

*Isaiah 6: 1-8*

*1 Corinthians 15: 1-11*

The famous existential philosopher — Popeye, the Sailor Man — often declared: "I yam what I yam and that's all that I yam," speaking his own truth that the way to survive the chaos of his world was to eat vegetables and be himself. Self-realization and a can of spinach were the keys to Popeye living his values and calling, and trying to get Olive Oyl to love him for who he was.

For the apostle Paul, the Church Man, self-realization, hard work, and a heaping of grace were keys to surviving a brutal world and to fulfilling his calling to preach the Gospel and build the church in our earliest days. "By the grace of God I am what I am," Paul wrote. "God's grace towards me has not been in vain." That is a very impressive claim on Paul's part. I've wasted some grace along the way, countless times when God's grace has been sprinkled upon the thorny ground of my heart and spirit and failed to take root and produce anything. When I've been fearful, tired, selfish and vain, God's grace has been in vain. Paul's bold insinuation that he has squandered not a jot or tittle of God's favor — thanks to his own efforts and grace working on grace — is probably an overreach. But, let us not judge him for his lack of hesitation or humility — at least he's got a witness and he's willing to share it.

Grace, the unmerited favor of God, the author Fred Beuchner said, "is something you can only be given. There's no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about. There's only one catch. The gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift, too." Author Anne Lamott famously wrote that the mystery of grace is... "that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us." But do we leave grace where we found it? Do we do something more than just take it?

I think about grace a lot — mostly because God has given me particular eyes to see it — in the lives of others and in my own life, something particularly useful when you are a pastor and a therapist, and extremely helpful when you are going through hell yourself. I'm not very good at seeing the deficits in the people I have served as a counselor, or naming the defects that any of us and all of us bear because of our humanity and sin — because what I mostly see when I look at all of you — any of you — are the gifts God has poured into your lives. In the work that I do, I start from strengths. Grace always contains possibility. So I hope you won't mind if I ask what you've been up to with your grace?

Most of us know today's offertory anthem by heart, and probably a bit about its complex authorship from either the sentimentalized Broadway version or 2006 movie. John Newton, a slave trader who was himself, for a time, enslaved by a Princess— was rescued in West Africa by a friend of his father only to have their ship caught in a horrendous storm off the coast of Ireland on the way home. Just as it was about to sink, Newton prayed. Miraculously, just at that moment, some cargo in the ship's hull shifted to fill a hole and the vessel drifted to safety which Newton took as a sign that there was a God and that God loved him. That moment he marked as his conversation to Christianity. Yet his change for the good took time. He picked up a bible, and started to feel sympathy for his captives, yet still he led three more voyages to sell his fellow human beings. Ten years later, after suffering a stroke, he became an Anglican priest who would go on to write almost 300 hymns. But it would be another 16 years before Newton would renounce the slaving profession, finally publishing a tract that described the horrific conditions on the ships. Newton, only then, apologized for waiting for so long to speak out about his own participation in slave trading. "It will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders." His pamphlet went to Parliament and under the leadership of Wilberforce, the British government banned slavery in 1807. Newton just barely lived to see the law passed. In his last years, with dim eyesight but greater insight, Newton reflected on this passage: "I am not what I ought to be. How imperfect and deficient I am! I am not what I wish to be, although I abhor that which is evil and would cleave to what is good. I am not what I hope to be, but soon I shall put off mortality, and with it all sin. Though I am not what I ought to be, nor what I wish to be, nor yet what I hope to be, I can truly say I am not what I once was: a slave to sin. I can heartily join with the apostle and acknowledge that by the grace of God I am what I am!"

This amazing grace took time to work on Newton, to become useful, when the collective trauma of the storm, the prayer, the sin, the shame, the stroke, the songs — finally he understood the impact of God's grace when not just given, but put to use, and witnessed to. A more dramatic, urgent grace was at work in the life of the apostle Paul. On the road to Damascus, this man who had persecuted the church and jailed many believers was struck blind by the Holy Spirit, and remained so, without sight, food, or water, for three days before Ananias was sent to bring the Holy Spirit's healing power and restore him — a story well told in the 9th chapter of Acts. It was grace that led him, in this passage for today, to talk about resurrection — the resurrection of Jesus, and really — his own resurrection.

