

WGUMC September 25, 2016 I Corinthians 15:1-11  
"I Am What I Am"

I was saddened to read about the two students who were killed in separate accidents in the Sierras this past week.

Patrick May wrote an article about them in Friday's paper. He talked about young people who are studying and launching careers in the turbo-charged, hyper-ambitious, super-competitive environment that is Silicon Valley. Apparently, when they need a break and seek respite in the high Sierras, they bring all that intensity with them. And maybe they don't fully appreciate the fact that mountains can be even more unforgiving than freeways.

Ian Fettes runs a Jeep adventure company out of June Lake, and he's seen his share of it. He says, "It's definitely something I see among the younger generation, this belief that they have to do extreme stuff in order to be normal."

Gee, I wonder where they got that idea. I'm afraid that we live in a place where the extreme is normal. If you're in school,

you have to be a genius in order to make the grade. If you're in business, you have to be a Steve Jobs in order to be a success. If you're buying a home, you have to be rich in order to be middle class. In almost every aspect of life here, it feels as if you have to go to extremes, just to be "normal." You have to be exceptional just to feel acceptable.

This is bad news. And you don't have to go free climbing or base-jumping to know that this is a culture that is going to kill us. Now it could kill us in many different ways—physically and financially—but my job is to worry about the ways in which it is killing us spiritually. One of my biggest concerns is that there is a widespread religion here. It is a religion of attainment and in that religion, there doesn't seem to be any room for grace. For those of us who are failing to attain, we could sure use some good news, some grace.

In our text today, Paul wants to remind the Corinthians of the good news that he had proclaimed to them: that Christ

died for their sins, that he was buried and then raised on the third day and appeared to Peter and all the apostles. This is good news for Paul because Christ also appeared to him, and Paul was the least worthy of them all. He says, "For I am the least of all the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." [I Cor 15:9] You could do a lot less here and be out on your ear. Amazingly, Christ came to him not when he was doing everything right, but when he was doing everything wrong, not when he was being exceptional, but when his actions were utterly unacceptable.

Paul did not earn the right to be called an apostle. He did nothing to deserve that reward. If he deserved anything, he deserved to be punished for what he did to the followers of Jesus. Yet Christ not only brought the grace of God to him, he chose him to bring it to others.

Here in this valley, that doesn't make any sense. For those who like to think that we live in a meritocracy, grace is

lunacy. When you believe that you have earned everything you have acquired and are solely responsible for everything you have achieved, then there is little space for grace. Those who think they don't need it aren't likely to offer it to anyone else. They figure: I made it. Why can't you?

The problem is that too many of us take that stubborn belief in our self-sufficiency right into our spirituality. We figure that if we pray enough, if we serve enough, if we love enough, if we suffer enough, we can work our way into the heart of God. So even for a lot of us life-long Christians, the Good News is still a mystery.

Paul tried to earn his way into the heart of God, but he couldn't get there that way. On the road to Damascus Christ came to shine a bright light on his self-righteousness and self-sufficiency. Christ made him look at his own inadequacy. Don't we hate it when that happens? While his physical eyes were blind, his spiritual eyes began to open. For the first time Paul

could see that he hadn't gotten closer to God. In all of his efforts to be right and to enforce the rules, he had only pushed God farther away.

The story in Acts says that Paul was in Damascus for three days. And for those three days, he not only was without sight but he was also without food and water. In some sense, he must have felt as if he was dying and that, in fact, was what Paul was doing. He was dying to his old self, his false self. He was confronting the lie that he could do something to merit his own righteousness and save his own soul. To put it nicely, he was descending into the abyss of his unworthiness.

So far, it's hard to see how Christ coming into his life was good news. I think the reason that so many of us won't let God take us down into that deep hole is because we are afraid God will leave us there. We don't want to take the risk of learning the truth about ourselves and so we continue to live the lie. We push God away and then punish those who point out what we

are doing to others and to ourselves. But in the end, it is the lie that will kill us; only the unvarnished truth will set us free.

For most of us, it takes some kind of existential crisis—a career setback, parenting problems, financial struggles, substance abuse—something that makes us descend into the abyss of unworthiness to get us to the place where we can know our true worth. That's because we have to believe that we cannot earn it before we will allow ourselves to receive it.

Psychologically speaking, Paul had to face his shadow in order to disempower it. He had to look in that mirror and say, "I am what I am" and not flinch or look away. Of course, God knew who he was all along, but Paul didn't know who he was. Until he could say, "I am utterly unworthy," he never knew that by God's grace he was totally worthy.

"I am what I am." These words had a different meaning for Paul and for God. For Paul, it was an expression of honesty: "I have been an S.O.B." For God, it was "Yes, but you are also

an S.O.G., a son of God. And I'm going to give you the grace to believe it and the strength to live it." That doesn't mean that grace made him perfect or changed his personality. Paul was still there, flaws and all. But grace made him able to live with himself and less prone to project his problems on to somebody else. And when he accepted the fact that he was accepted as he was, he could become what God had always known him to be. And so he tells the Corinthians, "By the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain."

That, my friends, is justification by faith. That idea is perhaps Paul's greatest contribution to Christianity: that by believing and receiving the grace of God, I can stop trying to be the person I never was and start being the person I really am. What grace does for us is allow us to see ourselves the way God sees us and to love ourselves the way God loves us.

So grace means that we can be totally unworthy and totally worthy at the same time. If you know this, you are

"saved." As Richard Rohr puts it, "You know that there is nothing you can do to talk God into loving you, because God already does."

That is the good news. The hard part is holding onto it. I guess that's why Paul had to keep writing letters to remind folks of it. And why we have to keep reading them so we don't forget it. Church may be the last place in this valley where it is good news to discover that we are unworthy. But it's also one of the few places where we can come to learn that we are totally worthy. That's a peak experience that we don't need to go to the Sierras for. We can have it right here. We are what we are. That's all we can give to God and that's all God wants from us. We are what we are: more loved by God than we will ever know. Thanks be to God.