

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

On Thursday night, we began our shortened study of spiritual disciplines with a discussion about why they are important to our lives of faith. Richard Foster, author of “Celebration of Discipline” writes that the classical disciplines he describes in his book “call us to move beyond surface living into the depths,” and invite us to explore the inner caverns of the spiritual realm.”<sup>1</sup> One of the reasons Foster calls these disciplines “classical” is because they are ancient, practiced by faithful people for centuries. On Thursday evening, we acknowledged our contemporary difficulty with the word “disciplines,” and agreed that calling them “holy habits” instead gives us a gentler and more descriptive name for the practices we engage in to grow closer to God in Christ. Today, as we find ourselves at the mid-point of Lent, those of us who are weary and tired of being disciplined, may find the strength and encouragement to get through the next three weeks of practicing the holy habits that our spiritual disciplines have begun in us, or even to begin new ones.

One of the disciplines—um, holy habits—we discussed on Thursday night was fasting, and a part of *that* discussion has also stayed with me. Foster points out that despite its deep biblical roots, fasting has gained a poor reputation, both in and out of the church. There was a time in the fairly recent practice of the church that people didn’t eat before they came to communion. To my knowledge we no longer do that, although I cannot tell you why. Maybe we think we can’t keep pace with our busy schedules without the fuel that food gives our bodies. Our ease in fasting depends on how we approach it and how we prepare for it; but most people who engage in fasting do so without talking about it, so it’s not something we normally learn from each other. I shared with the group the story of my own fast on this past Ash Wednesday, a fast I had not announced to anyone other than God and myself. I walked into the office on that morning to find that one of our excellent bakers had shared slices of a carrot cake. To me, that beautiful piece of cake represented temptation to break the discipline I had set up for myself that day. But another person in our discussion Thursday evening saw it as grace. What do you think?

Today’s lessons reek of grace, although that word is mentioned only in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. We talk about grace in church all the time, assuming that everyone around us knows what it means. Unfortunately, our assumption is just as incorrect as the assumption that people will understand what we mean when we quote John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Huh? Quoting scripture or throwing out words like “salvation,” or “grace,” probably will not convince anyone to believe in our Lord Christ. These are concepts that take their place among the mysteries of faith, and we hold them in our hearts, barely understanding what they mean ourselves or how to articulate them to someone else! So every now and then, it’s not a bad idea to bring them out and talk about what they mean and how they affect our lives.

*More Than Words: A Resource Book for Church School Teachers and for Students in Junior High School Classes* published in 1958 defines God’s Grace in three ways. The first is the “undeserved love and favor Almighty God offers” to human beings. The second meaning is “God’s special love and favor to us through all that Jesus Christ was and said, through all he did, and all that happened to him.” The third way we understand God’s Grace is that “God’s love and kindness are working inwardly in our hearts” and through God’s Grace “we are given power to act in ways acceptable” to God.” God’s Grace, then, is about God’s love and favor and power, freely given by God, and at work in the world and in us.

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<sup>1</sup> Foster, Richard J. *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. HarperSanFrancisco, 1998, p. 1.

Is that clear enough for us to understand? Yes, at least on one level. But words like love and grace, particularly when used by religious folk like us, are not words of intellect; they are words of the heart. We know them because we experience them, and how we experience them is not always the same. Take, for example, that piece of cake that put itself in front of me on Ash Wednesday. For one person, it was grace. For me, the grace was not in the piece of cake itself, but in my ability to walk away from the temptation of it, an ability that I believe came from God's power and certainly not from myself. The ways that we perceive and experience grace can be just as unique and different as each of us, and that's yet another reason why we find it hard to describe it in words that others will understand.

That book *More Than Words*, tells two stories to demonstrate God's Grace. The first is the story of a little girl whose mother hugged her one day and said, "That is because you were so brave at the dentist's this morning." Later in the day, the mother hugged her again and said "This is because you helped me with the dishes." In the evening, the mother hugged her daughter again. "What is that for?" asked the little girl. "Nothing," answered the mother. It's just because I love you." This last hug reminds us that God's Grace comes to us, not because of anything we do, but simply because God loves us.

The second story about God's Grace in this wonderful little book tells of a boy who forgot a rule—or chose to ignore it—and did something he knew his parents had forbidden him to do. His parents punished him for it, just as we often are punished in one way or another when we break rules. The boy was ashamed, embarrassed, and forlorn; and then his parents came to him, hugged him, and told him they loved him. He received their undeserved love and favor despite what he had done.

In the same way that these parents loved and favored their children, God loves and favors us and all whom God has made. It has always been that way. God never stopped loving Adam and Eve, even after they defied God and broke the one rule God had given them. God never stopped loving the Israelites, even when they grumbled and groaned and did everything they could think of to be unlovable. Today's story of the bronze serpent—irreverently known in seminary and preaching circles as the story of the snake on a stick—demonstrates that. God did not let the Israelites' sins go unpunished, but still loved them and demonstrated undeserved, unearned love for them in a way they could not forget; a way, in fact, that they had to rely on if they were to live.

Thankfully, there are no jokes in seminary, or among preachers, or anywhere else I've been about the man on the cross. John reminds us that "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." For us who are believers, the cross reminds us of God's love, in the same way the bronze serpent reminded the Israelites of God's love. There's a cautionary reminder in their story, though. Eventually the bronze serpent became an object of worship for the people of Israel and they made offerings to it; they even gave it a name. In Second Kings, Chapter 18, we learn that years later King Hezekiah broke it into pieces. "He trusted in the Lord the God of Israel;" and held fast to the Lord; he did not depart from following him but kept the commandments that the Lord commanded Moses"—those very commandments that we heard last week. In the same way, we must hold fast to the Lord, remembering that the cross of Christ is not an object to be worshipped, but an instrument of our faith, a reminder of God's everlasting Grace through the gift of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Those spiritual disciplines, holy habits that we take on during Lent, are also instruments of our faith, ways for us to grow closer to God in Christ, to become more aware of God's Grace in our lives. Beginning today, at this midpoint of Lent, let's shift our focus to remember not only God's sacrifice for us, but also God's Grace to us. May we never forget that God loves the world now just as much as God loved the world then. God *so loves* the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Then. Now. Always. *Amen.*