

1 Sermon, August 28, 2011

Texts: Romans 5:1-11, Ephesians 1:3-10

Title: "Finding Christ at the Center: Receiving Grace"

1. Finding Christ
2. What is "the center"?
3. How do we get to the center?
4. How do we receive grace?

1. Finding Christ

This sermon is one that could be given without words, using simple gestures. Open hands, hands bringing close to the heart, and eyes lifted to the heavens.

But sermons are supposed to have words.

The title of this sermon is "Finding Christ at the Center: Receiving Grace."

I suppose I should start out by saying that the title is a bit presumptuous. It's not really us finding Christ.

Christ found us long ago.

Finding Christ, then, is discovering what has been there all along: the love of God.

Today's reading from Romans says, "Christ has also introduced us to God's undeserved kindness on which we take our stand."

Christ has come to us, not we to him. And it is Christ who shows us the love of God. When we "find Christ," it is discovering that Christ has always had a hand extended in blessing, and another in beckoning to us. As Christ extends a hand in blessing, he says: "Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." And "Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

With the other hand beckoning to us, Christ says, Come, follow me." "Come to me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

2. What is "the center"?

Again, the sermon title is "Finding Christ at the Center: Receiving Grace."

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So what do I mean by the center? It's a spiritual concept of finding Christ in the place of peace, not outside of us, but within and among us.

It's the center of our spirits, that place where, when we quiet all the other demanding voices, we hear the heartbeat of God's grace within.

Today's reading from Romans says: "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

In the center of our spirits, we are put right with God, connected to God, and we are home.

It's also the center of our bodies, for the Christ was made flesh and lived among us. Christ still comes to the center of our bodies. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul says that our bodies are members of Christ himself.

The Psalms say that we are God's work, fearfully and wonderfully made.

When I shared with you the gestures at the beginning of the sermon it was very intentional, because our faith is not just a matter of our minds, but our bodies, also.

To be centered is to stand or sit in a way that you are grounded, a way that your muscles are relaxed, and because you are relaxed, you are more open.

We also find Christ at the center of our faith community, when we pray together, when we can sense the love in our midst. This is a congregation that cares. I have seen the love of God poured out here, in helping people in need, in hugs and laughter, in patient listening, in giving people a chance.

We are the body of Christ, and Christ is made flesh in our words and deeds.

We find Christ at the center of our faith community also as we respect each other, and make it a place where all voices are heard.

3. How do we get to the center?

So how do we get to the center, where we find Christ?

Well, that has been the quest of Christians for 2,000 years. To try to recap the numerous spiritual paths would take a lot longer than I have here today.

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But at the heart, there is prayer – prayer that lets down the barriers we have toward God.

It's not about right doctrine.
It's not about achievement.
It's not about doing things the right way.

We come to the center by simple trust in God. Trust that God is good, that God will provide, that God already has something prepared for us.

At the heart of it, it means accepting a mystery: that it's not what we do, but what Christ has already done it for us.

Romans 5:9 says it: "God has accepted us through the sacrifice of Christ's blood."

4. How do we receive grace?

We human beings are always trying to do things. We want to earn our keep, gain trust, do something to deserve what we receive.

It's hard for us just to receive. It's hard for us to sit back and accept that we ourselves are accepted by the creator of the universe.

It's hard for us to simply sit and open our hands and receive. But that's an essential for our Christian faith and life.

[Do gestures.]

Ephesians 3:7 says that we're given freedom through Christ's blood.

We have freedom to choose. Jesus over and over gave people choices: a broad way or a narrow way, to try to be first or to be content with being last, to follow or not to follow Jesus.

God gives us a radical freedom to choose, so in one sense, receiving grace is a simple choice. It is a choice to place our trust in God, and let God give us the gift of love.

And if we choose to accept God's grace, accept that God is good, and that God will bless us beyond our understanding, then We can even suffer with contentment because we know God's undeserved kindness.

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That's the whole point of Romans 5:3-5:

But that's not all! We gladly suffer, because we know that suffering helps us to endure. And endurance builds character, which gives us a hope that will never disappoint us. All of this happens because God has given us the Holy Spirit, who fills our hearts with his love.

[do gestures]

Amen.

