

"Stay on the left, drive on the left," I said as I headed down those Irish roads. You had to think about what you were doing. It took intention and thoughtfulness. So does grace. So does grace. Accepting it as the gift it is from God, and then offering it to one another as best we can.

Let me end with one of my favorite grace stories.

We were in North Carolina. I was serving a small congregation between Mebane, Efland and Hillsborough. It was a collection of good people who had gone through a time of severe conflict before my arrival.

I was just a young preacher, a Yankee boy, but I preached my heart out, loved people and things began to heal. Then, after a year, anonymous phone calls and letters began to come my way. It was a challenge. It was painful. That part of our time there didn't steal my joy, but it was a mysterious, painful puzzle. Who was this? They knew our family well. They knew the church well. Whoever was making the phone calls and sending the letters had to be in the church.

After awhile, I was certain I knew who was behind it all. Hazel, who was married to a man who had a small farm just down the county road from us, taught Sunday school with her two adult daughters. She was quiet. She was faithful. But I began to piece things together, came to the conclusion it was her, and then I called to see when I might stop by.

So one summer day, I drove down the dirt road that led to their farm. Hazel welcomed me at the back door, we sat down at her small, white kitchen table. And after some chit-chat, I brought up the subject of the letters and the anonymous phone calls. Hazel said she had heard about them. Then, I took a deep breath and told Hazel I knew that she was the one making the phone calls and sending the letters.

As the words left my mouth, I suddenly realized that the pieces didn't fit together. I realized as I spoke the words that Hazel could not be the person behind those awkward, puzzling, painful things.

She sat quietly for just a moment. The kitchen was quiet. I held my breath expecting a storm to come my way, expecting to be thrown out of her house and off the farm. I expected to hear that neither she nor her husband nor their children would ever come back to Lebanon United Methodist Church.

Then, Hazel quietly shook her head from side to side, and said, "No, pastor, that wasn't me." Before I could say I was sorry, before I could say that I made a terrible mistake, Hazel looked at me with a quiet smile and said, "Preacher, would you like a glass of cold sweet tea."

I've never forgotten what it felt like to sit there, and watch Hazel get a glass out of the cupboard. She went to the Kelvinator, got ice cubes, and then I could hear the sweet tea pouring into the glass. When our conversation was done, she walked me to the screen door just off the kitchen. Hazel said she would see me in church on Sunday. To this day the sound of ice cubes clattering from an ice cube tray, and the taste of sweet tea, remind me of grace.

"Stay on the left, drive on the left," I told myself or thought to myself.

We're traveling a different road than many may be traveling, and yet it is the Jesus road we have chosen. It's the road of grace. You'll have to focus: "Stay on the left, drive on the left." Stay in grace, live in grace.