

“RESTING IN GRACE, WALKING IN LOVE”

Ephesians 2:1-10; 4:1-7; I John 4:7-12

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Faith and works: it seems like it's been a very long time since I talked about this theological tension. In fact, it's been a long time since I even thought of it as a "tension." But back in my high school years and for several years after that, I would lead discussions about the apparent conflict between this verse in Ephesians, "For by grace, you are saved through faith..." and a phrase in the book of James, "Faith without works is dead."

I don't trouble myself much with the tension these days, largely because my understanding of the Christian life has changed over the years. I seldom think about salvation in the context of an after-life, but as a present concern. Jesus isn't our ticket to heaven. His death and resurrection are not an offering to appease *an angry God*. And grace is not what Jesus does *for us*.

One of the things that we were emphasizing in sermons this summer was the importance of Jesus' life for faith. I still remember my New Testament professor defining a gospel as "a passion narrative with an extended introduction." Roughly a third of each gospel tells the story of Jesus' death and resurrection, so there's little doubt that the writers draw our attention to those events. But when the introduction is two thirds of the book, it is not unimportant. And yet many evangelicals have skipped it, summing up the meaning of Jesus as the Savior who died for our sins that we might live forever with God in heaven.

When you read the introduction, the life and teachings of Jesus, you realize that the death is not about appeasing an angry God, but the result of a life in conflict with the current human priorities and institutions. Jesus was put on the cross by people. He died because he was doing the will of God on earth as it was already being done in heaven. We simply cannot understand the cross without attending to the things that Jesus said and did.

Many introductions attempt to describe the landscape of the material that the author intends to cover, the forest before moving on to the trees in the main body of the book. This is what the gospels do. They describe the world in which Jesus lived. In that world there were people who were sick through no fault of their own. There were people who were hungry and broken and lonely and lost. And the people who were well fed, who were influential, who had power to address those needs chose instead to build bigger storehouses for their own wealth, prestige and power. Jesus demonstrated in his life and teaching what God would want us to do and say in that kind of world. That's the world in which we live too. We live out our lives in the introduction, trying to figure out what God would have us say and do in this context.

In this world there is no tension between faith and works. One looks much the same as the other. Jesus forgives the sins of a paralytic and to demonstrate that this is what God wants, he tells the

man to get up and walk... and he does. Jesus has compassion for the hungry crowd and to show that God does too, he feeds all of them with food left over. That's what James is telling us: faith cannot remain idle where there is work to do. And that's what Paul is telling us in Ephesians too. "Saved by grace through faith" is paired with "created in Christ Jesus for good works."

The only tension between believing and doing is the inconsistency we experience between what we say and what we do, and that's not a theological tension. The more appropriate word is hypocrisy. But maybe the contrast most Christians have in mind is the distinction between grace and our own human efforts, between trusting in God and trusting in ourselves. To what extent do we rely on God's grace in following Jesus and to what extent are we responsible for our failures and successes in the life of faith?

I really like the way the worship team has phrased this in our theme for year: "resting in grace, walking in love." There's something in these phrases that recognizes that God is doing something in us, while we at the same time are doing something in the world. This is not an either/or, but a both/and deal. Some times in the year we will focus on one aspect over the other, but we are not trying to resolve a "tension" that exist between them. Neither are we seeking to achieve a balance. All of this, resting and walking, grace and love, is happening at the same time.

Understanding this dynamic seems especially important in the midst of this pandemic, and perhaps more so when we come out of it. Alice Walker, in a commencement address given in 2002, spoke to the graduates about the importance of a "pause." The need for a pause comes in those moments "after a major accomplishment that "we are so pleased to be done with... that we are already rushing... into the Future" (p. 48). Sometimes circumstances force us to stop and reflect before choosing the next step. Other times we move forward without thought and pay serious consequences.

Many of you have experienced the pandemic as a time for reflection that has taught you to see your life and your faith differently. You have perhaps been more aware of "resting in grace." Many of us have recognized that there is no "going back to normal," but we are eager to see what the "new normal" will look like. We have become bored with "resting." We are done with reflecting and are ready to walk.

Even though the pandemic is not done with us, many have gone back to the restaurants, discarded the masks, and have placed individual rights above the health of other people. This is neither resting in grace nor walking in love.

This is panic, believing that no more grace can be found in this moment, that God's blessing has abandoned the scene. Stephen Philbrick sent this poem to Alice Walker. The first part of *A Blessing* goes like this:

Don't try so hard.
It comes in a shiver sometimes,
Sometimes in a windowpane,

Wild with the unseeable
Frozen there in ice:
The shapes above clouds,
The score and the libretto of wind,
The plot of waves.
Don't try so hard.
Sometimes it falls,
A flake at a time,
Into your life while you're asleep...
Sometimes it comes when you least
Expect it.
And sometimes it doesn't.
Quiet, still, no voice (even small),
No whirlwind, no reply; no burning.
Just a bare winter bush.
This is God, too.... (pp. 50-51).

Resting in grace acknowledges that God is present, even where he can't be seen, even where she can't be heard. There isn't any work to be done, any trying just a little bit harder. Grace recognizes God's desire for people to be whole, for creation to renew itself, for the hungry to be fed. Grace sees every person as a child of God. Grace recognizes God in the breath we take, in the grandeur of a mountain, in the kiss between lovers, in the reconciliation of enemies, in the justice enacted, and in the kindnesses between strangers. And grace recognizes God in the pauses that interrupt our lives.

But grace is not idle. Like faith, it encourages us to walk. Recognizing God in the hungry, it compels us to share our food. The commandment to love does not go on vacation when we are resting. Grace, as I John tells us, bears witness to the priority of God's love for us, a love that inspires us to love one another. We do not neglect love just because we are resting. Our moments of contemplation do not absolve us of our responsibilities for others and for the earth.

The pandemic may have curtailed our activities offering more time for reflection, but it didn't stop us from walking. If anything, it forced us to new expressions of love. We are resting as we walk, and walking as we rest. We are giving thanks for God's grace that sustains us and moves us even as we learn new ways to love our neighbor. When Jesus healed on the Sabbath, he wasn't violating the Sabbath as the Pharisees believed. He was doing a good thing on the day of rest. There is no tension or contradiction in this. Every day we are renewed by God's grace, even while attending to the love that binds us to one another. Simply put, it's what the Christian life looks like. It's who we are and what we do as we follow Jesus. There will be much to enjoy and much to challenge us as we explore this theme this year. We will discover much grace in which to rest and much love in which to walk. Amen.