

God, Who First Loved Us 2023
Romans 6:3-8, 11, 14, 23 Ephesians 2:1-10

Romans 6:3-8, 11, 14, 23 (New Revised Standard Version)

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Ephesians 2:1-10 (New Revised Standard Version)

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But 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.

While I was away on vacation and relaxing in a sauna,
a stranger came in, sat down and asked me if I was retired.
I answered that no, I am still working,
so then he asked me what I do, what is my profession?

Somewhat reluctantly I admitted that I am a pastor,
and he asked, "What flavor? What denomination am I?"
I said that I am a Presbyterian pastor, and then he was silent.
After a few more moments he asked,
"So what do you think about predestination?"

I replied that I believe we are **all predestined to be loved by God**.
No exceptions, everyone is precious and beloved,
and the Lord offers gracious love to all that he has created.
After a slight pause, the man replied, "Yeah, I can buy into that."

The truth of God's unrelenting love and mercy and unreserved grace
toward even the least likely and most petulant of sinners
was the central focus of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

Yet, if you ask most people how does someone get into heaven,
you will most likely hear, by being a good or religious person.

The true message that the disciples were called by God to proclaim,
the wonderful truth that the Church is equipped to make known,
is that God loves us regardless of our sins and mistakes,
regardless of our situation or the trouble we are in,
and that Jesus came to give us yet another second chance...

... and that amazing truth, of God's unrelenting love and blessings,
is meant to help us live better, more meaningful & joyful lives,
and that awareness & trust in God's love and purpose
have the power to transform our whole mode of living.

And whether we respond to God's love with faithful obedience or not
**God still loves us regardless of what we may say or do,
and continues to say yes, even while we're shouting no.**

The message that God entrusted to the Church & us to live & proclaim,
is that the Lord God will never reject, walk away or abandon us,
but loved & loves us enough to send Jesus to suffer & die for us ...
**... so that we can know, experience & grow into God's irrevocable love
and unchangeable grace that is rooted in the very nature of God.**

That true message and wonderful truth flows all through Scripture,
for example, Jeremiah 1:4-5

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and
before you were born I chose you...

Or, Psalm 139:1, 13-14

O Lord, you have searched me and known me. For it was you who formed my inward parts; **you knit me together in my mother's womb.** I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

From the Ephesians passage we read earlier today, 2:8-10

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.

And as Paul explains further about grace, Romans 11:6

But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, **otherwise grace would no longer be grace.**

In our world, much of
our sense of value derives from the things we achieve and earn,
our human worth is usually measured by our productivity,
and meaning is tied to our accomplishment and success.

The world teaches that we must work to earn and deserve what we get.
This world teaches us to repay our debts and balance the books.
But this can also become a motivation and desire for control
which can devolve into a **defective theological fallacy.**

It is a terrible, harsh, and destructive theology that attempts

to balance the books through works of Christian accomplishment,
or by doing good works in an attempt to make up for a past
that God graciously chose to forgive and forget long ago.

As Christians, we can be driven harshly by guilt, by shame and regret
**rather than by feelings of gratitude, joy and love toward
our God who first loved us, even while we were yet sinners.**

As we were informed earlier in Ephesians 2:1, 4-5,
You were dead through the trespasses and sins. But 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—**

Grace is our assurance that God's promises do apply to each of us.

Our faith then, is the means by which we appropriate God's love,
for it is by faith alone, that God's love and grace are received.
And grace means that no amount of trying will make God love us more,
& also no amount of sin or failure will cause God to love us any less.

Jesus is the full disclosure of divine love and favor toward all.

In Christ, God offers new life and healing in abundance,
a hope that can make all the difference in the world,
and a sure truth upon which we can build our lives...

... but also means we must give up any pretense of self-righteousness.

One time after a life of violence and stealing on the high seas,
a pirate had accumulated a great chest of treasure for himself,
and he decided it was enough, so he would retire to the good life.

Along the way his ship was caught in a huge and terrible storm.
The ship was thrown against a rocky shore as it was breaking up,
the pirate holding onto his treasure was thrown into the sea,
and sinking he realized he couldn't swim with his treasure.

He had to let go of his treasure to get to the surface and be saved.

Sometimes we describe salvation as finding and receiving Christ,
but I think it's more accurate to say that **we are found by Jesus.**
Consider the parable of the prodigal son Jesus tells in Luke 15.

Even before the younger son can even reach the edge of the village,
his father rushes out in an undignified run to greet & embrace him,
and he restores his son's status with a ring and a robe
even before this son can confess his sin and repent.

According to the parable,
repentance is not making effort & sacrifice as repayment for sin,
but rather **repentance is simply allowing ourselves to be found.**
**Repentance is receiving the love, grace and pardon offered by God,
which is why Jesus welcomed & ate with tax collectors and sinners.**

When I am focused on good works, caught in frozen resentment or envy,
when I am stuck and imprisoned in harsh obedience or driven by duty,
will I let God's gracious love and transforming power find me?

