

Sermon 6-23-19
Paul Purdue preaching

Our Identity as a Child of God - June 23, 2019

I think someone gave me Anne Lamott's "Traveling Mercies" years ago. Grace in all its forms comes as a gift. I first read it 10,000 feet from the Earth, next to strangers and in the window seat. Around page 49, I fought to hold back my tears. What makes a story resonate deeply?

Anne Lamott defines grace as "the force that infuses our lives and keeps letting us off the hook. It is unearned love- the love that goes before, that greets us on the way. It's the help you receive when you have no bright ideas left, when you are empty and desperate and have discovered that your best thinking and most charming charm have failed you. Grace is the light or electricity or juice or breeze that take you from that isolated place and puts you with others who are as startled and embarrassed and eventually grateful as you are to be there." (Traveling Mercies)

Theology rarely soaks deeply enough into my heart to be physically born out in my tears. Perhaps, this is why God sent Jesus born in a stable, refugee to Egypt, dining with sinners, crucified, dead and buried- the third day raised to life! God came within the human story. God did not send another set of stone tablets or a golden theology paper. God became one of us.

So hear some of Anne Lamott's story as she is near the bottom: "...and I got in bed, shaky and sad and too wild to have another drink or take a sleeping pill. I had a cigarette and turned off the light. After a while, as I lay there, I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner ... The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there--of course, there wasn't. But after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus. I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this.

And I was appalled. I thought about my life and my brilliant hilarious progressive friends, I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, "I would rather die."

I felt him just sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with patience and love, and I squinched my eyes shut, but that didn't help because that's not what I was seeing him with.

Finally I fell asleep, and in the morning, he was gone. This experience spooked me badly, but I thought it was just an apparition, born of fear and self-loathing and booze and loss of blood. But then everywhere I went, I had the feeling that a little cat was following me, wanting me to reach down and pick it up, wanting me to open the door and let it in. But I knew what would happen: you let a cat in one time, give it a little milk, and then it stays forever. So I tried to keep one step ahead of it, slamming my houseboat door when I entered or left.

And one week later, when I went back to church, I was so hungover that I couldn't stand up for the songs, and this time I stayed for the sermon, which I just thought was so ridiculous, like someone trying to convince me of the existence of extraterrestrials, but the last song was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or something was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling—and it washed over me.

I began to cry and left before the benediction, and I raced home and felt the little cat running along at my heels, and I walked down the dock past dozens of potted flowers, under a sky as blue as one of God's own dreams, and I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there for a minute, and then I hung my head and said, "F--k it: I quit." I took a long deep breath and said out loud, "All right. You can come in."

So this was my beautiful moment of conversion."

I share so little with Anne Lamott and yet, 30 years later, her story once again brought tears. I do not identify with the prodigal daughter- I am more the older judgy brother. I am not much like the woman pouring perfume on Jesus' feet and washing his toes with my hair; I would likely join the crowd of disappointed murmuring pharisees. Maybe you know that little cat that pursues you with divine love? Perhaps the congregational songs rock you in sacred arms?

Perhaps, it resonates so deeply in my soul because I know that same Jesus. I know Jesus, who sits in the corner silently loving me in my lowest and worst moments. I know that Jesus, who in my meanest moments, purrs grace, hope, and love as innocently as a housecat. I know that Jesus who loves us all like crazy, who sat in my corner in the fourth grade as Mrs. Her-Name-Withheld read my best dyslexic sentences aloud to my mostly horrified classmates. I know that Jesus who held me as a senior in high school when I went on a date with my best friend's ex-girlfriend and had no way to undo the hurt I inflicted on him. Thirty years ago, it was Jesus who meowed "hush- little know-it-all seminarian, you are so loved, now listen, listen with love" as our friend's best-friend shared his story of hiding his queer identity inside the church.

Christinaity proclaims radical grace. We believe God died for sinners- that Jesus paid it all- for all people. All of us are God's children through faith in Christ Jesus. All who are baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ. There are no longer these dividing walls: Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, nor is there male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Paul is the grand champion of God's radical grace. Radical grace welcomes all and makes us all one. It breaks down every barrier.

Radical grace drives the Methodist movement. We welcome everyone because our theology flows from God's grace, not human effort or merit. "We are accounted righteous before God only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour, by faith, and not for our works or deservings." (Articles of Religion IX). "Through the sacrament of Baptism, we are initiated into Christ's holy church. We are incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation and given new birth through water and the Spirit. All this is God's gift, offered to us without price". (UMC Baptismal Vow)

Grace wooed me into this church 32 years ago. I told Connie, "I would hate it." As to infant baptism, I first said, "No, sir." Grace, like a little innocent house cat wooed me to the font. I slowly made a theological reconciliation, but when I held my own little babies, I said, "I will love you more than anything in the whole wide world, to the moon and back- you will always be mine." If I love my children like that, does God love my children more? We may leave like the prodigal, but we begin within God's deep radical love. Baptism is God- grace and love. *All of us are God's children through faith in Christ Jesus. All who are baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ. There is no longer these dividing walls: Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, nor is there male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

By God's grace alone, we are given a new identity, new creations, children of God. Our identity as children of God, made in the image of God is our fundamental identity. Our status as God's children supersedes lesser categories and classifications of the law, race, class, and even gender melt away-lost in wonder, love, and praise. *All of us are God's children ...nor is there male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* Careful keeping of a kosher diet-poff lost in love. All that good Greek food- poof lost in

love. The damage done by the lash- healed in love. The pride of economic triumph- humbled by love. The fixed binary sense of gender norms- transformed by love. Jesus said there is no marriage in heaven. Paul tells the surpassing greatness of love will melt away everything less than love- leaving only faith, hope, and love.

Oh, how wonderful to know we are loved by God. We could end the sermon right here basking in the heart warming rays of grace. Heather and I debated where this sermon might end. But to know and live within the love of God is not enough- to have the love of God poured in our hearts is not enough. To be filled with grace is not enough: that is only a half-work of grace. Returning loving back to God is only half the Great Commandment. No love must be given away. Unused love evaporates out of our lives. Grace withheld sours like day old manna. Grace must be offered to others. Grace and love come like wildflowers in the wilderness; they bloom so beautifully, but love must bare fruit and grace must drop seeds on the ground or into the belly of blue jays. The seeds of love and grace given to others grows greater grace and love. Again, again, and again grace sprouts up and multiples from the seeds given away. Indeed, unless we die to self and give God's love away- we will never truly live!

Grace comes as an unmerited force infusing others with unearned love- it keeps letting others off the hook. Grace is the help you give away when your neighbors have no bright ideas left, when your opponents are empty and desperate and have discovered that their best thinking and most charming charm have failed them. Grace goes before and greets broken people before they arrive at community. Grace is that light or electricity or juice or breeze that walks with other lost souls as they journey from isolation into Christ's blessed community. (adapted "Traveling Mercies")

Radical grace not only comforts us, it challenges: "All of you are God's children through your faith in Christ Jesus." So we welcome everyone because our theology flows from God's grace, not any sense of human achievements. The Apostle Paul, that grand champion of inclusion, declares: In Christ-all means all. Therefore, let us live as people practising a radical grace, a boundless forgiveness, and hopeful love. Let us remember Jesus, who sits in our corner during our worst moments, so that we may sit with others offering grace. Let us trust that little innocent cat named Christ can work holy magic and bring life to all who will but open the door. Amen.