

By Grace  
Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 107:1-3  
Reading from the New Testament: Ephesians 2:1-20

While it didn't alleviate my guilt, it did confirm the love that will never let us go. This week I heard an encouraging word about a saint who died far too early many years ago. I have long carried with me the sorrow that I could not be the pastor she needed at the time, that my attempts at ministry were inadequate to the moment. She had grown up in the church I was serving at the time, the child of parents whose lives had long been centered in faith and grounded in the church where they were revered as servant leaders.

Our paths had seldom crossed, my ministry there having begun after her studies began at UNC Chapel Hill, where she would pursue a nursing degree. Thus, our encounters were limited to those few church door greetings when she traveled home at Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. So, I knew a few things about her, but did not have the joy of knowing her well. She had been highly involved in the church's youth ministry under the leadership of a dynamic associate pastor who had moved to Durham just before I came to the church. Montreat was a literal and metaphorical mountaintop experience for Katherine in

addition to a youth mission trip to Jamaica. She had also become involved with the campus ministry of University Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill. And it was in Chapel Hill when Katherine was diagnosed with lung cancer, that insidious, slow evolving beast that ravages body, mind, and spirit. I grieved for her and for her parents who had recently also endured a long, dark journey with a son who had been sexually abused by a popular teacher at the local private school.

As with any pastor of a small-town church, I had quickly become accustomed to the long commutes to hospitals in Asheville, Hickory, Charlotte, Winston-Salem, Durham, and Chapel Hill. I even remember searching for a unique 7th Day Adventist Hospital in the small mountain town of Fletcher. So, I was already used to getting lost in the hallways of places like UNC Hospital.

I can't speak for other pastors, but I know it is true for this pastor, a hospital visit to someone you don't actually know carries with it a level of awkwardness and flustered discomfiture. There are no shared stories from which spring memories and conversations. And in such a sensitive setting as a hospital room, it is hard not to feel as though you are intruding on the interior of someone's life without a passport. This

is particularly true when the hallway is lined with the patient's classmates holding vigil, encamped as watchful protectors of their friend. I remember that I managed to run the gauntlet of suspicious eyes, but I cannot recall what I said or even whether I prayed amidst the traffic of nurses, nutritionists, LPN's, and therapists; but I do remember that as I walked away, I felt the familiar guilt that I had somehow fumbled the opportunity to help raise that window through which the sacred enters in. Intention and presence could not overcome the absence of a connection that cannot be manufactured.

Katherine would continue her battle, bravely. A later visit with her at home included communion, and since both parents were elders, we had prayer and the laying on of hands, but still, it felt a little too mechanical because there wasn't the depth of connection she had experienced in the youth ministry. I was disappointed, and though they never expressed it, I sensed her parents were probably underwhelmed by my inability to be what she needed me to be.

It still readily pricks my conscience. And yet, my inability in no way inhibited God's ability to render what was needed. Remember the youth pastor I mentioned? I also told you that he had moved to

Durham, which as any ACC devotee knows is but 10 miles from Chapel Hill. Providentially, he was able to tap the kind of connection that fosters raw truth-telling. She could, with him, risk expressing the burdens of the heart.

A few years after I moved to Charlotte, he moved to Nashville, and in my reading this week, I just happened to come across a sermon of his that recalled his interaction with Katherine. He said Katherine fought against that cancer with everything she had; and when there was no more that they could do for her, she said to [him], 'I know how to live, but how do you die? I'm scared.' [He doesn't] remember what [he] told her. But [he] remembers what she told [him], for [he] watched her handle her days with dignity and grace.

"[He] heard how on late evenings when she could not sleep from either pain or worry, she would call her mother, calls sometimes by phone, sometimes to her bedside, either way, they would open a hymnal and sing together. 'Our God our Help in Ages Past our Hope in Years to Come.' They would sing, 'God of our life, through all the circling years, we trust in Thee. In all the past, through all our hopes and fears, Thy hand we see' ... They would sing until they could see the future

together. And when she finally found the mystery revealed, she could rest. You know how to die when you know what the future will bring."

(Donovan Drake, *Day 1*)

Katherine would fight through the disease long enough to graduate with her nursing degree, and her brave journey so influenced her community in Chapel Hill, that with her death they established a nursing scholarship in her name, so that her spirit would continue to provide a path for future Tar Heel healers to follow.

