

“The Gift of Grace”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Lent IV – March 11, 2018

Ephesians 2: 1-10

What’s the greatest gift you’ve ever been given? Perhaps it was a picture of a fun-filled time you had with your best friend. Or maybe it was a special toy your relative gave you when you were a child. Or maybe it was a handmade item someone gave you that you’ve continued to use for years and years.

We talked about gifts in the bible study on Tuesday, and what makes them unique and special to us. A gift doesn’t have to be an object or have great monetary value to be meaningful. A special gift can be time shared with those we love, such as a visit with grandchildren to the art museum, or a meal with good friends. What makes a gift meaningful is how it makes us feel loved and special. One person described how she as a young girl received a doll for Christmas, and that made her feel particularly special, since she was one of nine children in her family. Gifts that are particularly meaningful and special to us are rooted in memories, as well as reflect the shared love we have for the person who gives us the gift.

A couple of years ago, I shared in a sermon my memory of saving up all my money as a child to buy a particular Lego set. I cashed in my \$2 bills and special coins out of my little silver piggy bank, and my mom took me to Service Merchandise to get the Lego Spaceship.

That Christmas, after I had shared that story in a sermon, I received two very special gifts. One was this drawing that Erin made of that Lego set which I had saved up for. The other was from my mom and dad, and it was the silver piggy bank I had as a child. Inside the piggy bank was \$38, the amount it cost for the set, including \$2 bills and the special coins I had used as a child. I keep both of these on my desk in my office. Those gifts are reminders of the memories I had as a child, as well as of people who are important to me in my life.

But gifts can also influence and change us. One person in the bible study shared about the gift her daughter received when she had car trouble in the North Carolina mountains. She and her two children were stranded, but thanks to the help of strangers, they were able to get back on the road. When she offered to pay the good Samaritans for their assistance, they simply said, “Just pay it forward.”

I shared with the bible study that one gift that influenced me was given when each of our girls was born. It was given by the father of my best friend from college. At each of the girls’ baptisms, he gave us \$500. He was a very successful businessman, but also a very generous human

being, who never forgot where he came from and he wanted to help others with the blessings God had bestowed on him. Those initial gifts by Lew Hooper were what began Erin and Heather's college savings accounts. As we prepare to start using them this fall for Erin, I am reminded of this deeply meaningful gift. I am also reminded of the impact our lives of generosity can have on others, and how I am called to show such gratitude in my acts of grace to others.

Today's passage from Ephesians is our reminder as Christians that the faith we have in Christ Jesus is not of our own doing; it is solely and completely a gift from God. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" (2:8). It is a gift we did not deserve, but have been given out of God's deep, rich mercy toward us, his creatures. It is also a gift that should guide and lead us moving forward, as we were "created in Christ Jesus for good works" to a hurting and broken world.

Fred Craddock recalls his German friend and New Testament scholar, Joachim Jeremias, reminiscing about his life in Israel where his parents were missionaries: *After WWII, Joachim returned nervously to Israel to see if the treatment of Jews by the Nazi regime had severed forever his friendships there. When he knocked at the door of an old friend, he was welcomed with an embrace. He joined his friend in the backyard, where a crude tent had been erected for the observance of the Feast of Tents or Booths, a time of recalling Israel's wandering in the desert, dwelling in tents. Fastened on the entrance to the tent were two slips of paper, each bearing a brief message: on the left was "From God"; on the right was "To God." There, simply yet dramatically, said Joachim, was the whole of life: from God, to God, and in the years between, a tent.*

Craddock continues: His recollection is a commentary on (this passage from Ephesians). Ephesians 1-3 is widely regarded as a baptismal liturgy, or at least a portion of one. How appropriate that the church prepare candidates for baptism in Lent! What most needs to be impressed on the candidate on the occasion of being set apart for God and God's service in a world confused and estranged from its Creator? One could do for the baptismal candidate what the writer of Ephesians does for the reader, that is, interpret what is happening to a person entering the Christian life. To "interpret" is not to enter the classroom for an academic exercise; interpreting is a common and necessary activity of every community. It is what a parent does when a child asks, "What is that noise?" or "Do hamsters go to heaven?" It is what a physician does when a patient worries about a numbness in the left arm or intense headaches. Teachers do it, as do lawyers, friends, spouses and neighbors. As do churches. In fact, interpreting is a primary activity of the church and its leaders. "What does it mean," asks the candidate, "to become a Christian?"

