

With All Your Strength

sermon digest

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Ephesians 2:1-10; 6:10-13

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The story has circulated for some time and provided perfect fodder for sermons. A group of tourists was making its way through Westminster Abbey with everyone standing in perfect awe of the history and stately elegance of that surrounded them. Suddenly, the hand of a small, older woman shot up as she addressed an apparently pressing question to the tour guide. "Tell me, young man, has anyone been saved here lately?"

We, like the people around her who began shifting nervously from foot to foot, may smile at the seeming simplicity of the question in a place of such grand splendor. In a number of ways and with very good reason, the question makes us uncomfortable. All of us have taken some issue with a simplistic interpretation of the Christian faith that too easily draws circles categorizing people as either insiders or outsiders. We reject an interpretation of our faith that risks inducing smug self-assurance on the one side while shutting people out on the other side. As we have matured, we have found ourselves turning away from a faith so focused on eternal rewards and punishments that it ignores the crying needs and opportunities of the here and now. We have also come to understand something of the tenses of salvation. More than merely an event that happened somewhere in the past and exists as an accomplished fact that leaves us feeling complacent, many of us see faith in terms of pilgrimage. Yes, it *begins* with our decision to venture the journey; but it continues and changes and grows for a lifetime. In a very real sense, we feel that we are *being* saved—not by some demanding works of righteousness but by the day to day discovery of the grace that nurtures and sustains our very lives.

Harvard University's John Rawls was probably the greatest political philosopher of the last half century. His insightful work on justice broke ground not just in national and international circles, but for ethicists of all stripes, including Christian ethicists. A brilliant mind, he wrote his undergraduate thesis at Princeton on sin and faith and seriously considered going to seminary. Shortly before his death in 2002, he wrote a private account of his struggle with faith. "Christianity," he had come to conclude, "is a solitary religion; each is saved and damned individually, and we naturally focus on our own salvation to the point where nothing else might seem to matter" [*Christian Century* (Nov. 17, 2009), 30].

So, let's broaden the question not just for our own sake, but for the sake of those who would believe but for monumental problems they encounter when looking at how the Christian faith plays itself out. Instead of asking "has anyone been saved here recently?" let's ask, "Is anyone *being* saved here?" And not just here, but is the world around us somehow being saved, somehow being deeply impacted by our presence?" Does it matter if this little community of faith called Grace Covenant Church exists? Does the broad freedom we have found of God in Christ translate into the profound commitment of the First Commandment to love God with all our hearts, all our souls, all our minds, and all our strength? Is there within the commitment that we share in our little community of faith the discovery of a truth so rich, so life transforming that it becomes the center of all that we are and do?

Faith calls us to be who we were created to be. Although there is some dispute (there always is), consider it baptismal instruction. Designed to answer the question of new believers about what it means to live the Christian life, Ephesians seeks to ground the believer in a history. Start out, the instructor says, by knowing who you are. Recall the way you came to faith—not by your own efforts, not by proving your worth through piling up an impressive legacy of good works, but through your encounter with the God of mercy and love in Christ. "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." Live, the writer says, out of that history. Live out of that grace, that gift.

I recall a game my father used to play with me when I was a young child. All of a sudden, a stern look would come over his face. Seeing it, my eyes would drop; and I would begin furiously going through my mind for what I had done wrong. What had he discovered that we were now getting ready to confront? Then, just as suddenly, a big smile would come over his face; and I would know everything was okay. The sense of fear and the burden would lift, and we would laugh and embrace.

Many of us spent our early lives feeling like we lived under God's righteous frown. I still recall the ominous dread that entered my young life when my sister told me that God was watching me and writing down everything I did wrong. I just knew the list must have been very, very long. I recall the joy of discovering a God of love—a God who was not poised to condemn and punish me but embrace and welcome me into the fullness of life.

So, who are we? "We are what he has made us," the baptismal instructor tells us, "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." Paul said it, too. "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (II Cor. 5:17). Live according to that new creation, we are being told. Live up to who you were created in Christ to be. Far from the heavy burden of engaging in feverish works to prove our worth to God and ourselves, the good works to which Ephesians points are a grateful consequence empowered by encountering the God of grace..

In the early church (and in the current church?) there were those who distorted Paul's insistence on grace over law as the occasion for careless, reckless living. Do you remember his question of the Romans: "Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?" (6:1). "By no means!", Paul responded. Be who you are created to be, the baptismal instructor tells us; or in the words of Jesus: "Take my yoke upon you and learn of me," (Mt. 11:28).

Freed from the fear of God's righteous frown that keeps us forever scrambling to prove ourselves, embraced by one who invites us to be all that we were created to be, our lives take on new purpose. Not carelessly, not recklessly, and certainly not arrogantly, but with all of our hearts, souls, minds, and strength, we give them back to God.

Faith reminds us that the stakes are high. Several weeks ago someone after my sermon on Hannah responded, "That's all too sweet." In other words, "it's not that easy." And be sure that living out of the conviction that God is on the side of the weak as we considered in looking at Hannah is not easy. It asks something of us; it asks a lot of us. And so it is with our baptismal instructor. Be who you are created to be—yes. *And*, he goes on to say, *be strong*. Be aware, he warns us, that you will encounter powerful resistance. What you are coming up against, he warns, is not just flesh and blood, but "rulers . . . authorities . . . cosmic powers . . . spiritual forces of evil." What you are up against, he dares to say, is not just avoiding a few sins of the flesh. What you are up against is a force of evil so strong that it seems to have the strength of the entire cosmos behind it. Think of it as the devil, if you will; or think of it as all of the greed, all of the grasping for power, all of the oppressive forces of domination building upon one another, aggravating one another, instigating one another and multiplying one another to the point that they appear to us as a reality far beyond anything we dare to challenge. Think of it, if you will, as unrelenting hunger and poverty, enmity and warfare that never cease, ugly racism, sexism, disease, and again, greed and human being's interminable grasping for power.

Using the same word that the Gospels employ in the First Commandment, our baptismal instructor calls us to strength. Our options, he suggests, are not simply those of timidity and shrinking before the challenge or imitating the challenge and taking on its tactics. Our calling, he says, is to stand in the strength of God, enabled by the gifts of God. Be sure to note the nature of the armor with which God gifts us. Often rejected for its military flavor, the armor calls to mind imagery reminiscent of both Hebrew scripture and the Roman guard. Be sure to note, however, that of the six pieces of equipment he enumerates, only one, the sword, could be used for offensive purposes. Of the six, only one could be used offensively. Our strength, the writer is saying, resides just here: in truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation and God's word. And that is enough.

So, Grace Covenant Church, has anyone been saved here recently? Is anyone *being* saved here? And not just here, but is the world around us being saved, being deeply impacted by our existence? Does it matter if this little community of faith called Grace Covenant Church exists?

Six years ago this past Thursday, this experiment in faith had its beginning. I have no doubt whatsoever that as we approach this Thanksgiving season, we give thanks to God for the rich faith journey we have shared over these years. And for myself, I answer "yes" to the ongoing hopeful, and I would say "saving" experience that is Grace Covenant Church. The future stretches before us; and in the coming months or years, we will answer every day of our lives whether this gathering of believers will embody Christ's command to love God with all our hearts, all our souls, all our minds, and all our strength. For, you see, that is what we are about. That is who we are. And the stakes are very high. It matters not just to us, but to the world that God loves.