

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 1st Sunday in Lent, February 22, 2015

Living on Grace Street

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1 Peter 3:18-22

Today my message comes from an unusual direction. I chose the title of this sermon long before I read the scripture for this, the first Sunday of Lent, and before I had any idea of what I was going to say. The title came to me last November when Betsy and I were driving home from our trip to Florida. Passing through Ft. Myers, Florida I saw a sign, Grace Street, and it struck me that that was what being a Christian means --- we are all living on Grace Street.

Most of you have lived here in McDowell County for your entire life and very likely have only had two or three addresses at most. I tried to count the many places that I have lived and can remember fourteen streets in five different states. I am sure that there are more addresses that I have forgotten. My life has taken me to many places --- Laclede Street, Shiloh Avenue, Forbes Avenue, Ross Street, Lebanon Avenue, several numbered streets, and many others --- sometimes for just a few months and sometimes for many years. My home has been on many streets but one thing I know is that I am living on Grace Street and have lived there all of my life.

Does that sound strange? It shouldn't. You too live on Grace Street, not US 221, Lake Tahoma Road, Lukin Street or Plantation Drive. Those are the locations of your homes but you really live on Grace Street. You live in the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Lent and the coming of Easter define what Christianity is all about --- salvation, that is grace, grace given to us when we were baptized. That is what our scripture reading from 1st Peter is telling us.

Let me read it again, this time from Eugene Peterson's Bible paraphrase, The Message:

"That's what Christ did definitively: suffered because of others' sins, the Righteous One for the unrighteous ones. He went through it all—was put to death and then made alive—to bring us to God.

“He went and proclaimed God’s salvation to earlier generations who ended up in the prison of judgment because they wouldn’t listen. You know, even though God waited patiently all the days that Noah built his ship, only a few were saved then, eight to be exact—saved from the water by the water. The waters of baptism do that for you, not by washing away dirt from your skin but by presenting you through Jesus’ resurrection before God with a clear conscience. Jesus has the last word on everything and everyone, from angels to armies. He’s standing right alongside God, and what he says goes.”

When you accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior when you were baptized, or when your parents did it on your behalf as an infant, you moved to Grace Street.

M. Craig Barnes said the *“Grace means that we receive what we need, not what we deserve.”* (The Pastor as a Minor Poet, William B. Eerdsman’s Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI 2009).

In Christian theology we call this concept, “justification by grace.” In his book Christian Doctrine (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1994), Shirley Guthrie explains justification by grace with these words: *“The doctrine of justification is a call first of all to give up. Surrender. Stop trying to be something you are not ... You cannot justify yourself. Only God can make things right within you and in your personal relationships ... Justification by grace, as a ‘gift,’ means quite simply: You do not have to try to buy God’s love and acceptance, because you are already loved and accepted by God --- without any qualification of prerequisites ... God says simply, ‘I love you just as you are --- you, not your righteousness, your humility, your faith or your accomplishments of one kind or another.”*

That is what living on Grace Street means.

Some time ago, the Rev. Billy Graham was asked the question, *“Is there any way I can know --- really know --- that I am going to heaven when I die? I believe in Jesus and have given my life to him, but I still can’t say that I know beyond doubt.”*

Billy Graham replied, *“Imagine that you owed the bank an enormous amount of money --- far beyond your ability to repay, even in the best of times. Even if you worked hard for the rest of your life, you knew you’d never be able to earn enough to pay this debt and yet it had to be repaid or you’d lose everything.*

"But suppose the banker's son came along and befriended you --- and not only that, he offered to pay the debt for you.

"This is somewhat similar to what Jesus Christ did for you. You owed God a debt --- caused by sin. And you could never be good enough to erase that debt. But Jesus Christ did it for you. He paid the price, and now our sins are forgiven --- completely!

"Christ has made you a member of his family forever --- and nothing can ever change that. His love for you will never end and will carry you to eternal life in heaven."

I add that Christ is your good neighbor on Grace Street. Like a good neighbor, Jesus is there.

About two years ago a friend in Nova Scotia sent me an email with a story of God's grace. That email said:

There once was a man named George Thomas, pastor in a small New England town. One Easter Sunday morning he came to the Church carrying a rusty, bent, old bird cage, and set it by the pulpit. Eyebrows were raised and, as if in response, Pastor Thomas began to speak.

"I was walking through town yesterday when I saw a young boy coming toward me swinging this bird cage. On the bottom of the cage were three little wild birds, shivering with cold and fright. I stopped the lad and asked, "What do you have there, son?"

"Just some old birds," came the reply.

"What are you going to do with them?" I asked.

"Take 'em home and have fun with 'em," he answered. "I'm gonna' tease 'em and pull out their feathers to make 'em fight. I'm gonna' have a real good time."

"But you'll get tired of those birds sooner or later. What will you do then?"

"Oh, I got some cats," said the little boy. "They like birds. I'll take 'em to them."

The pastor was silent for a moment. "How much do you want for those birds, son?"

"Huh? Why, you don't want them birds, mister. They're just plain old field birds. They don't sing. They ain't even pretty!"

"How much?" the pastor asked again.

The boy sized up the pastor as if he were crazy and said, "\$10?"

The pastor reached in his pocket and took out a ten dollar bill. He placed it in the boy's hand. In a flash, the boy was gone. The pastor picked up the cage and gently carried it to the end of the alley where there was a tree and a grassy spot. Setting the cage down, he opened the door, and by softly tapping the bars persuaded the birds out, setting them free.

Well, that explained the empty bird cage on the pulpit, and then the pastor began to tell this story:

One day Satan and Jesus were having a conversation. Satan had just come from the Garden of Eden, and he was gloating and boasting. "Yes, sir, I just caught a world full of people down there. Set me a trap, used bait I knew they couldn't resist. Got 'em all!"

"What are you going to do with them?" Jesus asked.

Satan replied, "Oh, I'm gonna' have fun! I'm gonna' teach them how to marry and divorce each other, how to hate and abuse each other, how to drink and smoke and curse. I'm gonna' teach them how to invent guns and bombs and kill each other. I'm really gonna' have fun!"

"And what will you do when you are done with them?" Jesus asked.

"Oh, I'll kill 'em," Satan glared proudly.

"How much do you want for them?" Jesus asked.

"Oh, you don't want those people. They ain't no good. Why, you'll take them and they'll just hate you. They'll spit on you, curse you and kill you. You don't want those people!"

"How much? He asked again.

Satan looked at Jesus and sneered, "All your blood, tears and your life."

Jesus said, "DONE!" Then He paid the price.

The pastor picked up the cage and walked from the pulpit.

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ

we bend our knees

and lift up our hearts,

giving glory to God forever.

Amen.