The Ephesians text answers the question experientially. The language is vivid: You were dead. This is to say, you were caught in a futile way of life obedient to desires of the flesh, seeking the approval of your culture, heeding every inclination that led away from God, aimless and helpless to extricate yourself. But God, rich in love and mercy, by free unmerited favor quickened your life and set you in a safe place in the constant presence of Christ. You are now alive, but not simply in order to enjoy God's grace. You have been created again as God's masterpiece for two purposes: to show what God can do through Jesus Christ, and to serve human need, engaging in good works which reflect the nature of God as gracious love.

*The Ephesians text answers the question historically. As unexciting as this may sound, it must never be over-looked. Israel has a history, Jesus has a history, the church has a history. To be a Christian is to enter into that history, to say we were in Egypt, we were in Nazareth, we were in Jerusalem, Rome, Geneva, Wittenberg and Boston. But the primary historical location of the believer, according to Ephesians 2, is Jesus Christ. The text does not use the usual Pauline phrase "in Christ Jesus," but "with Christ Jesus." The historical references to him are brief but sufficient: he was crucified, he died, he was buried, he was raised, he was enthroned. To be a Christian, says the text, is to be crucified with Jesus, to die with him, to be buried with him, to be raised with him, to be enthroned with him. Spiritual? Yes. Mystical? Perhaps. Subjective? Partially. Experiential but inseparable from history? Always (Fred Craddock, "From God, To God," *The Christian Century*, March 22, 2003, 18).*

Imagine for a moment reading this letter for the first time in the first-century early church. Imagine you are a new believer to the faith, you are not Jewish in background, so you were considered a Gentile. You have a lot of questions or uncertainties about what this faith in Christ Jesus was all about. You also don't have a lot to compare it to, and you sometimes wonder if the past life you led before being introduced to this faith is looking better and better. Then you read, "You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived . . . All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else." That's who you once were - that's not who you are now.

Imagine you are a young priest in Germany in the 1500s, and you are troubled by the church's practices and traditions. You see corruption and abuse of power, and you witness the selling of indulgences as a means of people receiving forgiveness for their sins. Then you read, "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." And you are inspired to write and preach and teach this message

of faith by grace alone, a message which inspires a movement of reformation in the Church of Jesus Christ.

Imagine you are the parent of a child who only seems to drain your energy rather than replenish it. Imagine you are at the end of a week when all you've experienced are failures and mistakes. Imagine you are at the end of your long battle with cancer, and you know the end of your earthly life is not a matter of months, but days. Imagine you are struggling with addiction to drugs or alcohol, or you love someone who is an addict, and you are nearly out of hope. Imagine you are in any of those situations, and you read, "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great mercy with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." We once were dead; now we are alive. We once were without hope; now we are always filled with promise. We once felt unloved and rejected; now we are forever loved and welcomed through God's unmerited grace.

All of us are part of this story of grace, this history of God's deep love for the world. It is a gift which is offered to us, and we can decide how to respond to that grace. As Jeff Paschal writes: *Yes, we are saved by grace through faith. No, we do not rely on good works to be saved. But we are what God has made us – people "created in Christ Jesus for good works." So good works are now transformed. Instead of being frantic means for trying to save ourselves, good works are the blessed opportunity for us to live out the lives we were destined to live. Good works are expressions of Christ alive in us ministering to the world. Good works are demonstrations of our present reality and future; we are God's royal children exercising God's dominion of love in the world* (Jeff Paschal, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2008: 113-115*).

The gift of grace is given to all of us as an integral part of the story of faith of the church. How will we respond to God's unconditional love? May our good works be expressions of our gratitude and thanksgiving to God for this gift we have received.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith." Thanks be to God. Amen.