Romans 5:1-11

Contemporary English Version (CEV)

1By faith we have been made acceptable to God. And now, because of our Lord Jesus Christ, we live at peace with God. **2**Christ has also introduced us to God's undeserved kindness on which we take our stand. So we are happy, as we look forward to sharing in the glory of God. **3**But that's not all! We gladly suffer, because we know that suffering helps us to endure. **4**And endurance builds character, which gives us a hope **5**that will never disappoint us. All of this happens because God has given us the Holy Spirit, who fills our hearts with his love. **6**Christ died for us at a time when we were helpless and sinful. **7**No one is really willing to die for an honest person, though someone might be willing to die for a truly good person. **8**But God showed how much he loved us by having Christ die for us, even though we were sinful.

9But there is more! Now that God has accepted us because Christ sacrificed his life's blood, we will also be kept safe from God's anger. **10**Even when we were God's enemies, he made peace with us, because his Son died for us. Yet something even greater than friendship is ours. Now that we are at peace with God, we will be saved by his Son's life. **11**And in addition to everything else, we are happy because God sent our Lord Jesus Christ to make peace with us.

Romans 5:1-11

New International Version (NIV)

1 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, **2** through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. **3** Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that

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suffering produces perseverance; **4** perseverance, character; and character, hope. **5** And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

6 You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. **7** Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. **8** But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

9 Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! **10** For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! **11** Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Romans 5:1-11

The Message (MSG)

1-2By entering through faith into what God has always wanted to do for us—set us right with him, make us fit for him—we have it all together with God because of our Master Jesus. And that's not all: We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that he has already thrown open his door to us. We find ourselves standing where we always hoped we might stand—out in the wide open spaces of God's grace and glory, standing tall and shouting our praise.

3-5There's more to come: We continue to shout our praise even when we're hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. In alert expectancy such as this, we're never left feeling shortchanged. Quite the contrary—we can't round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit!

6-8Christ arrives right on time to make this happen. He didn't, and doesn't, wait for us to get ready. He presented himself for this sacrificial death when we were far too weak and rebellious to do anything to get ourselves ready. And even if we hadn't been so weak, we wouldn't have known what to do anyway. We can understand someone dying for a person worth dying for, and we can understand how someone good and noble could inspire us to selfless sacrifice. But God put his love on the line for us by offering his Son in sacrificial death while we were of no use whatever to him.

9-11Now that we are set right with God by means of this sacrificial death, the consummate blood sacrifice, there is no longer a question of being at odds with God in any way. If, when

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we were at our worst, we were put on friendly terms with God by the sacrificial death of his Son, now that we're at our best, just think of how our lives will expand and deepen by means of his resurrection life! Now that we have actually received this amazing friendship with God, we are no longer content to simply say it in plodding prose. We sing and shout our praises to God through Jesus, the Messiah!

Ephesians 1:3-10

The Message (MSG)

3-6How blessed is God! And what a blessing he is! He's the Father of our Master, Jesus Christ, and takes us to the high places of blessing in him. Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son.

7-10Because of the sacrifice of the Messiah, his blood poured out on the altar of the Cross, we're a free people—free of penalties and punishments chalked up by all our misdeeds. And not just barely free, either. Abundantly free! He thought of everything, provided for everything we could possibly need, letting us in on the plans he took such delight in making. He set it all out before us in Christ, a long-range plan in which everything would be brought together and summed up in him, everything in deepest heaven, everything on planet earth.

Ephesians 1:3-10

Contemporary English Version (CEV)

3Praise the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ for the spiritual blessings that Christ has brought us from heaven! **4**Before the world was created, God had Christ choose us to live with him and to be his holy and innocent and loving people. **5**God was kind and decided that Christ would choose us to be God's own adopted children. **6**God was very kind to us because of the Son he dearly loves, and so we should praise God. **7-8**Christ sacrificed his life's blood to set us free, which means that our sins are now forgiven. Christ did this because God was so kind to us. God has great wisdom and understanding, **9**and by what Christ has done, God has shown us his own mysterious ways. **10**Then when the time is right, God will do all that he has planned, and Christ will bring together everything in heaven and on earth.

Ephesians 1:3-10

New International Version (NIV)

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3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. **4** For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love **5** he[**a**] predestined us for adoption to sonship[**b**] through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— **6** to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. **7** In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace **8** that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, **9** he[**c**] made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, **10** to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.