Our healing in Christ is entirely the gracious blessing of God
which cannot be earned, controlled, deserved or even repaid.

The message we are called by God to live, to reflect and make known,
and the wonderful truth that Christians are called to proclaim,
is that through Jesus Christ, fully human and fully divine,
God loves us with unearned and undeserved mercy and grace...

... and I know of nothing in this world,
that better illustrates that truth about God's gracious love,
than the baptism of an infant or a young child... as in Titus 3:5
Jesus saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but
according to his mercy, through **the water of rebirth** and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

Baptism is a sign and declaration of God **already at work in our lives**,
and it serves to remind us of God's promise and covenant,
as it reassures us of God's life-transforming-healing-love,
as we are invited to live and to grow in that relationship.

For Presbyterians,
baptism is a window through which we can see the grace of God,
for what better than the baptism of an infant or child to symbolize
and bear witness to the truth that God's love lays claim to us,
even before we have knowledge or can respond with any faith?

In faith, we believe God will accomplish as God has promised,
so we claim God's love and grace on our children's behalf.

That claim is made trusting entirely upon God's faithfulness,
that God chooses to show love & favor, mercy and grace, based
entirely upon God's faithfulness and not our worthiness.

We claim God's promise of love and grace in the mystery of baptism,
and like very high quality paper that has a watermark,
baptism is our watermark of God's grace, love and mercy.

Infant baptism uniquely gives expression to the ultimate truth,
that we are saved by grace, healed by God's grace alone
quite apart from our own good works or any deeds of faith.

When we baptize babies and young children,
I confidently announce that they are precious and loved by God,
though I baptize entirely without **their consent or approval.**

They haven't repented or done anything to deserve God's grace,
therefore, whatever it is that happens at their baptism
it's entirely God's doing, and it's all about God's love.

Baptism is a wonderful mystery that signifies
something awesome that God has already decided and accomplished,
and in response, we, parents and congregation, **vow that we**
will faithfully make that truth of God's love known to them,
and in a spiritual sense, let them stand on our shoulders.

The essence of the promise that we make before God in baptism
is to provide an environment that reflects God's love and mercy
so that our children will learn and respond to God's grace.

When our children receive, feel and experience love and acceptance,
and they experience welcome and worth and a place in this church
as a part of our church's shared mission, programing and ministry,
that makes the truth of God's love, compassion & grace
become more real, believable and concrete to them.

The task of both family and Church, is to demonstrate and model
the truth and depth of our Christian faith by both word and deed...
... for it is by how we live that we truly instruct and prove
that our words of faith have integrity and real meaning.

**Grace makes sense to them, that God must love & care about them,
when they have felt loved and valued in God's house by adults.**

I believe that the single most significant task of this church
is to create a caring, **faith and hope nurturing environment**
where we do faithfully reflect God's gracious love
by welcoming all and being attentive to human needs.

We are called to be a community that helps form **Christian character**
which means that here, everyone should be experiencing God's love.

Though a young child may not be able to understand much theology,
even the tiniest infant or toddler can tell
if they are loved, welcomed and accepted here...

... and though they may not be fully aware of who God is,
yet they can recognize expressions of God's love,
and they can tell if other people want them here or not.

Therefore, as we read in *Hebrews 10:23-25*

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider **how to provoke one another to love and good deeds**, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but **encouraging one another**...

Our call is to intentionally, clearly and actively demonstrate
God's love and grace and truth in every way we can by serving
as **caring dispensers of the Good News about Jesus Christ**,
and nothing that we'll ever do will matter more than that!

**And from that life-changing and life-redirecting truth,
may we celebrate with joy and wonder, God's gracious love**
the amazing lengths to which God extends grace and welcome
just to bring us back home to a life that really does matter
and toward bringing peace, hope, joy and love into our world.

I am so grateful that God has given us this sacrament of baptism,
as a lesson and frequent reminder of the theology of grace,
for the world in which we live can be a pretty graceless place.

Infant baptism stands against the ways and values of this world
for it demonstrates our righteous God who loves in grace,
and whose love claims us even before we can respond in faith.

Infant baptism is incredibly hopeful, powerful and full of mercy,
reminding us that though our faith sometimes falters and fails,
yet God's love remains steadfast, amazing and secure...

**... which is our hope and powerful assurance that God will surely
bring us through even the worst of difficulty or tribulation,
and that that nothing in all of creation can or ever will
separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

As we sang earlier,

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind, but now I see.
'twas grace that taught my heart fear, and grace my fears relieved.
How precious did that grace appear, the hour I first believed.

But sometimes amid all the distractions and lies of this world,
we forget ... we forget who are, and how very much we are loved.

So as the Apostle Paul explains in 2 Timothy 1:6

... I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you ...