

Running the Race

Exodus 20:1-4,7-9; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

Three men who had never been to church found themselves shipwrecked and they floated on a raft for three days without food and water. All of the ships they sighted did not see them. One of the men felt it was time to pray, but none of the three had ever been in a church.

Finally one of the men said, |I grew up across the street from a Roman Catholic church. Maybe I can help out. Bow your heads, fellows and I will give it a try. And then he began to pray “Under the I, 23, Under the O, 44 . . .”

With apologies to our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers, there is a simple truth that underlies this little joke. We often seem to think that in order to be heard by God we have to achieve a certain level of purity or have a certain secret knowledge before God will even listen to us.

Those of my generation who attended Sunday School as children likely had to learn the 10 commandments at some point in your Christian Education as I did. There is also a mind set out there that if we can adhere to the letter of the law of the commandments God will bless us in some way or at the very least, that we will be commendable Christians. We have reached the finish line. But St. Paul who was far more religious as a Pharisee than I will ever be seems to be saying something slightly different to the First Church of Philippi.

It's not that I have already reached this goal or have already been perfected, but I pursue it, so that I may grab hold of it because Christ grabbed hold of me for just this purpose. Brothers and sisters, I myself don't think I've reached it, but I do this one thing: I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me. The goal I pursue is the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus. (Phil 3:12-14 CEB)

Will Willimon writes: “I had known him since he was a college student. Now he was entering

his thirties. When he was a student, he was a self-described “conservative evangelical.” He was keen on Bible study and memorization of scripture and always seemed to have the perfect biblical text for every situation, memorized, right on the tip of his tongue.

So I was surprised to hear him say, “I think I’m losing my faith.”

“What?” I asked. “As long as I have known you, you have always been a champion believer.”

“Not anymore,” he confessed. “Doubts are creeping into my consciousness. Funny, I really knew for sure a lot more about God ten years ago than I do today. I’m coming to question lots of things that I thought I knew for sure.”

“‘Doubts are the ants-in-the-pants of faith,’ said Frederick Buechner,” I told him. “Maybe your doubts are just a sign that you’re growing in your faith. Maybe your faith isn’t being lost. It’s growing up.”

I really believe that. Sometimes people say that they come to church looking for “firm faith.” But what if our faith—our belief and trust in God—is more organic, something in process, growing and changing. Remember, we worship a living God, not a firm, once-and-for-all proposition.”

Some of you may have had dramatic, moving first encounters with Christ. That’s wonderful. But then you wake up the next morning, and though the presence of Christ in your life may not be as dramatic as it was yesterday, nevertheless, he is still there, working with you, busy in your life, forming and reforming you. The church has always called that continuing busyness of God in our life “sanctifying grace.” The word *grace* means “gift.” And when you are in relationship with Christ, the gifts keep coming.

Sanctification is the continuing work of God in our lives after our first awareness of God’s work. The grace, the gifts don’t stop. God has surprises in store for us still. We may now be fully Christian,

that is, fully accepted, forgiven, reconciled. But God isn't finished with us, not by a long shot. God may take us, as the old hymn states: "just as I am, without one plea," but God never leaves us just as God found us.

Look at Paul. He met the risen Christ on the Damascus road in a dramatic encounter. Paul courageously testified to his Christian faith and had suffered greatly for his testimony. In his words to the church at Corinth: "Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; brothers in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches." (2 Cor. 11:24-28)

Paul founded churches all over Asia Minor. And yet Paul, Saint Paul, could testify to the Philippians, "*I myself don't think I've reached [perfection], but I do this one thing: I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me.*" Saint Paul, with all he knew about Christ, saw himself as a person in process. As Paul colorfully says (in the Common English Bible translation) "*Christ grabbed hold of me.*"

For what purpose has Christ grabbed Paul? Paul says it's for continuing growth and development in his understanding of and relationship to Christ.

All this is gift, grace. In church parlance, "justifying grace" signifies what Jesus *did* for us in his cross and resurrection; "sanctifying grace" is what Christ *does* in us in continuing to transform us, draw us closer, and enlist us in the good work of God.

Sometimes we throw around that word *grace*. The grace of God (and I think Paul would back me up on this) is gift, but a gift given with a particular purpose. Dick Heitzenrater, who knows more about Methodist history than just about anybody, thinks that *grace* is one of the most misused words in the church. Grace, says Heitzenrater, doesn't mean a mushy pat on the head by a God who purrs sappily, "I love you just the way you are; promise me you won't change a thing."

According to the dean of United Methodist historians, *grace is the power of God working in you, sometimes in spite of you, to help you live a different life than you would be living if God had left you to your own devices.*

Christ may accept me "just as I am," but he never leaves us just as we are. He promises to make us into the disciples he knows we can (with his active grace) become.

Paul says he is on the way to becoming what God would have him to be. And please don't dismiss Paul's testimony with, "Well, after all, he was *Saint* Paul. I'm just your average layperson."

I am bold to believe that this dynamic, life-changing grace is active right now in all our lives, sanctifying, transforming us into much more faithful disciples than we would have been if God had left us to our own devices.

When someone said something hurtful and prejudiced toward someone of another religion, you—even though you didn't know the person they were talking about, even though the religion being attacked was not your religion—you spoke up.

You were a little amazed by your courage because you don't think of yourself as a particularly courageous person.

That's sanctification.

You grew up dutifully putting your dollar in the offering plate. When you became an adult, you increased your giving, but not by all that much. Yet recently something touched your heart and moved to your wallet. You surprised yourself (you have never been called overly generous by anybody) by increasing your giving to the church, asking more of yourself, giving at a level that is new to you. How did that happen?

That's tangible, material testimony to the sanctifying grace of God busy in your life (and in your wallet!).

In an old marriage service, just after the couple had promised to love each other and live together throughout their lives, the pastor used to pronounce solemnly, "Be well assured that if these vows are kept inviolate, as God's word demands, God will bless your marriage, will establish your home in peace."

In other words, the service promised that if you dared to risk making a promise of fidelity, God's grace would help you be more faithful. Many people in this congregation have found that to be true. You kept your promises, and God kept God's promises. That's sanctifying grace.

Maybe we ought to write a warning over all of the Christian life: DON'T DARE TRY TO BE A DISCIPLE WITHOUT THE SANCTIFYING GRACE OF GOD.

You can't do this without divine assistance. Of course, to be frank, you can't do much of anything worth doing for God without divine assistance. So that's why we read Saint Paul's testimony of the grace of God working in his life and give thanks. What Paul says about Christ encouraging him, prodding him, helping him also applies to you and me.

Amazing as it may seem—you and I, even you and I, are being sanctified right now. Thanks be to God! Amen.