
We Are What God Has Made Us

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Lauren Holder
Lent 4 – Year B

Grace, grace, grace to you and peace from God our creator and the Lord Jesus Christ. We are going to talk about grace today.

But first, we are going to talk about Nicodemus. Oh, I have a tender place in my heart for Nicodemus. When I realized our Gospel text today would be the story of Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night, asking Jesus the questions keeping him up, I closed my eyes and pictured my childhood Bible.

Not the story bible I would have had as a young child, but the one I was given at my baptism, when I was seven years old. It was the Bible I took to the Baptist church with me every Sunday, dutifully writing notes in the margins as the preacher preached. It was the Bible I used for Bible drills, the one I took to camp, the one I highlighted with bright colors, the one I read from when searching for answers.

And interspersed throughout this Bible were just a few glossy pages of pictures depicting scenes from Jesus' life. One of those pictures was of Nicodemus and Jesus talking at night. I remember it so vividly. Nicodemus with a long greying beard, showing his age. Jesus with kind eyes. It was a closeup of their faces, but the dark blue and purple hues gave the impression of sitting outside on a dark warm night.

That is the context of today's Gospel reading. Jesus is talking to Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a holy man, a Pharisee, who sought out Jesus after Jesus had turned the tables in the Temple. And when he finds Jesus, he calls him rabbi, teacher, and says he knows that Jesus has come from God.

Jesus responds by telling Nicodemus that anyone hoping to see the Kingdom of God must be born from above, must be born of water and Spirit, must be born anew.

This puzzles Nicodemus. So much so that Nicodemus asks one of the most absurd questions in all of scripture... can one enter a mother's womb a second time and be born again?

On behalf of all the mamas of the world, let me say emphatically... No! No, Nicodemus, you cannot do that. No, nope, no way.

Jesus, seeing his efforts to illustrate a point have zoomed over Nicodemus' head, points instead to a story Nicodemus would have known well—the story of Moses lifting a serpent made of gold onto a stick so that the Hebrew people who had been bitten by snakes would be healed by looking at this snake. It's a longer story for another day, but a story Nicodemus would have learned as a child and taught as a religious leader—a story reminding us that sometimes to be healed, we have to look at and ponder the thing meant to kill us. Rather than averting our eyes and living in denial, we must look death in the face so that we might live in truth.

I can just see the lightbulb beginning to flicker in Nicodemus' head.

And Jesus continues, saying God loves the world... as in, everyone. All the people. And out of that love for the world, God sent Jesus to shine a light on the things we'd rather hide in the darkness, hide in shame, hide in denial. Because bringing all those things we'd rather hide into the light is what saves us! Living in fear and shame and denial is death. Living in truth and light is real, full, abundant life!

This is why our reading from Ephesians today begins with the bleak words: You were dead. You were dead!

You were dead like everyone else in the whole wide world because like everyone you made mistakes—things done and left undone. And those mistakes, those transgressions, that sin we all wrestle with and often try to hide—it was life-draining.

But then the letter reminds the Ephesians: “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.” Oh, to be loved EVEN when we were dead, even when we were stuck in sin, even when we were living in darkness and denial.

Friends, this is what grace is. God loves us even then, maybe even especially then. We don’t have to raise ourselves up from death, no! We aren’t alone in cleaning up our mistakes, no! We aren’t left to our own devices. God doesn’t say, “You’re a mess! Come back after you’ve pulled yourself together.” No.

God sees us, loves us, shines a light on us so we can see ourselves—the good, the bad, the ugly—and saves us from our sin and shame and death.

The letter to the Ephesians says: “For by *grace* you have been saved through faith, *and this is not your own doing*; it is the gift of God.”

Ah, grace. It’s a hard word to wrap our heads around. I think a lot of us—myself included—are actually more comfortable with the idea of *earning* God’s favor. I say that because I spend an awful lot of time and energy trying to be the perfect friend, the perfect parent, the perfect partner, and it’s exhausting. The trying is exhausting, but the failure is too.

I need to spend less energy on trying to be perfect and more energy on trying to understand grace—and the implications of God’s grace in my life. I think the words of the hymn we heard before the Gospel help me inch closer to understanding grace:

There’s a wideness in God’s mercy like the wideness of the sea;
there’s a kindness in his justice, which is more than liberty.
There is welcome for the sinner, and more graces for the good;
there is mercy with the Savior; there is healing in his blood.

There is no place where earth’s sorrows are more felt than up in heaven;
there is no place where earth’s failings have such kindly judgment given.
There is plentiful redemption in the blood that has been shed;
there is joy for all the members in the sorrows of the Head.

For the love of God is broader than the measure of the mind;
and the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind.
If our love were but more faithful, we should take him at his word;
and our life would be thanksgiving for the goodness of the Lord.

Yes, the love of God is broader than the measure of the mind—I cannot fully wrap my head or heart around God’s grace and love in general, but I’m especially stumped by God’s grace and love for me. And yet the letter to the Ephesians reminds us with humility: “we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

You are what God made you... you are what God made you. You are lovingly created in Jesus for good! And this goodness that we are created for, this goodness is to be our way of life. Not by endless striving, but by believing in the wideness of God’s mercy and grace and love so that our lives may be an endless thankful testimony to the goodness of the Lord.

Amen.