



ST. ANDREW'S IN THE PINES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

SERMON 6-5-16

If you've read much in the Old Testament you've probably picked up on a theme of "chosenness". From that start we learn about a God that says follow me and I will take care of you. And then he works with certain families; Adam and Eve, Cain and Able, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob (who is renamed Israel), and then the 12 tribes of Israel (Jacob's sons) and so on. In all of these stories God is promising to take them to a land of milk and honey and give them a good life if they will listen to God. Part of this good life includes defeating anyone living in the land these followers of God want to live in. There is an amazing bit of us and them in the Old Testament. There is an amazing emphasis on following God's laws and commandments and keeping oneself pure. Some of those purity codes even included not being kind to or marrying anyone outside of your religion. They also included taking care of family members and living in a rather tribal sort of life.

That is the religious tradition that Paul was raised in. That was the religious tradition Paul studied fervently and tried to live faithfully in his life. That was why Paul was greatly disturbed to hear people talking about a Jesus that taught some new ways of living. Paul was sure that anyone listening to or following the teachings of Jesus would upset the entire foundation of his world. What had been in existence for hundreds of years would crumble. Paul couldn't let that happen – not on his watch. So he began promoting and using violence against Christ followers. He approved of and was present at the stoning of the apostle Stephen. He was traveling to Damascus to do a round-up of Christ disciples when he was struck blind and in blazing light he saw Jesus and heard Jesus ask him why he was persecuting him? After that God's grace surrounds Paul and he realizes he was wrong. He was wrong! What he had learned and built his life upon could no longer be the only truth.

Because Jesus was about love, love for everyone, not just the people of Israel. And what Paul writes today in Galatians is that with God's grace, Paul was able accept that change. I mean, he really changes. He didn't just murmur to himself, "Oh I was wrong" and then slink away from persecuting the Christ followers. No, he adapted and committed his life to sharing the message and telling others the ways that God loves us all. And you can pick up in this reading how he is defending himself – because after all – he's been a murderer of these disciples and now he wants to work with them. They are understandably suspicious. And maybe he's understandably sensitive to how wrong he'd been and how slowly he has to go to learn about Jesus and be ready to share the story of Jesus. But share it he does. He dedicates the rest of his life to that mission. If you read his writings you follow his deep struggle to connect the teaching about the God he grew up with with the God he met on the road to Damascus. And while he struggles the world does not fall apart, because God always remains God.

Can you run that same story through your own lens today? Can you think of some situations where people are warning about, bewailing the undermining or destruction of our way of life if this change or that change becomes acceptable? May I remind you of arrest and conviction of heresy of the scientists like Copernicus and Galileo, who taught new discoveries like the sun is the center of the solar system, not earth? Or the burning of the first translators of the Bible into the common language of the people, people like William Tyndale, who translated the Bible into English? Or the hysteria and killing of people who said Black people could go to the same schools as White people? You can all go on with your own examples of when our culture, when our traditions, when what we've been taught is WRONG! Something must change, adapt, be revised.

Why do I bring this up today? One reason is because Paul is an astounding example of someone so fervently violent to others not like him, changing to someone dedicated to the breaking down of walls so that all are embraced in God's love. But the other reason is because we are in the season of transitions for many here today. Soon we will recognize that changes coming in the lives of our Rite 13 teen-agers. High School graduation was on Friday and some of our youth are about to leave Pinedale. And part of what they will learn is that it's a big world out there – other cultures, other ways of living, other opinions about what matters or how we should do things. Any of us who travel outside of the United States and are paying attention can't help but realize there are so many teachings and traditions that do not match the ones we were raised in.

And I pray that we have the grace that Paul found to adapt and change and grow and accept that part of what we learned was wrong, or part of what we learned was not the whole answer, including the interpretations we've been fed about faith and politics, the environment, other cultures, so forth.

I am not saying that the message of the gospel, the message of love and faith and hope and charity will ever change. That is a solid foundation to build our life upon. But there are so many interpretations and unanswerable questions and proponents of this or that being right that sometime, somewhere each and every one of us is going to realize we are wrong. We got it wrong, or we got it only partially right, and maybe we should make some changes in our thinking and in our actions.

And that's where to let grace step in. Like Paul, the grace of God changes us and enables us to remain engaged with a world that sometimes may not make sense to us.

This week I recalled a favorite U2 song titled Grace. Here are some of the lines from that song.

“Grace, she takes the blame, she covers the shame, removes the stain.
And when she walks on the street you can hear the strings, Grace finds goodness in everything.
When she goes to work you can hear her strings, Grace finds beauty in everything.
What once was hurt, what once was friction, what left a mark, no longer stings.
Because grace makes beauty out of ugly things,
Grace makes beauty out of ugly things.

At her Salutatorian speech on Friday evening, Lily Jensen asked the seniors to live with devotion, courage, and tenacity. Today I'd like to add: Grace.

Thanks be to God.