The crux of this chapter is Paul's clear summary of the Christian message: Christ died, was buried, and was raised — the essence of the Gospel, a centerpiece so absurd...that someone who was dead would come back to life — he brings a bevy of witnesses to support the claim — appealing to the Hebrew Scriptures, and a list of witnesses quite extensive and impressive, ending with the most important witness — himself, a person once defined by his deficits, persecuting of the church and throwing believers in prison. But because of the work of grace, Paul takes his mark of dishonor and wears it as a badge of pride. Like Isaiah, who laments being a man of unclean lips, both men are prepared and chosen by God for something momentous despite their defects and deficiencies. Called to proclaim the Gospel and grow the church, Paul is raised from the deadly path of being a persecutor of the church to serving as its champion. If God could enact this sort of "resurrection" in Paul's own life, how much more powerful is the resurrection of Christ?

Newtonian Grace and Pauline Grace — it's all the same grace that comes to you and me. It's no less powerful. When we take it and it is made useful to God, though, it has to be proclaimed. We must bear witness to it. For years, I've been addicted to spiritual memoirs. From Flannery O'Connor to Anne Lamott, from Glennon Doyle to Nadia Bolz-Weber, from Lidia Yuknavitch to Fred Beuchner, the late Rachel Held Evans and the awesome Kate Bowler — I am drawn to the stories of grace working itself into the lives of people with flaws and failures. These are the people who have taught me about faith — those who have come to reflect God with honesty and authenticity in their own gritty lives. More than my Sunday school teachers or my hunger, my love for God. Each is a story of resurrection, and often one which is still ongoing. In the words of Paul, we are always being saved. Your story goes on, too.

The Christian Century magazine way back in 1939 started a series called “How My Mind Has Changed,” explaining that “when there is turbulence in politics, culture, and religious life, it's tempting to hold tightly to current convictions. Allowing a change of one's mind or heart can be difficult work.” Leading thinkers reflect on their own struggles, disappointments, and hopes as they address the topic “How my mind has changed.” Two of my favorites are one written in 1960 by Martin Luther King, Jr., on how he came to a commitment to nonviolence, and one by the British author Francis Spufford just last fall, on how he came to change his mind about same-gender marriage. I'm drawn to these stories because they are people who, rather than promoting their own impressive grasp on God, are here to tell us about God's grasp on them.

And isn't that what the church most needs? Pious, sanctimonious people don't grow the church — they bar the doors. It's not Biblical scholars and fancy-schmancy theologians that draw people to life-giving faith — it's how grace allows us to find ourselves in the story. People, afraid to share the reality of their struggles because they think it will reflect badly on Christ and his church, are leaving grace in vain. Not the author Glennon Doyle, who recounts her spiritual journey this way: “For more than a decade I have written and spoken openly about addiction, sex, infidelity and depression. Shamelessness is my spiritual practice.” The best kind of sin is the forgiven kind — the redeemed kind. When Paul talks about Christ's resurrection from the dead, he does it through the lens of his own resurrection. What God is asking of us is to share our redemption and resurrection stories, even if there is some shame, even if we're still in need of help, well... because we're all still in need of help.

Lewis Galloway wrote, “Whenever Christ turns a life around, heals a marriage, transforms a bitter heart, forgives a sinner, teaches a fearful person to love, or shows a greedy person how to give, there is a witness ready to take the stand to tell the good news of God's grace.” I hate the term “private faith.” It's an absolute oxymoron.

If you can't even tell your children about your faith and trust them to hear not about your grasp of God, but God's grasp of you — is that faith? Perhaps at least you can get to what Scott said last week. "I believe. Help my unbelief."

Friends, we are not Paul, or Newton, or Anne Lamott and her dreads, or shameless Glennon Doyle. Our experiences are unique, and they are our own. We have each come to faith in different ways. Paul did not hide his past; stifle his personality, or suppress his anxieties. He was who he was by the grace of God. And so are you. Each of us has struggles, pains, joys, accomplishments, and dreams — stories of the gospel grace within us can light the way for others. It's not your work to do — it's God's work through you.

So how about your spiritual memoir? It's been written: We all have faults uniquely ours, those flaws that cause self-blame, but God accepts us as we are and we must do the same. Claim your flaws, the role of grace that got you in this room today — and bear witness. Help us tell our own congregation's spiritual memoir of where God has met us as a church and not left us where grace found us. For Dietrich Bonhoeffer, grace demands a return, writing, "Costly grace is the sanctuary of God." In our 195 years together, surely First Pres left some of God's grace in vain. But as Bonhoeffer said, "Grace is the Church's inexhaustible treasury, from which she showers blessings with generous hands without asking questions or fixing limits." Let's give out some grace!

Our value is not in what we do for God but in what Christ has done for us. Friends, it is by God's grace that we are who we are — individuals called by Jesus, reeking of our humanity. It is by God's grace that we can become followers: people who are reluctant and afraid, yet gifted with courage beyond wonder. And it is with God's grace that we become who we might be, a community willing to step out in faith so that others can know grace, too.