

Sermon
Lent Four-B
St. Andrew's, Methuen
March 14, 2021
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Numbers 21:4-9
Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22
Ephesians 2:1-10
John 3:14-21

I've told you about the Sunday morning I pretended to be sick so I got to stay home from church. It was right after my 12th birthday and I had received a crystal radio set from my parents, so I wanted to stay home from church so I could assemble the radio to see if I could make it work.

So, after my parents and brothers left for church, I opened the box and put the little radio together, then I attached the battery, turned the tuner, and then sound started coming out of the tiny speaker.

I find this a helpful metaphor for how the Bible understands the spiritual life. Saint Paul today says that human beings are like radios with no connection to any power—either from the wall or from a battery. Therefore, we are unable to pick up the God waves floating all around us. He says we are dead—unable to pick up God because we are disconnected from the power necessary to turn us on and make us work.

He says that in our natural state human beings are dead to God's broadcast.

Theologian Karl Barth says we are like Lazarus, dead in the grave, incapable of even hearing.

Therefore, if we are ever to play the beautiful music we were created to play, we must receive the power to turn us on, to wake us up. Since this power doesn't belong to us, we can only be turned on by grace.

Our readings today use different images to describe this grace that turns us on to God who is all around us.

In Numbers grace looks like sick people receiving healing power from God when they look at this bronze snake on a pole that Moses holds up in the air.

In Ephesians, grace looks like people dead in their sins, receiving life-giving power from God through the pure gift of Jesus Christ, so that Paul says,

“But 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 Christ....”

Then in the gospel of John, Jesus says grace is Christ lifted up on the cross, so we might look to Christ and receive the power to come alive in God.

Each of these images is telling us that being connected to God—salvation—is not **self-generated, but God—generated.**

And this is as true, not just at the beginning when we first believe, but every moment of our spiritual journey, so that we can never boast about our life in God because it always comes as grace.

The person who goes to church every week is in need of this grace every bit as much as the person who spends their day hurting people in their quest for success.

Here’s the thing: being a good person who lives a moral life does not have the power to connect us to God.

It reminds me of a story you all know:

He was such a good boy. He did everything his parents asked of him: He worked hard in school, was faithful in attending church, excelled in memorizing the Scriptures, and he obeyed all the rules for holy living. He grew up into a productive, faithful young man. He walked the straight and narrow and was an example to his peers.

But now he is in prison and in a year will be on death row for disobeying the police, causing riots and seducing others to join a new age cult.

His family is heartbroken and his clergy are deeply disappointed.

What in the world has happened to Saul of Tarsus, who we know as the apostle Paul?

Writing today to the Ephesians from his prison cell, he says what happened to him he was grace—not only unearned but also unexpected.

Paul did not pray for it, because HE DID NOT WANT IT!

His life was going great—he was living the dream: a rising star.

Then grace wrecked his life.

We all know the story that he tells three times in the book of Acts about **when the risen Christ appears to him on the road to Damascus.**

But too often we miss the inner meaning of that encounter.

We say that was when he makes Jesus his lord and savior or when he is washed in the blood of the Lamb, or when he is baptized.

And all those things do happen to Paul as a result of that encounter, but what plugs him into God and overturns his life?

Paul is seized by the power of a great affection.

I first heard this phrase from former Roman Catholic priest, recovering addict, and prolific author Brennan Manning who describes his experience of grace as being **seized by the power of a great affection.**

The current that flows into Paul waking him up isn't electricity, but Divine Love.

We, like Paul, are raised to conform: to conform to the norms and values of our parents and society; to conform to the laws of our nation and the beliefs of our church.

We conform so we will not be condemned.

But here's the thing: Conforming earns us the respect and admiration of others, but it does not connect us to God.

Only being seized by the power of a great affection does that.

The good news of this and every day is "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world", rather God sends the Son because God so loved the world."

So to be people of faith who play the music of God, we must grow beyond conforming to the world.

And we can't transform ourselves. We are saved by grace.

But what we can do every day is to take a few minutes to look on Christ in order to remind ourselves that even in our failures we are not condemned, because we have been seized by the power of a great affection.