

A Sermon By Rev. Jim Hickman
Corona United Methodist Church
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But God in His Grace Called Me Pt 1
Galatians 1:11-24

In the opening chapter of his letter to the Galatians, Paul defends himself against his critics, especially those who point out that he had never seen the historical Jesus. So in the heat of the argument he says,

...the gospel which I preach is *not* of human origin, for I did *not* receive it from others as second hand; but as a revelation of Jesus Christ [himself].

(Gal. 1:11-12)

The revelation he is referring to is his encounter with the Risen Christ on the Road to Damascus AND the time he spent in seclusion in the Arabian desert. (vs. 17).

Having said that, Paul tells the story behind his statement,

You have heard of my former life in Judaism;

- How I was devoted to the traditions of our ancestors.
- How I was ahead of most others Jews my age in my practice of our religion.
- How I relentlessly persecuted the church of God and did my best to put an end do it.

But God in his grace...called me and was pleased to reveal his son to me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles. (vss. 11-15 with my rearrangement of vss. 13 & 14; *Today's English Version* rendering of text)

Finally Paul goes on to outline his education/his training in the new faith and how he is now known as

“The one who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.” (vs 23)

It is a story many of us are familiar with from sermons; Bible reading and Bible studies over the years. It is the story of Paul's call.

As I read this the key phrase in it for me was verse 15:

But God in his grace...called me... [repeat]

Grace is the love of God. It is a word Paul uses over and over again in his letters:

We are saved by grace/by grace you have been saved.

There is nothing you can do to earn the love of God.

God in his grace saves us.

We are familiar with the idea, but sometimes we wonder: Why does God love us?

As I thought about this question this week I realized that I can understand the grace of God if I compare it to the love an artist—someone who is creative and creates—the love an artist has for what she or he has created. I've known artists who could not part with any of their paintings or sculptures—they won't sell them; they won't give them away. You visit them and there are all their pieces of work all around the room. I've known artist who contacted families to “redeem” a piece of their work because the owner has died and it looks like the art will end up in the garage beyond a bunch of boxes only to collect dust. Didn't the family of Ansell Adams just go to court to get a set of photos he'd done and given to a museum, and now the museum was going to sell them?

It isn't an ego centric, "I made *that*." Oh, there is some pride in what I am describing, but it is the pride in what they've done—in the beauty or ingenuity or intricacy of what they've accomplished. Artists/craftsmen care about what they've created and hold on to it when others would say, "Let it go." I think God is like that. God is the creator. He created all that is. I suspect he has a kind of pride and joy in what he has accomplished. I would be willing to guess that is a factor in grace. God loves us. Grace says "just because we are." I'm adding "because he made us."

And in that love he calls us.

Call is a fine ol' religious word that we don't use much any more. Most of us think of it as something that applies to religious vocation: God called the Minister/every minister should have a "call story" meaning the story of "their call to the ordained ministry." But you know that is too bad because the concept of being called by God has a much broader meaning than that. For example, I suspect that most of us assume that when Paul says,

But God in his grace...called me...

He is talking about his call to ministry. But if we read the passage "again for the first time" (listen to that phrase: it means leave your preconceived notions behind and read the Bible as if you'd never read it before)—if we read the passage "again for the first time" we would have to admit that it could just as easily be referring to the call

To come and follow me...

There are at least two calls in life:

One is to discipleship: to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

The second is to service.

And all of us are called to where we work/where we serve.

Ah, come on Jim. I wasn't called to work where I work—I just kinda fell into it...

It was the only thing available at the time....

I like what I do, but it wasn't my first choice....

I am doing what I am doing because I choose to do it...

Maybe it wasn't your first choice. But when you say you "just kinda fell into it..." could it be that God moved you this way and that way by opening and closing doors in your life and "falling into it" was your call?

And if you say that you are doing what you want to do, that's fine. Who gave you the interests, skills and abilities; who opened the doors for your education or training? Who or what seemed to pave the way to where you are now? Dumb luck? Your ingenuity? God's hand?

You see what I am saying: God in his undeserved love made things happen that open the doors to what we are doing for a living or in retirement. Because you see,

God in his grace calls us

To follow him

To serve where ever he sends us.

Let us take a few minutes to reflect on what we've heard and seen this morning.
Amen.