

“Saved by grace through faith”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*Ephesians 2:1-10 and John 3:14-21*

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

The other day, Jenna and I were taking a walk with our dogs when she happened to mention something that struck me as odd. She said she had to go into the office the next day to meet with an organ donor family—people who had chosen to save the lives of others by gifting the organs of their loved one who had died. What struck me as odd was that this wasn’t a response to a thank-you letter; it was first contact. It was the family trying to reach out to the recipient. It seemed strange that the recipients of this breathtaking, amazing gift would not have reached out and said something.

When I commented on this, Jenna explained that this is quite common. A lot of organ recipients do not pen the first letter. They try. They get out the thick, embroidered paper, the expensive pen they bought just for this task. And they freeze. They can’t write one word. They’re terrified that they’re not good enough—that there’s no way their life could ever measure up to the gift they received and the pain it cost.

Sometimes the gift is so amazing, so breathtaking, that it feels almost too much to bear.

As I imagined these recipients sitting in pale light at a desk, their hands shaking, staring at that white, empty paper, my mind flashed to a scene in *Saving Private Ryan*. In this film, US Army Rangers Captain John Miller and his squad of seven men search for Private James Ryan, a paratrooper lost in the chaos of the Normandy Invasion and whose three other brothers have died in combat. The squad is supposed to bring him home. All but one will eventually die in their effort to save Private Ryan. As Captain Miller lays dying, he takes Private Ryan by the shoulder, leans in close, and whispers, “James, earn this. Earn it.”

The film ends where it began—in a cemetery in Normandy, France. Many years have passed. James is now an old man. He’s brought his family. He walks haltingly across what seem like miles of green grass through a field of white marble crosses. Falling to his knees and crying, he speaks to the captain who gave his life to save him, saying, “Every day, I think of what you said to me that day on the bridge, and I’ve tried to live my life the best I could. I hope that was enough. I hope that at least in your eyes I’ve earned what all of you have done for me.” James then turns to his wife and says, “Tell me I have led a good life. Tell me I’m a good man.”

I think, in some respects, we are all James Ryan, kneeling before a cross, feeling unworthy of this sacrifice. I think we’re like all those organ recipients who are immobilized by the fear that they’re just not good enough.

We stand here, in Lent, knowing all too well where this journey will take Jesus. We know the suffering and the death that await him. And we also know that, because of his sacrifice, because of his love for us, we will be saved. How could we ever earn that?

And yet, like Private Ryan, we think we must try. We keep track of our failures, our shortcomings—and of our successes and achievements. We carry this weight around with us—this burden of who we have to be, what we have to do—and it gets so heavy. It can feel impossible ever to be enough, do enough.

It was no different for Nicodemus. That’s who Jesus was talking to in our passage from John today. Nicodemus was an accomplished, intelligent leader, a Pharisee. He knew his Scripture, and he loved God. He even believed in Jesus. But he couldn’t wrap his mind around what Jesus was telling him. What Jesus told him about being born of the Spirit from above, and the Son of God being raised up to save the world, seemed impossible to him. Because Nicodemus still thought of salvation as coming from the Law. He still thought that if he did the right things, believed the right ideas, and worshiped the right way, he would be saved. Suddenly, Jesus was telling him that he had to let go of all that, let go of all his accomplishments, and yes, also failures, and “become like a newborn, ready to receive the world on completely new terms” (Lance Pape).

Those new terms were grace: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Paul writes in Ephesians, “By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is God’s gift... We are what God has made us” (Eph. 2:8, 10).

To appreciate the full power of this statement, Dale Brunner dissects John 3:16 in this way:

“God .....The greatest subject ever  
So (much)..... The greatest extent ever  
Loved..... The greatest affection ever  
The world (kosmos)..... The greatest object ever  
That He gave His One-and-Only Son,..... The greatest gift ever  
So that every single individual, whoever, .....The greatest opportunity ever  
Who is [simply] entrusting oneself to him..... The greatest commitment ever  
Would never be destroyed, .....The greatest rescue ever  
“But would even now have a deep, lasting Life.” .....The greatest promise ever

This is what the Reformers of the Reformation wanted us to hear: that we are saved by grace, and we don’t have to earn it. In fact, we can’t earn it.

The truth is that no matter how great a life Private James Ryan led, it would never have been enough to warrant the sacrifice of seven good men. That’s a gift he cannot earn.

That’s where Christianity differs from the rest of the world. We believe in the same sacrifice. We kneel at the same cross. We hear a dying Christ whispering in our ears. But instead of Christ

saying, “Earn this,” Christ says, “Accept this.” Christ’s sacrifice doesn’t come with conditions. It isn’t retracted if we don’t earn it. Of course, God wants us to live honorably, compassionately, but God also knows that it’ll never be enough; we will always fall short. And that’s OK. Because Christ doesn’t ask for guilt. He doesn’t ask for ambition.

He just asks that you believe something that you have fought all your life, something that has eluded you, something the world has denied you, something that all your mistakes and all your hurts have covered up: God loves you. God loves you so much. God gives this to you, this sacrifice, because God loves you. You, as you are. Messy and holy. You.

That’s what the donor families of organ donation tell their recipients. They say you don’t have to be afraid, or feel guilty, or feel unworthy. This was a gift. And we just hope that you’ll accept it.

What if, every day, in so many big and little moments, God is writing letters to us, telling us the same thing? This is a gift. Believe in it.

Believe that Jesus was sent not to condemn, but to save.

The Reformers feared that the church was reinforcing condemnation by emphasizing works, rather than testifying to freedom through Christ. That, they said, was too great a burden to carry. Martin Luther writes, “Human reason has the Law as its object. It says to itself: ‘This I have done; this I have not done.’ But faith in its proper function has no other object than Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was put to death for the sins of the world. It does not look at its love and say: ‘What have I done? Where have I sinned? What have I deserved?’ But it says: ‘What has Christ done? What has He deserved?’... Therefore, faith acknowledges that in one Person, Jesus Christ, it has the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Whoever diverts his gaze from this object does not have true faith; he has fantasy and a vain opinion. He looks away from the promise and at the Law, which terrifies him and drives him to despair.”

This is the tricky thing about grace. It’s there already. Jesus’ work is accomplished. We don’t have to earn it. But we do have to see it. We have to turn our gaze toward it, like the serpent Moses lifted up, in order to receive it. We have to believe in it; we have to let it into our hearts. A gift is not enjoyed if it is not opened.

God’s love will never stop pursuing you. All we have to do is stop for one moment and let it catch us. All we have to do is accept that, flaws and all, sin and all, we are loved; we are saved; we are redeemed. That is faith. Not a bunch of intellectual propositions. Not saintly good works. Faith is accepting God’s love. It’s letting grace catch us.

Faith is the sure knowledge that it doesn’t matter what you accomplish or don’t; all that matters is what Christ accomplished for you. And he did it for you, for one simple reason: he loves you. He loves you with a love you have never imagined. A love that will sweep you off your feet if you let it.

So, I say: let it. **Amen.**