

“Grace Saturated Saints”

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Third Sunday after Easter – May 8, 2011 – Mother’s Day/Festival of the Christian Home

A sermon preached by The Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden

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Dr. Leonard Sweet, prominent United Methodist minister, prolific author, professor, academic dean, *avant garde* theologian, and preacher extraordinaire, begins each service with the greeting: “Good morning, saints ...good morning, sinners!” Let’s try it ...remember you have to respond twice. Here we go ...first, good morning, saints ...[*congregation responds “Good morning”*] ...good morning, sinners ...[*congregation responds “Good morning”*]. You see, by the grace of God we are *all* saints. You don’t have to work miracles ...you don’t have to be beatified or pronounced a saint by the Pope or the presiding bishop of United Methodism ...you only have to believe in Jesus, the Son of God, the Lord of all life, the Savior of the world, to be a saint. The word “saint” literally means “being different from,” “being set apart from,” “being sanctified or made holy.”

So we are *all* saints, saved and being sanctified by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. But we are also sinners. We are *all* sinners because the scripture reminds us that “*all* have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” Paradoxically and simultaneously, we are *both* saints and sinners until our lives are totally transformed when we leave this earthly life.

Today I want to focus briefly on our saintly, rather than sinful, nature. At the beginning of the First Letter to the Corinthians the apostle, I think, almost sarcastically ...almost “tongue in cheek” ...given the many flaws and failings of the Corinthian Christians that he points out ...addresses them as follows: *To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those **being sanctified** in Christ Jesus, called to be **saints** together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.* (1 Cor. 1:2-3). And then later in the 15th chapter, which was read earlier in the service, Paul gives his own reasons why he could be called a “saint.” And it all has to do with believing in Jesus Christ, being loved unconditionally by God, and being transformed from the person he was to the person he is in Christ. Paul declares: “But by the grace of God, I am what I am.” (1 Cor. 15:10). What he was saying is that he was being

saturated by God's grace. And if that is true for Paul, it is also true for us.

Allow me to make three brief points this morning about being "Grace Saturated Saints." And on this Mother's Day, let me say that the one person who more than anyone else taught me these things is my own mother, Mabel Reynolds, and this sermon is in her honor. They are:

1. **Grace saturated saints *have been found.***
2. **Grace saturated saints *can't help smiling!***
3. **Grace saturated saints *spill God's grace in God's world.***

1. **"Grace Saturated Saints" are those people who have been found.** I mean found by Jesus who was sent by God to find us. In the case of lost hikers, being found is like being discovered by a search and rescue team and being shown the way back down the mountain to safety. It means "getting your bearings" again. When an eighteenth century slave ship captain, John Newton, was found by Jesus through the effort of a Methodist lay preacher, he gave up selling slaves. That's when he wrote the words of a hymn we all know so well: "Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see."

Our experience may not be as dramatic as John Newton's, nor our response as lyrical, but we know what it is to be found. When we have recovered our bearings and recognize the landmarks that will lead us safely home, we can sing with Newton: "Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come; 'tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home."

Whether the demands of work, a family crisis, some temptation, or simply neglect of our spiritual lives has caused us to lose our bearings, and lose our way, so that we are trying to live our lives without God, God's grace, which is like a search and rescue team, is there searching for us, ready to lead us home. Like the woman who had lost a coin in one of Jesus' parables, God has turned the lamp on and has searched in all of the dark corners and found us wherever we are. Grace is always about God finding us, not us finding God. It is all about God and none of self.

Bishop Will Willimon is quick to remind his hearers that they may only have regard for themselves ...that is, they may regard themselves as worthy, *only* because of God's grace, *only*

because they have been found by God. In a homily entitled *The Precariousness of Goodness* Bishop Willimon stated: “We have a wonderful expression that we use whenever we hear that one of our number has fallen, messed up, gotten caught, been found out, uncovered, indicted. ‘There, but for the grace of God, go I,’ we say. And well we should. But for the grace of God, we have no claim to goodness or courage in ourselves. We are able to stand ourselves only by the grace of God. Our goodness is not simply unimpressive. It is precarious.”

2. **“Grace Saturated Saints” are those who can’t help smiling!** There are two dimensions to grace. There is God’s grace *for* us, and there is God’s grace *in* us. My first point – we have been found – is only possible because of God’s grace *for* us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God’s grace *for* us is God’s unmerited love toward all humankind. But the second dimension is God’s grace *in* us: that is, God’s power at work within us ...providing us with the ability to do God’s will ...enabling us to be faithful when others are forsaking God ...displacing our fears and timidity with the power of God’s indwelling grace ...establishing a quality of life and demeanor that are distinctive and attractive. God’s grace *in* us is making us saintly!

The great Methodist missionary to India, E. Stanley Jones, once said that when he met Christ, he felt he had “swallowed sunshine.” When we have been found, when we have recovered our bearings, when we know we belong to God, the grace of God produces an infectious joy in our lives. We can’t help smiling! Newton tried to express it in this verse: “When we’ve been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we’ve no less days to sing God’s praise than when we’d first begun.”

Grace saturated saints are contagious Christians who are out to infect the world with laughter and love, dancing and delight! We’ve swallowed sunshine! We can’t help ourselves. God’s grace *in* us was never meant to be contained or conserved. So, let’s smile and give it away!

3. **“Grace saturated saints are those who spill God’s grace in God’s world.”** In Ephesians 2:8 we read: “For we are saved by grace and that not of ourselves; it is the gift of God.” If God’s grace is good enough to be saved by, God’s grace ought to be good enough for us to live by. There have been times in all of our lives when we have felt as if we could pick and choose what *we* wanted to do ...pick and choose where *we* wanted to go ...only to discover

that the will of God for our lives, and that which God would have us do, turned out *not* to be what we had in mind.

In one of his other letters, the apostle Paul wrote: “For me to live is Christ.” (Phil. 1:21). That’s what we’re supposed to do. We’re supposed to live a Christ-like life in this world. We’re made in the image and likeness of God. When we are around other people, they aren’t supposed to see and hear us; they’re supposed to see and hear Christ. We’re saturated with God’s grace, and yet God adds more and more grace every day to our lives. The result is that we are spilling that grace in God’s world.

What’s happening is all good! We’re meant to be making a difference! God’s grace can reach others through us. God’s grace enables us to make disciples and fulfill Christ’s Great Commission. God’s grace allows us to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with others. We need to be spilling the abundance of God’s grace all over God’s world ...pouring it out of our hearts onto the streets of Thomasville, into our homes, into all our workplaces, into the schools, hospitals, stores, sports arenas.

God’s grace *in* us is powerful, but to spill over into the world demands risk on our side. Interestingly, it’s the theme of Amanda McBroom’s song made famous by Bette Midler in the movie entitled *The Rose*. Listen to the words of this song. McBroom may not have intended this, but her song conveys the kind of love God has extended to us and the kind of love God wants us to extend to others. Such love is never without risk, as the lyrics make clear:

*It’s the heart afraid of breaking that never learns to dance,
It’s the dream afraid of waking that never takes the chance,
It’s the one who won’t be taken, who cannot seem to give,
And the soul afraid of dying that never learns to live.*

Jesus knew the risks of extending God’s love to all people, and he took these risks. Grace saturated saints do the same. They spill God’s grace whenever they can ...wherever they go. It’s a nice mess! It means God is doing something through people like you and me in God’s world. That’s good ...that’s what life is all about! So keep on smiling and keep on spilling, saints!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.