

July 31

The Turning Point – Justifying, Converting Grace or Saving Grace.
Ephesians 2:4-10

We left our discussion on grace last week with a word of hope. We have come to realize that the choices we have been making are causing us to move farther and farther from what God would wish for our lives. But instead of continuing on, grace has been at work. We begin to have a guilty conscience; we wish better for our lives; we see others more at peace; and that causes us to say, “No more!” It is then that we became aware of how God is active in our lives.

We have been using the image of a well digger. Up until this point we have been digging deeper and deeper with no way out. Even though God wants better for us, we had ignored God’s loving help. Once we become aware of God’s grace, one that Wesley called prevenient grace, and decided that we want to change, we also become aware of a different aspect of God’s grace working in our lives. Wesley called this grace by many names. Sometimes using the term justifying grace, other times converting grace and other times saving grace.

To go back to our image, this is the time the well digger puts down their shovel and moves to the ladder. You know now that someone cares, someone is at the top of the hole willing to help. You are no longer digging deeper but instead contemplating what needs to happen for you to climb out of that hole. It is that moment when we quit living for self and start living for God.

It all starts when we repent. We talked about this in relationship to the Prodigal Son. He was in a far country, broke, hungry, taking care of pigs, when he came to himself. That moment, when he realized that he didn’t want to live in a far off country and wanted to go home, is the moment of saving grace, to use Wesley’s term. To truly repent means to turn and go in a different direction. It is, to use my image, that moment when we put down the shovel of sin with which we have been digging an ever deeper hole, see the ladder, and turn towards it with hope, and put our foot on the first rung of the ladder. Wesley said, “Where we once lived in sin with little thought of God, now we have had a change of mind. Now we know that God matters. God must be followed.”

Think about those moments when you realized you were on the wrong track. Likely it was not as dramatic as the prodigal but maybe you realized you were holding grudges when God asks you to forgive, or you realized you were selfish with your time or resources and you know God wants you to have a generous heart, or a host of other things. You, all of a sudden, are aware of your mistakes and you want to change. That turning is this justifying or saving grace. Wesley calls repentance “the porch of religion” We have quit doing things we know we should not do and we have started to turn towards God. We have found forgiveness and now see ourselves living in relationship to God. Even more, we begin to feel guilty when we do not do as God asks. We are no longer comfortable living the way we have. We may not yet be ready to actually begin to climb out of the hole we have dug, but we are no longer digging it deeper, and even more, we are no longer content to be there. The power of change is moving within us.

One of the great gifts of saving grace is that we come to realize that we are beloved Children of God. We can put our trust in God’s mercy and forgiveness. We come to understand that we can and should rely upon God instead of ourselves. When we were making the decisions, following our desires, we ended up in a place far from God, deep in a hole, broken and wounded. We realize that through God’s love that is often shared through the love of others, we can do better, be made whole. We are ready to grasp the ladder and think about climbing.

This transformative moment is not just intellectual assent but is a commitment to obedience. The prodigal could have decided that home was better than where he was, but if he wasn’t ready to head for home he would have remained where he was.

We, since we are here this morning, have experienced this grace of God. We know we are beloved, we know what God wants us to do, we even have a guilty conscience when we are not doing the things we should! All this is good and how it should be. We will talk some more next Sunday about how grace helps us climb the ladder.

For now, I want us to think about how we can be agents of God’s saving grace to those who do not know, or at least embrace faith. We, who live here in the Pacific

Northwest, are in what sociologists call the “none” zone. What this means is that when people are asked on a survey to list their religious preference the majority of folk check “none.” We all know people who are part of the “nones.” It might be a neighbor who never goes to church, a child or grandchild who has turned away from organized religion. They might be good people, living moral lives but without God. We know that creates a hole, an emptiness that God wants to fill. How can we help?

Love them without judgement. We do not know why they are one of the “nones.” Preaching at them our faith will rarely get them to change but love at least moves them towards us in times of crisis. We have family who do not go to church but whenever there is a family crisis we are one of the first they contact, asking us to pray. We always hope that this will lead to further conversations but at least they know they are loved and God is with them.

Don't be apologetic about your faith. Sometimes when we are around people of no faith we think we have to apologize for going to church on Sunday because it is inconvenient for the rest of the group when they make plans. Or we don't want to come off as too religious so we are careful to not bring our faith into conversations even when it is appropriate. I think of times when people have asked me how I can handle some major issue. I always say, “Through prayer I am given the strength and wisdom I need.” Sometimes the person responds positively and other times they change the subject but I am not apologetic about my faith and neither should you. As part of this, offer the gifts of the church to those who don't know it when they are hurting. I have had neighbors who do not go to church who I have put on prayer chains, with their permission, when family was in crisis. I have connected them with church or community resources when needed. My family and acquaintances know I am a preacher so it is maybe easier for me to make these approaches, but all of us can share our faith.

Lastly, invite when you can those who are “nones” to church activities. Now they may have been “nones” for a long time or just between churches but invite. They are more likely to say yes if it is to a special service, like Christmas Eve, or to a mission event like helping with the community dinner. They can say no but at least they know

there is an invitation. God's prevenient grace is surrounding them always but it might be your actions that actually causes them to turn and begin a life changing transformation.

One of my favorite Guidepost stories was about a boy age five. There were new next door neighbors and from the moment they moved in things did not go well. The new neighbor was angry about the kids making too much noise when playing outside. She refused to return a ball that came into her yard because it had damaged some flowers. The mom was at her wits end. She was thinking about asking her husband to put their house on the market and move. She was standing in the kitchen agitated after another berating call from the neighbor when her son of about five came in. He said to her, "Mrs. so and so must be a really unhappy person. Let's bake her some cookies." Mom wasn't too sure about this but he was insistent. After the cookies were done he went upstairs and put on his Sunday best. Taking the plate of cookies he went next door. Mom trailed along to deal with his hurt after the, she was sure of, rejection. He rang the doorbell and when the neighbor appeared he handed her the cookies with the words, "God loves you and so do I." Mom held her breath. The angry neighbor took the cookies and looking at that earnest face full of love said very quietly, "Thank you." The next day she was at their door with a loaf of homemade bread on the plate as a way of returning it. Mom asked her if she wanted to come in and have a cup of coffee and was surprised when she agreed. Sitting in the kitchen her neighbor talked about how hard it had been to move and leave friends. She had not wanted to be there and she realized she had been taking out her anger on her neighbors. Could they ever forgive her? "Of course," was the reply and that led to a decade's long friendship and when they had to move because of ill health mom and her cried about her leaving. They had grown so close, they were the best of friends, and they had even started going to church together. All of this because of a plate of cookies and love.

God's saving grace has been at work in you and in others but you need to be willing to open your heart, repent and begin to change. Next week we will see how God helps us climb the ladder of grace and hope.