

## Foundations of Our Faith: Grace

I really wanted this car. A long time ago, 4 or 5 cars lives ago, we needed a car, and I was ready to try an SUV. They were really expensive, but I found a sweet deal. Almost half price! Of course, there was the sticker that said in no uncertain terms, 'As is.' The salesperson explained in great detail, especially after he found out I was a lawyer, 'you know what 'as is' means, right? You take it as you find it. Don't you be bringing this puppy, fine puppy that it is, back here if it breaks, OK?"

But it was a shiny black car, with a cool leather interior. Lots of bells and whistles to play with. And for a while it was great. Until the transmission started acting up. I became a real favorite at the car repair shop. I think they put my picture on their customer wall of fame. And then one day I called them and asked them to come to the mall (you remember, where Meijer is now), and pick up my sick little puppy. I was parked where Panera Bread is now. And that was the end of my lemon, that I took a big risk on because I really wanted it as mine.

(SLIDES) "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions..." Ephesians 2:1.

When God finds us we are already dead. We come with the worst kind of 'as is' label. "This car is perfect for parts." How did we get that way?

(SLIDE) Paul explains in vv. 2-3 that we all have two basic problems. We follow the ways of the world. We know that money is not the main goal in life and yet we make it our idol. We know that there is nothing wrong with food or sex, not when used properly. I mean, God made us to want, to need both. The problems happen when we allow them to be consume us, when our desire for things that gratify our God-given desires are perverted. And we are all, in one way or another, people who are unable to obey God's laws that are designed to bring us joy. That is sin. That is the result of the original sin that infects the human race since Adam and Eve like plague for which there is no human vaccine.

(SLIDE, Eph. 2:4-5a) But God. I love it when the Bible makes this transition, as I have told you many times before. But God. Grace follows when you read those words. God sees the 'as is' sticker. God knows a lemon when God sees one. But God purchases us from anyway.

(SLIDE, 2 5b) "...it is by grace you have been saved." There is it. What is grace? God is the car purchaser who knows exactly what the problems are under the hood and he buys us anyway. Not because we are good or have great merit. Not because we are worthy. God pays the price of our lives because God is a God of grace.

You see, in God's eyes, we are not lemons. We are perfect. God sees us the shiny new model we want to be but cannot on our own figure out how to become. God transforms us because God loves us when we are not perfect with the full intention to make us perfect. We don't need to be picked up by the tow truck in the mall parking lot because God's grace won't let that happen. We belong to God, and God keeps what he loves.



A long time ago there was a movement which came to be called the orphan trains. The movement was the precursor of the modern foster parent programs, based on the theory that a child in a home is going to be blessed in ways that a child in an institution cannot be blessed. Anyway, putting aside for the moment all of the controversy that accompanied the orphan trains, they had some beautiful results.

As Peter Marty writes in an article for Christian Century (and this sermon is really a long riff on the ideas in that article), between 1854 and 1929 children's aid organizations in big cities sent over 200,000 children who were abandoned by their parents on trains to states 'out west.' As the orphan trains arrived at the train depots their new parents would greet them and take them home, giving them new lives.

Well, this made me think of how God is the ultimate parent at the train depot. We are traveling through life, so often feeling lost and alone, abandoned even. We go through the mountains and valleys of life, across long boring stretches of the flatlands. Trains-full of us, chugging along, heading into the sunset states. And then the train arrives and we don't know what to expect. But God is there, arms open wide, and God says, 'welcome home'. We get a new suit of clothes. And God puts us in our own room and gives us a new purpose in life, a new reason to be alive. Orphans no more.

It is by grace you have been saved. Not because we are especially good children, but we are children who need someone to love us, to hold us, to parent us. We need someone to be for us, not against us. God, the ultimate Adoptive Parent.

You know the musical, *Annie*, right? Annie is an orphan in the big city, living with a bunch of other orphan girls. But she has a dream of finding her parents. And when Daddy Warbucks shows up she is given a room in what might as well be a palace. The sun that she dreamed would come out tomorrow had finally risen.

(SLIDE, Eph. 2:6-7) That is what God does for us when he adopts us. God raises up with Christ in the heavenly realms. God wants to show us the incomparable riches that are in store for those who God are orphans no more.

(SLIDE, 2:8-9) For it is by grace you have been saved-through faith. You believe in the one who will rescue you from the orphanage and raise you up to the high places where you will overcome the nasty, evil people who have populated your life. He will raise you up from the bunk room of the orphanage to the throne room of your home with King Jesus. Not because of what you have done, but because of your faith in the one who has already done it.

(SLIDE) As our catechism reminds us, true faith is a sure knowledge, a wholehearted trust that God has granted us freely forgiveness of sins, eternal righteousness, and salvation. "These are gifts of sheer grace, granted solely by Christ's merit." Sheer grace. Can there be two more beautiful words in the Christian faith? Grace alone. Faith alone.

(SLIDE, 2:10) Why would God do that? Because we are God's handiwork. God made us, in Christ Jesus. We are saved not because of good works, but to do good works created in advance for us to do. We are a part of the on-going creative work of our God of grace through our Savior Christ Jesus.

(SLIDE) As the catechism goes on to teach us, we have been delivered from our misery by grace, but that is not the end of the story. We are being restored by his Spirit into his image so that with our whole lives we can show how thankful we are for his free gifts, for his grace.

(SLIDE) That is the idea I invite you to dwell in this week. If you will accept God's grace you will know what it means to dwell with Christ Jesus as you do God's good works.

Good works like Heidi Robinson, a teacher at Maryland Avenue Elementary School. She was on the national news this week talking about her work delivering her virtual lesson plans to her students. In her interview she was wearing a sweatshirt which read 'grace changes everything.' The news story closed with a little boy saying to his teacher, safely distanced, 'I hope we can have breakfast together.' God's good works are that simple and take that much dedication.

And that is the work of the church too, to help little children come to know God's grace. I am reminded of the story of Michael, a foster child.

When five-year-old Michael showed up at the courthouse for an adoption hearing with his foster parents, he found a group of surprise visitors waiting--his entire kindergarten class. Michael's teacher, Mrs. McKee got the idea when she

encountered Michael's foster mom dropping him off at school. The two of them devised a plan, and McKee organized the field trip, bus and all.

Our work as a church is to show up, the entire class, to welcome the children and adults who need to know that they are loved 'as is.' Those children and adults who need to know they will never be left as broken and useless in the mall parking lot. Those orphans who need to know that we are riding the orphan train with them to the greatest adoption party in the world where all who will receive God's offer of grace will hear the marvelous words of grace: this child whom I love is now declared to be mine forever.

