

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Ephesians 2:1-10

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

In the 1986 film, *The Mission*, Robert De Niro plays Rodrigo Mendoza, a brutal slave trader from the conquistador era who has captured, sold, and murdered many native South Americans. Although he scarcely thought twice about killing a native in the past, when Mendoza murders his brother in a fit of anger he is overcome with remorse. A Jesuit priest gives him a penance to atone for his sin: he must accompany an expedition of Jesuits deep into the rain forest, where they plan to teach the natives about Jesus Christ.

On the trek into the forest, Mendoza binds up his armor in a net. He ties a rope around this heavy burden and drags it along, to remind himself of the violent life he has left behind. The sack of armor slows the expedition, but the priests tolerate it because they know how important it is to the penitent man.

Close to their destination, the missionaries climb to the top of a waterfall. At the top, they warmly embrace the native friends they have come to know on an earlier journey. But then the natives spy the exhausted Mendoza, still ascending the rocks beside the waterfall, dragging his armor behind him.

They know him, and they fear him. One of the natives grabs a knife and runs over to Mendoza, holding the blade against his neck as though to kill him in revenge. Mendoza looks up at his assailant, preparing himself for death.

But then something surprising happens. The native does slash his knife, but what he cuts is not Mendoza's throat. He cuts the rope holding the bag of armor. The entire company watches the conquistador's burden fall away, falling end over end down the waterfall, smashing onto the rocks below.

Mendoza cries like a baby, fresh from the womb of God. A priest says, "Welcome home, brother." Then, his real instruction begins.

We all have gotten caught up in the world of sin; no one has ever been perfect—except for Jesus. Every Christian at some point in time fell victim to selfishness, greed, power, and/or materialism, all of which leave us worshipping something other than the one and only true God. We allowed this sin, more than once, to take over our lives, guiding our words and actions, causing us to drift away from the will of God.

There was a little girl named Larissa who discovered the secret to making mud one day, which she called, "warm chocolate." After her grandmother cleaned up the mess, she told little Larissa not to make any more chocolate

The little girl soon resumed making her chocolate, saying, sweetly, “Don’t look at me Nana. OK?” Nana, wanting to please her granddaughter, agreed.

Larissa continued to work the mud, but three times she said, “Don’t look at me Nana, OK?”

“This tender soul of a little girl shows us how necessary it is to us that we not be observed doing our wrong,” writes Dallas Willard, a professor in the school of Philosophy at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles and author of numerous resources on spiritual formation.

Anytime we choose to do wrong or to withhold doing right, we choose hiding as well. It may be that out of all the prayers that are ever spoken, the most common one – the quietest one, the one that we least acknowledge making – is simply this: Don’t look at me God.

It was the very first prayer spoken after the fall. God came to walk in the garden to be with the man, Adam, and the woman, Eve, and called, “Where are you?”

“I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid,” Adam answered, “so I hid,” meaning, “Don’t look at me God.”

When we think on the reality that we sin, we might want to hide; and our sin can feel like an unforgiveable burden. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians tells us this just isn’t so. Paul says, “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.” Mercy and grace are ours to receive if we will accept them. You might be thinking, why wouldn’t anyone want these gifts from God? Let’s think about this.

Could it be that anger gets in the way of accepting God’s gifts? Certainly, I see this happening to people. They’ve been hurt by something someone did or said to them. The hurt festers and takes over their thoughts and feelings. They may obsess over trying to figure out how they can make the point that they’ve been wronged, and then are unwilling to see their own wrong they are now entertaining. It can get so out-of-hand that they may want to get revenge.

Their pain and anger may color their world with darkness to the point that they cannot find God’s presence in it; and they begin to question whether there even is a God. For anyone, if anger takes us over, we build a wall that keeps God’s mercy and grace out of our lives.

Something else that may keep us from experiencing God’s precious gifts is if we do not practice spiritual disciplines because these practices help to strengthen our faith and relationship with God. Spiritual discipline practices remind us that we are NOT God, but we are God’s. They put in the forefront of our awareness that WE NEED GOD. Every day we should be taking time to feed and grow our relationship with God. We do that by reading the bible, by spending quality time in prayer, by serving others just as Christ came to serve, by listening for and looking for God’s presence in our day, and of course by worshiping God.

Spiritual disciplines help us to stay connected to God. Our knowledge increases so that we understand God’s commands and we seek to be obedient to God’s will. Through spiritual disciplines, we fall in love with Jesus, a man yet also God who loved everyone, even those who society considered low life, unlovable burdensome individuals of society. Jesus becomes our mentor, our example for how we should live together. (Even while he was dying on the cross. He was so close to his Father God.) Instead of focusing on what is acceptable and popular to the world, which can lead to sin and separation from God; we focus on the teachings of Jesus and God, which leads us away from sin.

I want to bring one other thing to our attention, which may also be a stumbling block for us when it comes to receiving God’s mercy and grace, and that’s the feeling of unworthiness. We

all have done things we regret, sin that we wish we never had done, and sometimes we hold on to those regrets—those sins—and we use them to put ourselves down. We feel what we have done is unforgivable. We tell ourselves that we are not good enough—deserving enough for God's wonderful freeing gifts.

Let's remind ourselves of what Paul says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

Did you hear that? We are not the ones to decide whether we are deserving of God's mercy and grace. We also cannot earn God's grace through doing good deeds. Who do we think we are that we can decide whether we deserve God's grace? We can't decide that. We are not God. We did not create ourselves; God did, and God doesn't create junk! And God loves each one of us so very much that he was willing to do anything to show us his love, even to the point of sending his only Son to be the final sacrifice for our sin. God forgives us even when we cannot forgive ourselves. God's mercy, God's grace is freely given because God loves each and every one of us.

God saves you and me: to bring glory to himself, to satisfy his justice, to demonstrate his sovereignty. But one of the sweetest reasons God saved you and me is because he is fond of us. He likes having us around. He thinks we are the best thing to come down the pike in a while.

Susan Hughes emailed me this Lenten story this week. It must have been a God-thing because it fits so well with where the Spirit was leading me in this week's sermon. Listen to this powerful story.

I was at TJ Maxx today and heard a loud crash and something shattering. Being nosy, I walked towards the sound and saw some people whispering and looking back to the end of the next aisle. When I walked down that aisle, I saw that an older lady had hit a shelf and many things had fallen to the ground and broken. She was kneeling on the floor embarrassed, frantically trying to clean up. I felt so bad for her. Everyone was just standing there staring at her. So, I went and knelt beside her and told her not to worry and started helping her pick up the broken pieces. After about a minute, the store manager came and knelt beside us and said, "Leave it, we will clean this up." The lady, totally embarrassed said, "I need to pay for all this." The manager smiled, helped her to her feet and said, "No ma'am, we have insurance for this, you do not have to pay anything!" If you have read this far, give me another minute.

Wherever you are, close your eyes, and imagine God doing the same for you! Imagine the broken pieces of your mistakes or the pieces of your broken heart from all the blows life has thrown at you all over the floor and you're there trying to collect all of the pieces and fix them yourself. Now imagine God comes and kneels right down beside you, smiles and says to you, "Leave it all there, I will clean this up for you."

He loves you that much and wants to put all of those pieces back together if you will let Him! With Him we have this insurance and it's called GRACE! It's free! All you have to do is ask Him to forgive you, help you, and to heal you. He's faithful, I promise! Amen.