



## “Because It’s All About Grace”

**Biblical Text: Ephesians 2: 8-13, 19-20**

*Dr. Michael F. Gardner, Senior Pastor  
Old Mission United Methodist Church*

First of all, let me say is what a joy it is to be back from vacation! I am so grateful for our clergy staff preaching the first messages in the series, *“Why I Love My Job.”*

\* Please join me in thanking our outstanding staff! Of course, it was a little risky! They could have used my absence to tell you, *“Here’s what I hate about my job!”* But I’m guessing that’s not what you heard. And actually, I didn’t worry one bit!

Thanks also for all your prayers and good wishes for a relaxing time for us. I was able to show Ann the amazing \* coastal redwood forests in California near where I was born, which made even me look small. \* It was wonderful. Those majestic trees reminded me of these words from Isaiah, *“The mountains and the hills shall break forth in song, and the trees of the field shall rejoice.”*<sup>1</sup>

I believe all creation, including our lives and vocations, are created for joyful praise to God. And it’s not just for clergy. It is for every life. Frederick Buechner’s words about vocation and calling are powerful and on point, \* *“The place God calls you to ... is where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep needs.”*<sup>2</sup>

We don’t always arrive at that understanding or discovery easily or early. Often, we are in the midst of living life and doing our daily tasks before we find words to express our life’s purpose, passion, or calling. At least it was that way for me.

About fifteen years ago, Dr. Rod Wilmoth asked a question that sent me on a search for those words: *“What do you plan to do with the rest of your life?”*

And here are the words I found. They come from the Bible – go figure! Actually from the Apostle Paul - in the twentieth chapter of the Book of Acts: \*

*“My one purpose ... is to run my race with joy ... to do the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus ... to testify to the good news of God’s grace.”*<sup>3</sup>

That is how Paul described his calling, his vocation to the Ephesian elders. And something in those words resonated deeply with me about why I do what I do.

<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 55:12, paraphrased by the author from the King James Version.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Copyright © 1973, HarperCollins Publishers.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 20:24, paraphrased by the author from the original Greek and several translations.

For me – it's always been all about grace.\* Grace is the hallmark of the Church's message, or it ought to be. Gordon MacDonald says: \**"You need not be a Christian to build houses, feed the hungry, or heal the sick. There is only one thing the world cannot do. It cannot offer grace."*<sup>4</sup> Testifying to grace is our business.

**United Methodists should know that. And my goodness, the world needs grace!**

The words and news of the day, including unresolved issues of racism, and the conflict in the Middle East are anything but gracious. The harsh grace-less-ness of our nation's political rhetoric \* "kicked up a notch" after Thursday's debate!

But it's too easy to point the finger at politics, whatever our affiliation. We live in an angry, ungracious age. \* Jon Stewart, whose final *Daily Show* aired Thursday night, was successful because he gave a sarcastic, humorous, talented voice to our anger.

Too many times our personal world is not gracious either. Complaints and irritation are easier to voice than tolerance. We are, especially those of our generations and income, self-focused and absorbed, blaming anyone except ourselves.

I am not the only one to make this observation. David Brooks' new book, \*The Road to Character, is now a best seller. He is not particularly religious; he is a columnist for the *New York Times*, and author of books that analyze our time. However, this book is a more deeply spiritual message than we often hear in Church about "*Five Steps to a Better You*," or something like it. A few of his more challenging points are these:

- \* We ought to not live for happiness, but for holiness.
- In the struggle against our own weakness, humility is our greatest virtue.
- \* Arrogance and pride are the central sins of our lives.
- We are all ultimately saved by grace.
- \* Personal honesty and integrity will not guarantee wealth, but something much more valuable – maturity.<sup>5</sup>

I resonated with his comment that "*We are saved by grace.*" But he does more than comment. He illustrates what he calls the U-turn of experiencing grace in the lives of Mother Theresa, Eisenhower, Dorothy Day, and Augustine, to name just a few.

If you were wondering when I would get to our text from \* **Ephesians 2**, it's now. So, if you are willing, open your Bibles to the best text on grace that I know.

Paul gets right to the point in verses 8-9. None of us, even the best of us, can rely on our own merit. **We all need grace, forgiveness, acceptance; the second chance.**

---

<sup>4</sup> Gordon MacDonald, Rebuilding Your Broken World. Copyright © 1988, Inter-Varsity Press.

<sup>5</sup> David Brooks, The Road to Character, Copyright © 2015. Random House.

**\* “<sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God - <sup>9</sup> not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” <sup>6</sup>**

And he reminds all of us that we each have a grace-story that we dare not, in our arrogance or self-importance, forget. Look at verse 11, 12 and 13.

**\* “<sup>11-12</sup> ...remember that at one time you ... were without Christ ... having no hope and without God in the world.” \* “<sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” <sup>7</sup>**

Grace, however it comes, brings lessons in humility. It teaches us to exercise acceptance and tolerance, even with those with whom we differ. And grace bridges our differences and connects us with others. It changes us. Paul says,

**\* “<sup>19</sup> So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and ... members of the household of God...” <sup>8</sup>**

Grace is the U-turn in our lives, that forces us to look at ourselves honestly and turn in a new direction. At least it has been that way for me in the powerful life-changing moments when God found me at some point of need. And I know I’m not alone.

Anne Lamott describes her slow, even painful, return to Christ and the church : **\* “I took a long breath and finally said out loud to God, ‘All right, you can come in now.’” <sup>9</sup>**

Frederick Buechner says: **\* “I am left with no other way of saying it than what I finally found was Christ. Or was found. It hardly seems to matter which.” <sup>10</sup>**

Imagine my surprise in finding fresh language in our time - from Brooks’ secular book by a non-observant Jew - far from the shelves where Church folk find their resources:

**\* “(Grace) may come in the form of love from friends and family, in the assistance of an unexpected stranger, or from God. \*But the message is the same. You are accepted. You don’t flail about in desperation, because hands are holding you up.” <sup>11</sup>**

**That’s how grace works. \*Grace heals all life breaks apart and makes it part of our story. Without experiencing it, remembering it, we fail, crushed under the weight of our singular arrogance. With it, we rise beyond our deserving, and find the best of us.**

**God, do we need it today. Amen.**

<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 2:8-9. New Revised Standard Version Bible, Copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. Ephesians 2:11-13, New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. Ephesians 2:19, New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>9</sup> Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies, Some Thoughts on Faith*. Copyright © 1999, Pantheon Press, p.50.

<sup>10</sup> Frederick Beuchner, *The Sacred Journey*. Copyright © 1982, Harper Collins, p. 110.

<sup>11</sup> David Brooks, *The Road to Character*, Copyright © 2015. Random House.