

**SERMON: “like me: reborn by grace.”**

Rev. Geoff Ross: Sunday, February 25, 2018, St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church

[Recap:A&E/Sin/Fall- Beginning Grace. Abram:chosen by grace – a gift given beyond our deserving. Grace:“last best word”/Yancey – reminds us of God’s love/saving plan for us. Without grace/lost/no chance to be reconciled/saved: sadly, like sheep/go own way – refuse/suspicious/doubt God’s grace – don’t even understand it: Let me give you an example.]

Last week we sang a verse from the hymn “*Amazing Grace*” – (we will throughout Lent) – for three reasons: first, because it sings defiantly that grace is the only thing that can “*save a wretch like me*” – (the source for series title); second, because theologically the hymn tells it like it is: you and I/we are “wretches” who are unable to save ourselves from ourselves; and third, because everyone knows it. Imagine, then, my surprise when I was told that some people have “*trouble*” with the word “*wretch*” – that it’s “*too extreme*”/“*isn’t them*,” that they prefer the word “*soul*” instead. First, I was unaware of the word change – our hymnal uses “wretch” – but even if I were, to me “soul” is too sanitized/cerebral/theoretical; “*wretch*” is more visceral word and better captures the nature of our situation: that without God’s grace we are nothing but wretched creatures.

The truth is there is no other word to describe our condition and no amount of wordsmithing is going change it: to think otherwise “we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:5-10), and we’re in more trouble than we know. And this is the problem: we believe that we can somehow think/work/rationalize/intellectualize/justify or argue our way into heaven while missing the point/not dealing with the problem altogether. Friends, grace isn’t something we can intellectualize – it’s something we can only experience: it’s not a commodity/earned/owned – it is something given, that once we have received it we know we’ve been touched by it. Which brings us to Nicodemus; a person much like you/like me.

[BP:Wakanda/Invisible – not what it seems/hidden Humans:Dorian Grey/masks vs true nature of who we are]

I imagine Nicodemus as a man in his mid fifties/sixties, gray haired, physically distinguished, accomplished, trim, and successful in his work. He was one of the primary teachers of the law, a professor of religion at the temple in Jerusalem, yet, like you/like me, he looked in the mirror every morning and saw the hidden/concealed/unvarnished/unadulterated/private face behind the Prufrock face he’d prepared to meet the faces that he’ll meet – the face of a person who wasn’t who he presented himself to be. As we learned last week, sin leads to shame and it hasn’t changed: we spend our days hiding our past/sins/failings/faults/the gap between the person we know/fear we are and the one we long to be. [Nepal/sick/mirror/didn’t know myself – lost to ourselves/who God made/meant us to be.] This is why, because of his fear of losing face, Nicodemus the Pharisee went to Jesus under the cover of darkness.

On the surface, Nicodemus' intent is to merely satisfy an intellectual debate – after all he knew the law – but he also knew that there was something missing, something he couldn't reconcile on his own. Driven by fear/hope, at night, Nicodemus knocks on the door of where Jesus is staying: our reading reports it as one of the most famous conversations of the New Testament. Jesus, revealing that His purpose/mission is to fulfill God's promise of grace to a waiting/fallen world, makes it clear that he/we are going to need to change how he/we see/think/do things/live by telling Nicodemus that he needs to be "*born again*" – there are no exceptions. Sadly, though, like Nicodemus, you/me/we balk.

As Christians we believe that, to be reborn through the Spirit means that God's love comes and lives inside us – something we believe happens through our baptism – and reforms us into our God-made image. Because we are born into a fallen world, we need to have our sins – the sins of this world – washed away; we need to be cleansed/purified of our sins. This, Jesus tells Nicodemus, is done through God's grace – a grace that through God's love absolves us, and through Jesus' sacrifice, offers us forgiveness/salvation. And once we are born again we experience a transformation and enjoy a new identity in Christ's likeness – but we must first admit that we need God's grace.

[Heartbreaking pain/suffering/loss – but there's beauty/grace/hope: New life/baby/tears]

The reading tells us that Nicodemus leaves confused – that he retreats, rejected, into the darkness of the night; but this is not the end of his story. Nicodemus appears twice more in John's Gospel and clearly their late-night encounter changed his life – both appearances are marked by acts of brave and courageous faith: he defends Jesus during a debate among the High Priests and Pharisees and he was the one who took Jesus' body down from the cross, provided the myrrh/aloe/burial cloths at his own expense/risk – joining the roll of people – people like you/like me – who, having encountered Jesus, were transformed and reborn by grace. Amen.