

“The Practice of Grace”

Date: October 4, 2015

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Colossians 3:15-17; John 15:1-8

Theme: Grace, soul care

Occasion: Soul Keeping series

In the Bible, God never gives anyone an easy job. God never comes to Abraham or Moses or Peter and says, “I’d like for you to do me a favor, but it really shouldn’t take much time. I wouldn’t want to inconvenience you.” God doesn’t recruit people like they do for the PTA at school. He is always intrusive, demanding, exhausting.

I’m sure you’ve heard this phrase before: “I never promised you a rose garden.” It comes from a semi-autobiographical novel by Joanne Greenberg, written under the pen name of Hannah Green. The book came out in 1964.

In 1970 it was turned into a song, written by Joe South, but its best known as it was recorded by country music singer Lynn Anderson. The message of that simple phrase is simply this: “God never promised us that life would be easy.”

In his book *The Road Less Traveled*, M. Scott Peck begins the book by saying, “Life is difficult.” Amen? God never said “I promised you a rose garden.” Life is not easy.

The Bible only uses the word *easy* once. It came from Jesus. “Come to me, all who are weary and burdened... and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is *easy* and my burden is light.”

The soul was not made for an easy *life*. The soul was made for an easy *yoke*. Jesus showed us how to live a life of grace. All human beings face challenge and pain and demands. Jesus, however, lived in a divine rhythm where grace was constantly flowing into him and

then flowing out of him. This morning we want to talk about the practice of grace, the rhythm of living in grace.

The beginning movement in the Cycle of Grace is *Acceptance*. For Jesus, identity and acceptance come before achievement. This is a joy that no one can take away. You cannot earn acceptance. God loves you for who you are, a beloved child of God, not for what you have accomplished. This is grace.

I like to tell people “God danced the day you were born.” Why? - Because God is delighted with each new soul that is birthed into existence. We matter to God. We are important to God. Not for what we can produce, not for what we accomplish, not for what we achieve, but simply for being. Every soul matters to God! Amen?

After he was baptized to begin his ministry Jesus heard these words: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” Jesus is accepted and blessed BEFORE he does a single miracle. And Jesus knew that his acceptance was not for his sake alone, but for all the people in the world.

The alternative to soul-acceptance is soul-fatigue. Our bodies can become weary – working too hard and not getting enough rest. Our minds can become weary by all of the information we’re bombarded with every day. Our wills can become weary with too many choices to make in a world that keeps offering us more choices.

All of this can combine to make us feel separated from God, separated from ourselves and distanced from what we love most about life and creation. This is soul-fatigue. We may strive to do more and work harder, *or*, we can find our rest in God. There is no one you need to impress, because you have already been accepted by God.

The next movement is what might be called *Sustaining Grace*. The idea here is that Jesus engaged in certain practices that allowed God's grace to keep replenishing his spirit. He prayed. He had a close circle of 12 friends. He fed his mind with scripture. He went to worship regularly at the synagogue. He enjoyed God's creation – the mountains, the water, the flowers, the trees. He took long walks.

You see, the human soul needs to engage in practices that connect us to God's grace and energy and joy. That might be going to the ocean, listening to glorious music, being with life-giving friends, taking a long hike, going kayaking.

The test of a sustaining spiritual practice is this: does it fill you with grace for life? What are your sustaining practices? The soul was not made to run on empty. We are not programmed to be constantly on the go. The soul needs rest.

The soul needs time to recover from the demands of life. When you give your soul rest, you open it to the peace that Jesus intends for you, his peace that the world does not give.

The third movement in the Cycle of Grace is *Significance*. We are made to make a difference beyond ourselves. Our lives were meant to be signs that point beyond our selves to God.

The 3rd movement of grace involves grace not just flowing into us, but also now through us and out into others for their sake. But this too is a gift of God's grace. Do we know who we are, apart from money, power and reputation?

Significance is about who we are before it is about what we do. Too often we listen to the Devil whispering in our ear: "Don't trust grace. Don't believe your Father. Prove it. Earn it. Make it happen.

Make it about you.” It is so easy to fall into the trap. We think it’s what we do that makes us significant. It’s not.

Significance is a gift, not an achievement. We receive our worth from God, not from what we accomplish. That’s good news. It takes an awful lot of the pressure off of us to succeed, to make it big, or to win the rat race. Our souls can find rest.

The final phase of the Cycle of Grace is *Achievement*. Jesus achieved a great deal. He taught, healed, befriended, recruited, trained, traveled, confronted. He launched the greatest movement in the history of the world.

To achieve, to bear fruit, is crucial to the soul. Jesus lived in a divine rhythm where grace was constantly flowing into him, and then constantly flowing out from him.

Jesus said, “I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5) What we really have to learn is how to live in grace with God each moment.

That’s what it means to abide in the vine – to live intimately with Jesus from one moment to the next. And when we do, we will accomplish great things for the Kingdom. Achievement is how the grace that has flowed into us now flows out of us.

Dallas Willard said this, “To ‘grow in grace’ means to utilize more and more grace to live by, until everything we do is assisted by grace. Then, ‘whatever we do in word or deed will all be done in the name of the Lord Jesus.’” (Col. 3:17)

The opposite of the Cycle of Grace is what we might call the Cycle of Works. In this way, which many people follow, we simply go backward against the tide of grace.

We begin by trying to achieve impressive accomplishments through our own strength for our ego's satisfaction. We hope that by doing these fine deeds we might feel significant. We then hope that this sense of significance will sustain us through the difficulties and stress of life.

And ultimately we hope that the end result will be that someone will find us acceptable. The Cycle of Works will destroy your soul. It is the hard yoke. It is the heavy burden.

But to live according to the Cycle of Grace, our soul will be at rest. We find our acceptance in God. We engage in spiritual practices that sustain our sense of grace and acceptance. As we abide in Christ and his grace becomes larger in our lives, we bear fruit for the kingdom. In this we find significance.

The achievement of our life is not in what we accomplish, but in who we become.

Life is hard. God never promised us a rose garden. But He offers us grace – that we may find acceptance, sustenance, significance, and achievement.

May you abide in God's grace. And so, I wish for you grace for today, grace for tomorrow, and grace for eternity. Amen.

Sermon borrows heavily from *Soul Keeping: Caring for the Most Important Part of You*, by John Ortberg. Zondervan, 2014; pp. 126-140; And *Soul Keeping Study Guide*, Zondervan, 2014, pp. 75-96.