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First Presbyterian Church, Copperas Cove, TX

Philippians 1: 2 - 11
September 2, 2018

(During the Time with the Children, we read *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse* by Kevin Henkes and noted truths about God that this illustrated children's story highlighted. Some of the phrases which were repeated in this story will show up in the sermon.)

OLD TESTAMENT READING

Psalm 139:5,7-10 (NRSV)

5 You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me....**7** Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? **8** If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. **9** If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, **10** even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

Today's New Testament reading comes from the opening words of Paul's letter to the church in Philippi. This is a congregation whom Paul loves dearly. He wants to share with them his joy of living a life steeped in Christ's love, a life transformed by God's grace, a life directed and propelled by the power of the Holy Spirit.

New Testament Reading:

Philippians 1: 2 – 11 (*The Message*)

2 We greet you with the grace and peace that comes from God our Father and our Master, Jesus Christ. **3** Every time you cross my mind, I break out in exclamations of thanks to God. **4** Each exclamation is a trigger to prayer. I find myself praying for you with a glad heart. **5** I am so pleased that you have continued on in this with us, believing and proclaiming God's Message, from the day you heard it right up to the present. **6** There has never been the slightest doubt in my mind that the God who started this great work in you would keep at it and bring it to a flourishing finish on the very day Christ Jesus appears. **7** It's not at all fanciful for me to think this way about you. My prayers and hopes have deep roots in reality. You have, after all, stuck with me all the way from the time I was thrown in jail, put on trial, and came out of it in one piece. All along you have experienced with me the most generous help from God. **8** He knows how much I love and miss you these days. Sometimes I think I feel as strongly about you as Christ does! **9** So this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well. Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings **10** so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental gush. Live a lover's life, circumspect and exemplary, a life Jesus will be proud of: **11** bountiful in fruits from the soul, making Jesus Christ attractive to all, getting everyone involved in the glory and praise of God.

A constant theme in Paul's letters is God's grace. It is singular—one grace that covers us all. It is neither something we deserve nor something we have earned. Grace is a gift that God freely gives us because God so loves us.

While there is but one grace, we experience it in different ways at different times in our journey of faith. In today’s Old Testament reading, we hear that God’s grace hems us in in time and space. It predates not only our recognition of it, but also our very existence. And God’s grace will continue to surround us, even after our lives on earth have come to an end. God’s grace pursues us to the ends of the earth. “*Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?*” (Psalm 139: 7 NRSV) The implied answer from the remainder of the psalm is “nowhere.” Pondering a limitless grace enveloping me with peace, power, and protection, I respond, “Wow!” It’s just about all I can say, “Wow!”¹

But we humans tend not to live in the Wow! Instead, we tend to live in the **now**. Right now, I’m hungry. Now I’m thirsty; I’m tired; I’m bored. Right now I want to be filled, pampered, and entertained. In the “right now” we, not God, are our focus. This self-centeredness is part of the human condition. Each of us—at some time—choose to do that which undermines God’s desire for our lives. Each of us—at some time—choose to be that which opposes the image of God in which we were created. Every human from Adam and Eve to each of us here today—every human, except one, Jesus the Christ (and he is divine also)—has made choices that turn us away from God. Yet the Holy Spirit speaks to our hearts, convicting us of our poor choices. The Holy Spirit speaks to our hearts, convincing us that we are missing out on something wonderful. The Holy Spirit nudges us and turns us around. Facing God once again, we see that our lives are not in line with God’s plans. Like David, in the 51st Psalm, we cry out: “*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.*” (Psalm 51: 1 – 2 NRSV) Through the power of the Holy Spirit we recognize our sin. We confess we have said and done that which breaks God’s heart. We confess we have failed to do that which would fill God’s heart with joy. We confess ... and ask forgiveness. God responds, “Excellent choice.”²

The grace offered through Christ’s life, death, and resurrection—justifies us. Picture the margins on a page of text that are lined up on the left and the right. The printer’s term for this is *left and right justified*. This experience of God’s grace lines up our lives with God’s will. We are justified and restored. We are restored to our true identity—God’s children, heirs with Christ to the covenant. I inherited a strong sense of responsibility from my mom and a desire to “do the right thing” from my Daddy. But everyday I see people who don’t do the right thing being rewarded with fame, fortune, and power. It’s easy to become resentful. Everyday I see people who have more than enough—more than enough money, more than enough food, more than enough creature comforts—people who have more than enough grabbing for even more and slamming the door on those who are hungry or homeless, those who are suffering and fleeing persecution. It’s easy to become angry. But God is gracious and responds to our

¹ Kevin Henkes. *Lilly’s Purple Plastic Purse*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1996.

² Kevin Henkes. *Lilly’s Purple Plastic Purse*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1996.

anger and resentment, to our disappointment and despair with, “Today was a difficult day, tomorrow will be better.”³

Each and every day, the Holy Spirit works **on** us—chipping away at our resentment and anger, melting the stone of our hearts into clay, and re-shaping our hearts. The Holy Spirit works **in** us—changing our perspective, so that we no longer see God’s covenant as a responsibility, an exercise in doing the right thing, but instead, we find God’s covenant written on our hearts [Jeremiah 31:33]. The Holy Spirit works **in** us so that our “*love becomes even more and more rich*” (Philippians 1: 9a Common English Bible). The Holy Spirit works **in** us until our response to God’s abundant grace is joyful gratitude bubbling up from deep within us.

Through God’s grace we are restored—restored to the relationship with God for which we were created—a relationship marked by compassion. Healthy relationships don’t just happen; they require work. For Paul, love is the work in relationships. “*This is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but [you will love] well. Learn to love appropriately.*” (Philippians 1: 9a-b *The Message*) For Paul, love is an action verb. We **do** love. And love permeates all that we do.

We are so full of gratitude for the grace we have received that we cannot help but spill out God’s love. This is the Holy Spirit working **through** us—restoring us to the life we were meant to live. We share God’s peace—offering a healing presence to people who are isolated and lonely. We share God’s forgiveness—bringing wholeness to our relationships with others. We share God’s grace—working to bring justice to our communities. We share God’s love—feeding the hungry at Copperas Cove Soup kitchen, housing the homeless at Cove House, and raising our voices against systemic injustice with our presbytery’s Mission Outreach and Justice Committee. (I think you worshipped and shared table fellowship with the chair of that committee, **Tom O’Meara**, a couple of weeks ago.)

This process through which the Holy Spirit works on us, in us, and through us is our experience of sanctifying grace. This is what Paul promises the Philippians, when he says, “*There has never been the slightest doubt in my mind that the God who started this great work in you would keep at it and bring it to a flourishing finish on the very day Christ Jesus appears.*” (Philippians 1: 6 *The Message*)

This singular grace that covers us before we were a gleam in our Daddy’s eyes until our own eyes close in death; this singular grace that restores us to right, loving, delightful relationships with God and others; this singular grace that transforms us into lovers—lovers of God and lovers of others; this singular grace is God’s ultimate gift to us. This singular grace is our great opportunity to live our

³ Kevin Henkes. *Lilly’s Purple Plastic Purse*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1996.

lives showing mercy and joy, sharing peace and grace, bringing love and justice.
“Wow! That’s just about all we can say. Wow!”⁴

⁴ Kevin Henkes. *Lilly’s Purple Plastic Purse*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1996.