**Sermon: Grace Reigns (and Rains)**

**Scripture:  Luke 15:1-10**

**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**

**Date: September 11, 2022**

O Living Water, O My Redeemer (Oh God my Savior) (O My Great Shepherd)

If I ever needed you. I need you now.

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And that is how we come to God… or rather how God comes to us, not in how we’re filled but in what we need, not in all we’ve found but in what we’ve lost and how we are lost. We say in prayer “if I ever needed you, I need you now” and that’s a prayer that lays us open for grace.  It’s a good place to begin here at the start of another fall, with this beautiful little 5-letter word - grace.  It is the Christian faith in a word, it all hinges upon it, the whole story, the arc of how we begin, how we are sustained and where we will land, so needless to say it’s a big, deep, rich, you might say inexhaustible notion, grace is, and so this morning I thought I’d offer a brief meditation on grace and I want to do so by asking 4 questions -

what is it?

How is it gained?

What does it do for us?

And how do we respond… to such a thing as grace?

So what is it, what do we mean when we talk of grace? In a Christian context we’re not necessarily referring to how Webster defines it as elegance or beauty of form, manner, or motion or an attractive quality or endowment or to adorn something, right, something or someone is graceful or full of grace or has graced a room. Those are all ways of using the word which are not unrelated but the heart of the Christian notion of grace simply means favor or goodwill and specifically grace is to be in God’s favor and goodwill.  It can manifest then as being graceful, full of grace, gracing the world around but grace as a Christian notion is God’s favor and experienced as God’s love. That’s what grace is.

And if that’s what grace is what does grace do? In the Christian imagination it’s attached to a very specific verb that the Apostle Paul writes of in his letters after he has his conversion experience on the road to Damascus.  Remember Paul persecuted Jesus followers until he experienced the resurrected Jesus who asks him quite blank “Paul, why are you persecuting me?”  And in that experience Paul has this overwhelming sense of being saved - saved from his own base instincts, saved from passions and patterns that diminished him and others, saved for something greater in this life and the next. And the way he most famously names it, is in his letter to the Ephesians is that “we are saved by grace through faith”.  Have you heard that?  One of the most famous of all phrases for Protestant Christians in particular.  So what does God’s grace do?  Grace saves. And… what does that mean exactly?

Well, many if not all of us humans have this existential experience on some level or another of the opposite of being saved which would be being abandoned or discarded as worthless or lost as unimportant? And it’s an experience that is accompanied by fear, that we will be lost, abandoned, discarded, that we really in the final analysis don’t matter and can be discarded as easily as kept around and this fear and sadness then drives us to make sure we DO matter, that we ARE worth saving, that we aren’t discarded and that drive sometimes can have good outcomes but often times not great outcomes. And so why grace is such an important and beautiful concept is precisely because GRACE saves. God’s grace saves us, it saves you, it saves me.

I want to put aside what conservative Christianity insists on making the central point that being “saved” is all about going to heaven and not landing in hell, because I hate that, I hate that that’s how it’s always framed because it makes such a beautiful concept, a threat, and undermines the whole notion of grace.  So let’s let that go please and just stick with our own very real grappling with the human pain that many of us believe we are essentially discardable, while the Christian faith says that God’s grace doesn’t discard us but saves us – “I’m going to save this for my very own.”

And Jesus tells stories that say just this. Like the two for this morning. And the beautiful thing about those parables is how they describe how God save us, cause our salvation could come with a bunch of conditions, you know?  We are saved by God if we do this and if we do that, if we are good enough and limit our badness and work hard enough. But what these parables make clear, and everything else about Jesus’ life, is that God’s grace, God’s favor is freely given, unearned and undeserved… simply, purely beautifully GIVEN. And even this far – these parables make it clear that it’s not like God freely gives in this way: let me demonstrated - here look at this beautiful chocolate bar sustainably sourced, it’s free, come and get it meaning you gotta get up and move forward and climb the steps and take it out of my hand but rather it’s more like this - *I run out to the congregation and give the chocolate bar!* - God takes the initiative. God goes out to find us and give us the free gift of grace.

The only thing required apparently, as the Episcopal Priest and gourmet chef, Robert Farrar Capon names it, is what commends us to receive God’s grace is our being lost, least, last, little or dead.  It’s all through the Gospels is Jesus turning to and reaching out to the lost, the least, the last, the little or the dead.

So this answers our 3rd question, how is it gained?  It’s not. That was a trick question. It’s not gained, it’s given, freely without prerequisite and without strings attached.  Ok, maybe there’s one precondition and that’s that we do have to be willing to receive it, to open our hands and receive what God so deeply wants to give us which is God’s love, the grace of God’s love and it usually the lost, last least, little and dead (or dying) who are the one’s most receptive . We have to be willing to be put on the Great Shepherd’s shoulders and walked back to the flock for the party back at the barn that he wants to throw for us. The great news is that we all fit into those categories at some level of another.  If nothing else we’ve all experienced dying on one level or another, one day we will all be dead and most of us know also being lost and least, last and little too, don’t we? Perfect, open your hands to God’s grace.

But let’s stick with DEAD for a minute. Cause in the Christian imagination, GRACE and DEATH are oddly very much related. And the connection comes in the figure of Jesus and his culminating act of his life which was his death on the cross. The *mechanism* that triggers grace is thankfully not up to us finally to trigger through good behavior, right thinking, appropriate associations, but rather it’s happened in God and that was when God took the deepest, darkest, most hopeless, dead end, emptiest, chasm spot of human existence known by us as DEATH – the big black gate that threatens nothingness - and God freely and fully fills it up with Godself through Jesus’ death, so that our little deaths in life, like when we die inside because of this or that experience or our big deaths at the very end become what? Ready for this?! – through Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected our deaths become not a final separation and discarding but an access point to God, or I should say the access point by which God can finally get to us, like a shepherd coming for his lost sheep! It’s beautiful, isn’t it? *The late writer and pastor Rachel Held Evans says this about it – “For all our lofty ruminations about God, for all the symphonies and theologies and liturgies for the divine, I’ve yet to find a more profound expression of God’s nature than the one that begins “once upon a time, there was a shepherd and a lost sheep.”*

So how do we receive God’s favor, God’s grace? Somehow in the mystery of Jesus’ death and resurrection we die, in the end or we die to all our little human efforts to be something more or other than who we are as God’s freely given beloveds and boom, there’s God’s grace. You see how it works? If I ever needed you, I need you now.

And to answer the final question, how should we respond? That’s an easy one, how we respond to any lovely gift given us, or the greatest gift ever given with two words - thank you. And then we interact with the world around us with new eyes and a new heart because finally we realize that it’s none of it about deserving and earning but about God’s love and that will likely soften us to everyone and make us better to adorn the room of this world with beauty.

And that’s the whole story and I’m stickin’ with it! What is grace, it’s God’s favor through God’s love. And how is it gained? It’s not, it’s freely given and we only have to acknowledge our need and open our hands and hearts to receive it. And what does it do for us?  It saves us.  We are not discarded as worthless and meaningless to God, we are saved, by Love for Love in God’s grace.