

“The Trace of Grace”
Ephesians 2: 1-10
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Some people are born "fixer-uppers." Those who love to buy old houses with peeling paint, leaky plumbing, tiny kitchens, too few bedrooms and no closets. They don't see any of these qualities as deterrents – only the promise of some future project that needs to be tackled.

Fixer-uppers are never happier than when their living rooms are full of sawdust and their bathrooms are full of holes. They love having a project or two around the house.

In one of my previous interim's the business manager was one of these persons, he was the ultimate "fixer-upper," he always had a project or two he was working on around and in his house. For these folks there is nothing more fun than to be always "under construction."

The truth is that all of us are continually "under construction." Listen again to the final verse of this morning's scripture lesson:

“For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”¹

The writer insists that as men and women saved by grace, we are now called to personified good works. Because "in Christ Jesus," we can do more than build "good works," we can become a "good work." We can be a "good work."

Turning our life into a "good work" is the ultimate fixer-upper project, the real lifelong construction project. Becoming a "good work" means reconstructing our lives by seeking to live like Jesus.

Thankfully, God is a determined and ceaseless "fixer-upper." As the epistle writer notes, God is "rich in mercy"² and continues to pour out the gift of divine grace to us throughout our lives. Only this constant infusion of grace makes it possible for the construction project to continue.

¹ Ephesians 2: 10

² Ephesians 2: 4

What is the blueprint God would have us follow? What is the finished project God has in mind as the goal of our "good works?"

It is the creation of the most "grace-full" structure ever conceived – the spirit-filled body of Christ, a community of disciples we call the church.

The design for this most grace-full place is built around three main structural supports. In order to stand strong and unwavering, we must be a community where the trace of grace is threefold. The church as a household of faith in Jesus Christ is a place where:

1. We are faithful
2. We embody God's love and
3. We are eternally hopeful

Only when these three foundational pillars have been erected can any safe and secure construction go forward.

Are we a Faithful People?

Without the basic pillar of faith, there can be no confidence in whatever else the community may undertake to construct. Without faith, doubt and fear can creep in like termites, nibbling away at our spiritual foundations. A genuinely faith-based spirituality is buoyed up even when the ground may seem to be sinking right out from underneath everything.

It is faith in the power of Christ's sacrifice; faith in the ultimate and eternal victory that Christ won for us; it is faith that keeps all our conflicts and difficulties in perspective. Even if we get sick and end up in the hospital; even if we lose our job; even if we can't sell our house or pay our bills; even when ministers, members, and staff come and go, and even when a loved one dies; our faith endures:

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is a gift of God.”³

Frederick Buechner writes:

³ Ephesians 2: 8

Grace is something you can never get but only be given. The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are, because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you that I created the universe. I love you. There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you reach out and take it. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too. ⁴

Are we a Loving People?

If faith is the essential pillar that holds our spiritual community up, then love is the cross-beam that reaches between and offers support by bracing one against another. Love must be "laced" throughout a Jesus spirituality, for love was the motivating force behind all Jesus did and said. Jesus offers his love to each of us because he sees in each of us a dire need for grace and mercy. Love is a lure that attracts our starving spirits to the richness of God's grace.

Consider Jesus' loving response to the woman taken in adultery in the midst of a crowd that was poised to stone her. Instead of judging her, Jesus responds with love and compassion.

Jesus' first instinct is to be compassionate. His heart reaches out to the woman. She is the one facing the death threats. The crowd wants Jesus to support their point of view. They want his endorsement so they can apply the letter of the law. But Jesus says "no" to legalism. His compassion compels him to stand with the woman. He is more concerned about giving the woman a fresh start through God's grace than about how his association with her is going to affect his reputation. In Jesus' mind, no one in the temple is innocent. Everyone in the scenario is in need of grace and mercy.

Greg Louganis the Olympic gold-medal-winning diver some time ago revealed in his book; "Breaking the Surface" that he was HIV positive and gay.

⁴ Fredrick Buechner, "Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC," pp. 33-34

After his book was released (in 1995), Greg went on book signing tours and wherever he went, he was met by "Christians" from local "churches" that had organized to greet him with banners and signs protesting his homosexuality.

When asked on the "Today" show how he handled such heckling and harassment, he replied,

"I've learned that you can't meet hatred with hatred. I try to love them and listen to them and greet them in as good a spirit as I can."

1. Are we extending a slap on the wrist or a handshake to others in need?
2. Are we responding to others in love and compassion or in judgment and arrogance?
3. Are we always looking for ways to inject Christ's love for others into our community?
4. Are we asking before anything else: "Is this a loving response to the pain and need we see or that we face?"

A church that embodies God's love takes Christ's own sacrificial love as its guide for action.

Are we Hopeful?

Hope is the kind of pillar that would hold up one of those grand "flying buttresses" that protrude from ancient cathedrals. Hope supports, but it also propels us forward. Without hope, a Jesus spirituality has no future – and the promise of a glorified future is integral to the gift of grace that God offers us. The future is something we must always be preparing for, not just waiting for.

In his extensive research on "low-hope" vs. "high-hope" people, psychotherapist C. R. Snyder isolates the unique "Hope to Cope" mind/body/spirit skills of people who are "high-hopers." They:

1. Minimize the negative – realize that "This too shall pass."
2. Establish an outward, problem-solving focus.

3. Call on friends and family more readily – to establish intimacy and deeper relationships.⁵

Don't be the son who calls his mother in Florida and asks:

“How are you doing Mom?”

“Not so good, I've been very weak.”

“What's wrong? Why are you so weak?”

She replied, “Because I haven't eaten in 38 days.”

“What? How come you haven't eaten in 38 days?”

“Because I didn't want my mouth to be filled with food when you called.”

We need:

To laugh;

To pray;

To exercise by keeping our bodies and our minds active;

To practice healthful behaviors; and we need

To age gracefully.⁶

Henri Nouwen writes in his book, “With Open Hand,” that:

“Hope means to keep living amid desperation and to keep humming in the darkness. Hoping is knowing that there is love; it is trust in tomorrow; it is falling asleep and waking again when the sun rises.

In the midst of a gale at sea, it is to discover land.

In the eyes of another, it is to see that he understands you.

⁵ C.R. Snyder, “The Psychology of Hope: You Can There from Here” pp. 58-64

⁶ Ibid., C.R. Snyder, “The Psychology of Hope: You Can There from Here” pp. 58-64

As long as there is still hope, there will also be prayer and God will be holding you in his hands.”⁷

Can we trace God's grace surging through our lives?

Can we feel God's grace continuing its work within and through us for the entire course of our lives – expanding, remodeling, modernizing, pushing out walls, and opening up new doors and entrances?

Listen to Ephesians 2: 7-10 from the translation called, The Message:

“Now God has us where he wants us, with all the time in this world and the next to shower grace and kindness upon us in Christ Jesus. Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish! We don't play the major role. If we did, we'd probably go around bragging that we'd done the whole thing! No, we neither make nor save ourselves. God does both the making and saving. He creates each of us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, work we had better be doing.”⁸

My prayer is that this church can and will continue to hear God's call to be:

Ever faithful, deeply loving, and eternally hopeful!

Amen!

⁷ Henri Nouwen, “With Open Hand,” p. 85

⁸ Ephesians 2: 7-10, from “The Message” translated by Eugene Peterson