Friends, that is grace, for in Katherine's case, and in ways far beyond our understanding, the circle truly remained unbroken. God provided ... in a way I certainly could not ... and in ways far greater than anyone could imagine.

"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."

That "he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." These immeasurable riches are such that our days are filled with graces we take advantage of, yet seldom recognize or acknowledge. The driver's kindness, flashing their lights and stopping to allow you to turn left on a busy road; the volunteer weathering the arthritis and giving up a Saturday to guide you to the next open seat at the mass vaccination event; the opposable thumbs that allow you to open the honey jar, grasp the shovel, and brush your teeth; the ER doc hosting the church youth event, who readily and calmly stitches your kid's busted lip after a collision with a staircase; the heart-rending power of love that catches you by surprise as the lights of a gas station reflect through the cross in the stained glass window during a Good Friday Tenebrae service; the chin of your dog resting on your thigh with those big eyes relishing your presence.

You didn't earn these things. You didn't purchase these moments. They came as a gift, often unplanned and spontaneous, unbidden, mysteriously appearing, catching your breath, inclining your heart to sing. Grace. It doesn't wait for you to approach, it came to you, elected you, claimed you, though you may well not have sensed it yet.

It began so long ago, "In the beginning ... God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." The Lord told Abram, "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." The prophet Jeremiah reported the Lord's intent, "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."

The angel told Zechariah he would have a son that would be integral to God's intent, "He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." And Gabriel told Mary, "nothing will be impossible with God." To the shepherds came the word, "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

John explains, "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." Paul

declares, "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." And thus, we read today, "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."

Grace, a gift freely given, never coerced, selflessly provided, inexhaustible, eternal, a love that just will ... not ... let ... us ... go. Theologians are pretty clear about this, God doesn't have a need, God is sufficient in Godself, but God does have a want ... you. The heart of God desires relationship, fellowship with you, and is not content to wait for it, and so God draws you to it through acts both subtle and profound. Wherever love is manifested, God is there, staking God's claim upon you.

I recall the image one seminary professor suggested. Say you're a fish in a tank and the water that holds you is God's grace; God has even given you the gills to extract the oxygen from the water. You may claim you are not a fish submerged in the waters of grace, even closing your



gills like a stubborn child. But guess what? You are still a fish in a tank of grace.

God has claimed you. Maybe what's missing in your life is not the next big thing, the perfect job, or the perpetually adoring mirror-mirror on the wall, or whatever it is that you are convinced will make you wallow in a big ol' vat of happy. Maybe what's missing in your life is gratitude ... for a love that will not let you go ... a love typically most clearly seen in the rearview mirror. For then we can see and realize our claims of independence have always been an illusion.

Samuel Wells, vicar of St. Martin in the Fields Church just off London's Trafalgar Square, says, "Gratitude is the moment we turn from seeing dependence as a burden and begin to see it as a gift. Gratitude is the lens we are given into how dependence creates relationship." He suggests, "a person might say, 'If it weren't for my poor eyesight, I wouldn't need to ask a neighbor child's help reading my mail and opening tins of dog food, I wouldn't be able to feed my dog regularly. If I didn't have a dog, I wouldn't have heard the noise and disturbance when my fridge malfunctioned and began to smoke. Because of the dog's barking I was able to press the panic button in my

home and support quickly arrived and my kitchen was saved and my belongings were rescued; perhaps I and even my neighbors would otherwise have lost our lives. A whole chain of events tracing back to my poor eyesight and the way it created the need of relationship.'

"A person who lived close by might say, 'Because my near neighbor had poor eyesight I used to go round to her house during the week to open her emails and letters and read them to her. And because I loved her dog I used to go round more often than she needed me to. And because I got used to talking to her about her messages and entering into her personal world, I felt more comfortable sharing with her my difficulty in sleeping, my nightmares, my trembling hands, my confused and patchy memories of my real father whom we don't see anymore. And that was how I got so interested in care of the elderly, because in her I saw both a gentle soul who was able to hear my distress, and also a person whose vulnerability made her subject to the kind of harm I now realize I suffered as a young child. And I came to pioneer a new form of care for seniors, which made me famous in my field. And all because I had a near neighbor and I loved her dog.'" (Samuel Wells, *Walk Humbly*)

"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."

Look in that rearview mirror. It's there again and again. You didn't earn these things. You didn't purchase these moments. They came as a gift, often unplanned and spontaneous, unbidden, mysteriously appearing, catching your breath, inclining your heart to sing. Grace. Amen.