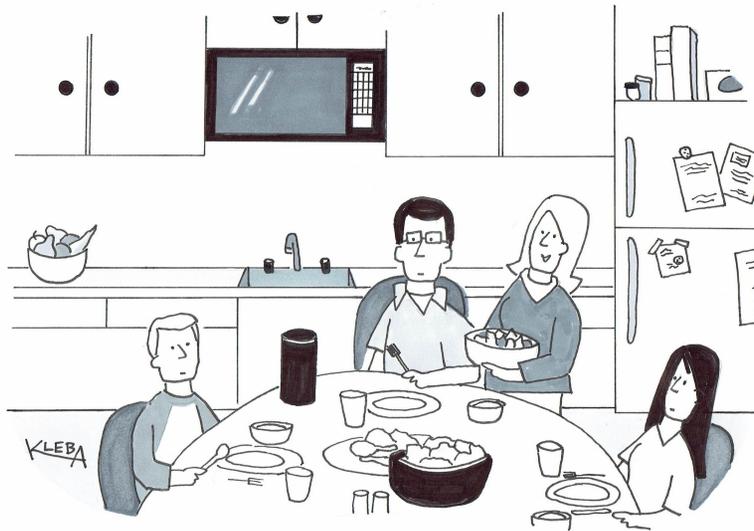


The Church's ministry is a gift from Jesus Christ to the whole Church. Christ alone rules, calls, teaches, and uses the Church as he wills, exercising his authority by the ministry of women and men for the establishment and extension of God's new creation. Christ's ministry is the foundation and standard for all ministry, the pattern of the one who came "not to be served but to serve" (Matt. 20:28). The basic form of ministry is the ministry of the whole people of God, from whose midst some are called to ordered ministries, to fulfill particular functions. Members and those in ordered ministries serve together under the mandate of Christ.

Presbyterian Book of Order G-2.0101

Grace is something you can never get but can only be given. There's no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth.

Frederick Buchner — *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*



"Alexa, would you like to say grace?"

compiled by RWH for Northminster Macon — week of 2024-03-10

Monday Morning

To you,

who were spiritually dead

all the time that you drifted along
on the stream of this world's ideas of living,
and obeyed its unseen ruler
(who is still operating in those
who do not respond to the truth of God),
to you Christ has given life!

We all lived like that in the past,
and followed the impulses and imaginations
of our evil nature,
being in fact under the wrath of God by nature,
like everyone else.

But even though we were dead in our sins

God, who is rich in mercy,

because of the great love he had for us,
gave us life together with Christ

—it is, remember, by grace
and not by achievement
that you are saved—

and has lifted us right out of the old life
to take our place with him in Christ in the Heavens.

Thus he shows for all time
the tremendous generosity

of the grace and kindness
he has expressed towards us in Christ Jesus.

It was nothing you could or did achieve—it was God's gift to you.
No one can pride himself upon earning the love of God.

The fact is that what we are we owe to the hand of God upon us.
We are born afresh in Christ, and born to do those good deeds
which God planned for us to do.

Ephesians 2:1-10 — J. B. Phillips translation (1960)

αὐτοῦ γάρ ἐσμεν ποίημα, κτισθέντες ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ ἐπὶ ἔργοις ἀγαθοῖς, οἷς προητοίμασεν ὁ Θεός, ἵνα ἐν αὐτοῖς περιπατήσωμεν.

For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Ephesians 2:10 — New Revised Standard Version

Lord, because you have made me, I owe you the whole of my love; because you have redeemed me, I owe you the whole of myself; because you have promised so much, I owe you my whole being. Moreover, I owe you as much more love than myself as you are greater than I, for whom you gave yourself and to whom you promised yourself. I pray you, Lord, make me taste by love what I taste by knowledge; let me know by love what I know by understanding. I owe you more than my whole self, but I have no more, and by myself I cannot render the whole of it to you. Draw me to you, Lord, in the fullness of your love. I am wholly yours by creation; make me all yours, too, in love.

St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109)
Archbishop of Canterbury, philosopher, opponent of slave trade

Ignatius of Loyola (d. 1556) composed a process of spiritual discernment for Christians who are seeking to find out what God intends for them. The most important rule is, “The love which moves me and makes me choose something has to descend from above, from the love of God.” The quotation from Ignatius indicates the significance of spatial imagery, which plays an important role in Ephesians as well. Christians need to order their way of life around God first. The passions and concerns of daily life remain part of Christian experience, but they now belong to something greater. Ephesians goes so far as to instruct Christians that they are “seated in the heavenly places” (2:6). Of course, that image cannot describe the actual experience of Christians in this life. However, it establishes a perspective. Suppose we could look down on our lives from above, from God’s presence. What would the script for that life be? Surprisingly, perhaps, there is more freedom in that world than in the old life controlled by sin and death.

The New Interpreter’s Bible

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.

John Newton (1825-1807)

“Salvation” is not a term heard very much in sermons these days. It may conjure up too many recollections of old-time revivals, when people “got saved,” if only for a short spell. Apparently a moratorium of sorts has fallen on the use of the term, at least in mainline churches. But “salvation” is a prominent biblical term, at the heart of the Christian gospel, and it surfaces in each of the readings for this Sunday in Lent. It may be time to dust it off and have another look. The people in our congregations know only too well the experience of lostness, and they may welcome a word of clarification about its opposite—being saved. Ephesians 2:1–10 is a classic text about God’s saving activity in Christ. It has movement and tells the story in language and images that overflow with various connotations. In fact, there is a certain lyrical quality to this passage. Words and phrases are piled on top of one another; expressions are repeated.

On the one hand, we know that “life” is a gift of God, the result of divine and not human activity. The repeated use of the perfect tense for the verb “save” in v. 5 and v. 8 (coupled in both cases with the phrase “by grace”) indicates that gratitude is the appropriate human response, not merely for the beginning of one’s experience of salvation, but for all one’s days (“by grace you were and are being saved”). With the dominant stress on grace in this text, one could conclude that the way of forfeiting salvation is ingratitude, a self-confidence that presumes that one’s accomplishments, whether material or spiritual, are one’s own—what the text means by “boasting.”

On the other hand, salvation also means doing what we were created to do—“good works.” As the NRSV interestingly puts it, this is “to be our way of life” (v. 10). Gratitude is not to be equated with passivity, but is in fact characterized by activity. But how are the “good works” of v. 10 different from the “works” of v. 9? Apparently they may look alike; that is, they may be the same in form and substance—speaking the truth with neighbors (4:25), working so as to have something to share with the needy (4:28), acting with kindness and forgiveness (4:32). What differentiates them is their grounds: gratitude, or anticipated reward. To put it another way, the works that are “good” are the works that the doer recognizes are themselves the gift of God.

Any reading of this passage, with all its good theology, must not neglect its lyrical quality. Ultimately, salvation is not so much a reality to be analyzed and dissected, as one to be celebrated and praised. Worship is the appropriate mood.

Text for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary