

“PILGRIMAGE: UNPREDICTABLE GRACE”

Acts 9:1-22; I Timothy 1:12-17

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I have been leading Bible Studies for about fifty years now. As with many religious leaders, I often describe faith as a journey, and have always believed that grace sustains us on that journey.

Only recently have I begun thinking about that journey as a pilgrimage. Nancy started many of us down this road early in the pandemic with an adult education class she was leading. As restaurants closed down, social activities became sharply curtailed, and many of us were spending more time at home, sacred space seemed to open up. Some were turning their attention to God for understanding in the midst of the crisis, some were seeking comfort for their losses, and some were just less distracted and suddenly had time and a desire to nurture the spiritual life they were just discovering.

Our sabbatical time this summer focused on the metaphor of a pilgrimage. Even in the time that we weren't actually traveling, the break from the routines and tasks of pastoring a congregation gave me space to rest, to tend to the personal needs of my body, to read about pilgrimage, to reflect on the sacred space in which God had placed us for the past two decades, and to prepare for and anticipate the sacred places we would be traveling to.

We experienced grace not just in the beautiful vistas of the great Smoky Mountains, but in the family relationships that developed and deepened with our daughters, son-in-law, his sister, and mother. With each new park we visited, we gained appreciation for the breadth and diversity of creation and the grace and love of its creator. We visited several indigenous museums and sacred sites and gained insight into their deep spirituality and many injustices that they had suffered during the colonization of the west. There was much food for thought as Westminster thinks about how we live out our commitment to the Matthew 25 Initiative.

This morning, though, I want to focus on the time we spent with Wesley Granberg-Michaelson at Ring Lake Ranch talking about pilgrimage. Specifically I'll be focusing on the unpredictable grace that accompanies us on our pilgrimage. As I implied at the beginning of this sermon, I've been talking about grace for fifty years now. "For by grace are you saved through faith..." was a favorite text for me from the beginning so I was not surprised to read in Granberg-Michaelson's book that Protestants had "weaponized" grace "as a theological canon instead of a functioning way of life" (*Without Oars*, p.104). I don't think I ever went that far, but I am very much aware of, as he goes on to say, "those most ardent in their defense of the doctrine of grace have been the least graceful in their stance toward others not seen as part of their tradition" (p. 105).

I have invested a lot of myself over my ministry in trying to understand and explain in accessible language the doctrines of the church. I found a home when we first came here with people equally passionate about understanding their faith. I still think we should strive to understand what we believe, but to talk about a “doctrine of grace” seems to miss the point. One of the first reactions to the experience of grace is, of course, “I don’t believe it.” Grace is by its very nature “unpredictable.”

Paul was a well-educated Jew. He knew the scriptures. He understood his faith. He was zealous about its practice... and he was vicious in his treatment of those whose understanding was different from his own. He was, in fact, on pilgrimage to the synagogues in Damascus to arrest the heretical followers of Jesus. He probably didn’t think that he was on a pilgrimage, but it satisfied Michaelson’s definition: “a journey with holy intent to a sacred place.” The blinding light and the voice that only he could hear were not expected. He was not persuaded by sound argument or an appeal to right doctrine. He wrote to Timothy, “the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and the love that are in Christ Jesus.”

“A pilgrimage,” Michaelson writes, “liberates grace from the confines of doctrine and embodies this foundational reality of God in lived experience. And grace liberates the pilgrim. The one who walks discovers how to receive grace, usually in ways that one cannot control” (p. 106). Paul thought he was doing the right thing. Only the encounter with God, unpredictable grace changed not just his mind, but his heart also.

Paul is changed by grace, but the encounter with God doesn’t dull his mind. Almost immediately, he begins to argue with the Jews in the synagogue that Jesus is, after all, the Messiah. He puts his sharp mind to use. Likewise, we haven’t abandoned learning here just because grace has confounded us a time or two. We need knowledge to live out our call. The church needs to understand its complicity in racism if it is to repent of past and current practices that contribute to the structures that hold racism in place. We need to understand the systems that trap people in poverty. But for those on pilgrimage, knowledge is not enough. We need to hear the stories of those who walk with us and those we encounter on the road. We need to put faces and names to them.

It seems a bit arrogant to suggest that we’ve had a “Damascus Road experience,” but we have been walking some road, and some of our ideas are shifting, the ministry we want to be about is shifting. What Granberg-Michaelson writes describes us in many respects:

“Religious organizations attuned to God’s preferred and promised future will find themselves on a pilgrimage. Normalcy and routine are left behind. Faithful patience is required, one step at a time, resisting superficial formulas for instant transformation.... Attention becomes rooted in concrete practices rather than abstract theological debates.”

We needed the pandemic for some of these shifts. We’ve adapted worship to work for livestreaming and are stronger for it. We’ve slowed down, done less perhaps, but delved more deeply. The polarization in our culture has pushed us to be more thoughtful about loving our neighbor and our responsibility for addressing injustice. The breadth and depth

of crises around us, from natural disasters to personal losses continues to draw us into prayer.

We aren't perfect, but we're healthy, and we're healthy because we're walking. "... the concrete practice of pilgrimage," writes Michaelson, "is like a school for developing the tools, sensitivities, and intuitions necessary for embracing a world that, at its core, is sustained by this grace, embodied in concrete, unpredictable ways" (p. 111).

Wesley Granberg-Michaelson worked for the World Council of Churches and the denominational offices of the Reformed Church in America during his career. He knows about large organizations and the amount of administrative work that goes into them, so you might be surprised that he is not a fan of the long range five and ten year plan. Needless to say we were all pleased to be given permission to nip that in the bud. There just isn't a long-range plan that can anticipate the pace of change in the world today.

That's a little scary. So many Christians today are worried about the future of their church, but I think that Wes is right in claiming that churches that understand themselves as being on pilgrimage have an advantage. "Slowly," he writes, "faith communities learn to trust that unpredictable grace will sustain their organizational pilgrimage on pathways in uncharted territory toward a new land" (p.111). I saw a lot of new-to-me land this summer. I look forward to the new-to-us land that we will encounter in the coming years, land, I suspect filled with the unpredictable grace of God. Amen.