

The Weakness of Grace

3rd Sunday in Lent, Year B – 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, March 8, 2015

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Most of you have heard me talk about the church I grew up in. Through a Spirit-filled incident that makes a good story of its own, I ended up attending a Baptist church while I was in school. There's another pretty good story of how I ended up at Madison Street Methodist Church at my first duty station in Clarksville, but that story is not finished yet, because that is where I met my Jenny. We moved together to San Antonio, and then to Fort Polk, Louisiana, the sometimes nicknamed *armpit* of the Army. We tried the Methodists and the Baptists in Leesville, but neither was a good fit for us, and we settled on attending the large chapel service on post. By the time Jenny and I and our one-and-a-half boys moved to Germany in '87 (Kyle was on the way), we were firmly Army-chapel Protestants – Baptist one week, Methodist the next, Lutheran the next, depending on which chaplain was on duty.

Nearly two years into our three-year tour, we got a call from my brother Doug that changed everything. I knew Doug had married an Episcopalian, I even knew that he had been worshipping with his wife's family at the Cathedral of St. James in South Bend, Indiana, but I had no idea what *any* of that meant. Jenny and I were anticipating a trip home for vacation and a short temporary duty assignment, and Doug asked if we would stand as godparents for the baptism of his newborn daughter, Elizabeth. Though the concept was hardly foreign to my Methodist bride, we did not *do* infant baptism when I was growing up, and I said I wanted to make sure that there were no horses' heads involved in being a godfather. Doug assured me that I would have no problems with the liturgy, and offered to talk me through it when we got home.

The service the next Sunday went pretty much like every Baptism service you've been to since the "new" Prayer Book came out in '79. Through the prayers and the readings and the sermon, I sat there thinking how right it felt to be there. St. James' has stained glass, an altar, a crucifix, and statues of James, Joseph, and the Blessed Virgin, none of which would have been acceptable in the church of my youth. And yet I felt strangely, comfortably at home. After the baptism, the liturgy continued as it always does, with the Eucharistic Prayer and Communion. Sitting down front, our family was the first to go to the rail. Because the altar rail at St. James is angled, I had a view of my sister-in-law holding Elizabeth as the priest broke off a tiny piece of the host and placed it in the eight-week-old's mouth.

Growing up, I had often heard the phrase repeated that salvation is "by the grace of God alone." But *that* phrase had usually been followed by something like, "So you'd better get right so God can love you." When I saw that, only because of the faith of those of us that surrounded her, and in *spite* of the fact that she was powerless to do *anything* for herself, Elizabeth was accepted as a full member of the Body of Christ, when I saw the power in that powerlessness, I finally understood the very *concept* of grace. And there I was, kneeling among a community, eating bread and drinking wine with a *family*, that took such grace as a given – every time, for *everyone*.

Now, I studied the Church's Teaching series of books during my temporary duty the next month. When we returned to Germany, Jenny and I began worshipping at a chapel community served by an Episcopal chaplain an hour from our home. We were confirmed by the acting Bishop for the Armed Forces the following summer. I was ordained a Priest seven years later, and nineteen years after *that*, here I am. But I became an *Episcopalian* with that one small act of grace.

There's no use trying to convince your friends about the logic of grace – because it just *isn't* logical. There's no use trying to convince your coworker about the strength of grace – because grace doesn't even *try* to be strong. There's no use trying to convince your neighbor that grace will get them

ahead – because grace is just *not* how our world works. There's no use trying to convince searchers that grace is the answer to their questions – because grace just does not compute. “We proclaim Christ crucified,” Paul told the Corinthians, “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” We proclaim Christ crucified, foolishness to our self-made, up by my own bootstraps, “I did it my way” culture. We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to a world in which bigger is better, it's my way or the highway, and the one with the most toys wins. We proclaim Christ crucified, worse than *worthless* to our self-aggrandizing, self-contemptuous, self-centered mentality. There is absolutely no use trying to convince *anybody* that the grace of God is anything *but* foolishness, that the God of grace is anything *but* weakness.

All we can do, the only thing we can *hope* to do, is to tell the story of what the grace and love of God has done in my heart and in yours. Because it is only in the context of “us who are being saved,” as Paul puts it, only in the context of your heart and mine, that the message and the power of grace is at all relevant. I need to tell *my* story. *You* need to tell *your* story. We *all* together need to tell *our* story. We need to *tell* of how the foolishness of grace has overcome our prideful dependence on our own understanding. We need to *tell* of how the weakness of grace has overcome our incessant thirst for privilege and power. We need to *tell* of how the “irrelevance” of God's grace has conquered *our* fears, has overwhelmed our guilt, has banished our pride, has made our doubts... just not matter.

We need to *tell* our story, and we need to *tell* it, and we need to *tell* it. Because it is only in our story of love's power to transform *us*, that grace has any meaning at all.

We need to tell our story. And we need to tell our story. And we need to tell our story. *And...* we need to *live* it.