

PRAYER TO THE HOLY SPIRIT

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and we shall be created. And you shall renew the face of the earth.

O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit, did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy your consolations.

Through Christ our Lord, Amen.



How can I tell the story of why I'm here?

Not just here in this room, or here as a pastor, but here on this earth.

God saved me.

I was 12 when I first heard a call to ministry, that is I had the sense that something mystical and spiritual was drawing me towards being a pastor.

And honestly, I didn't know what that entailed; but the call was there.

And at age 12, that call felt a little like going into a foreign land, or enemy territory.

And I went in the opposite direction, at first, without even intending to, just a series of "no's" to any kind of invitation from God to that vocation, and not just to ministry but to any kind of real relationship with God at all.

For the next twenty years. I mean, Jonah's got nothing on me.

And there would be moments, where I would hear that call again, where I would briefly say "yes" to God, if not to that call, and then I'd wander off, flailing away at life, in over my head.

I didn't leave home, but I went into a far-off country.

By 15, I was already grappling with the possibility of fatherhood.

By 17 I had already, quite literally, put a gun to my head.

Before I turned 19, I had already discovered the physical limitations of alcohol to medicate heartbreak and betrayal and had moved on to other substances.

And God kept saving me.

I remember especially one night, the pain inside me overwhelming, a mix of shame and self-loathing over my failures in a relationship that had ended, the way in which I longed for the comfort of someone who wanted me, the disappointment that I couldn't make them love me.

I don't remember what prompted me to get the knife, probably because of the quart of wine in me.

Again and again, I cut, on my arms, my chest, trying to let the pain out; trying to punish myself.

I'd like to say that no whale was required, or even a giant fish, but I must confess that my journey did include moments where I cried out from the depths.



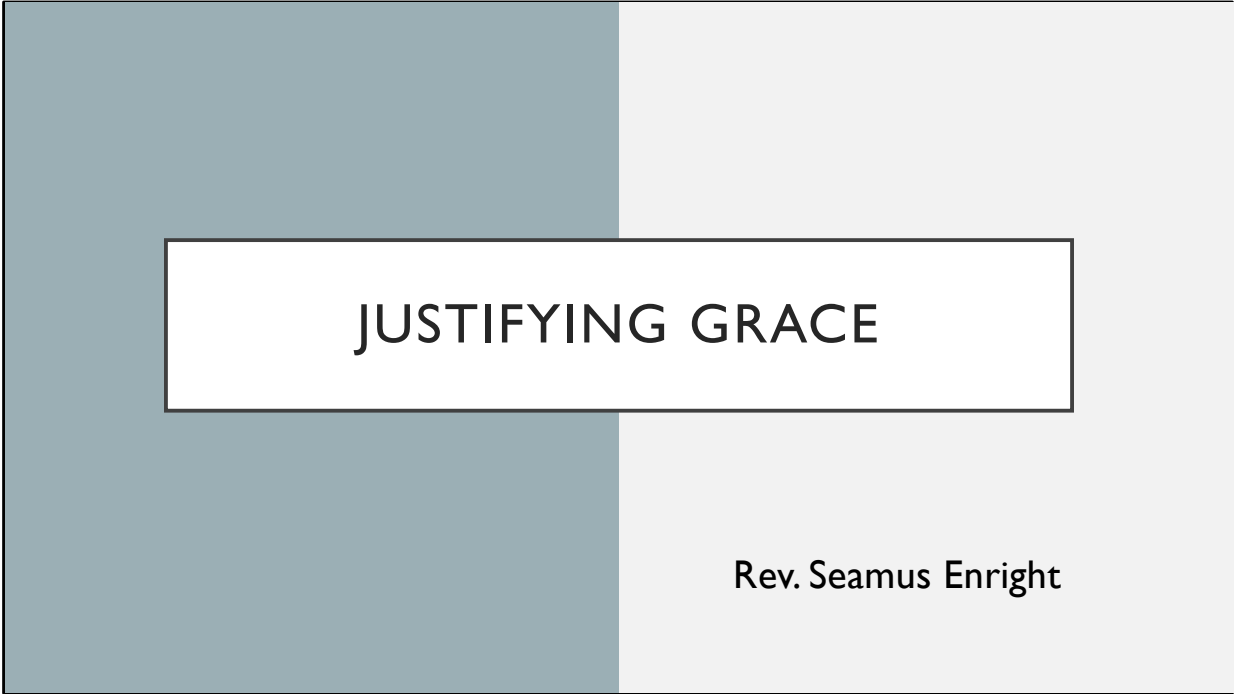
I was ready to say “no” to life, but God didn’t stop offering “yes” to me.

And slowly, I started to say “yes” back.

Until eventually I found myself in a Bible study in late 2002 remembering that call that seemed dead and buried and wondering what the consequences of all those “no’s” would be.

Just weeks later I was at a retreat, not unlike this one, certain that I had once been called, called by God to be a pastor, and that this was the vocation that God intended for me, what I was made for...and absolutely terrified that I had missed my shot, blown my chance. That I was too damaged, too sin-soaked, too old (at thirty three), too under-educated, obviously unqualified. And I asked the question, how could God ever accept someone like me?

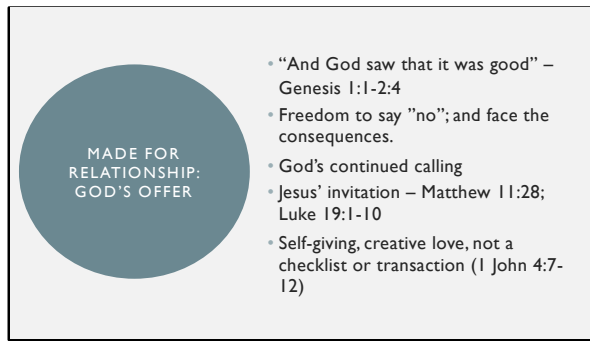
Could even I be redeemed?



JUSTIFYING GRACE

Rev. Seamus Enright

I am, by the grace of God, the Reverend Seamus Enright, and the title of this talk is “Justifying Grace”.



God offers us a relationship, and the nature of that relationship is unconditional love and unmerited favor – what we call grace.

It begins with Creation, God makes a good world and puts us in it. God makes humanity very good, in God's image and likeness, able to love and be loved, with responsibility to relate to and care for Creation as stewards; to be fruitful and multiply goodness, in relationship with the Creator and Sustainer of all things.

We were, and are, free. Free to choose.

Like our ancestors in the Garden, like the prodigal son in Luke's Gospel, we're free to cut off relationship, to take the goodness we've been given – in our lives, in the world – and spend it selfishly, even though that leaves us empty. Like Jonah, we can run from what we're called to.

And because we were made for a living relationship with God, nothing else can satisfy the hunger of our souls, nothing else can take the place of the source of life.

After I first heard a call to ministry, at a youth retreat, I went in the opposite direction. Trying to fill myself with anything but God.

I've been a cheater, and been cheated on, I've been a drunk and a druggie, a thief and a liar, I've dishonored my parents, denied my friends and my God, a cutter and a coward.

But that's never been who I am.

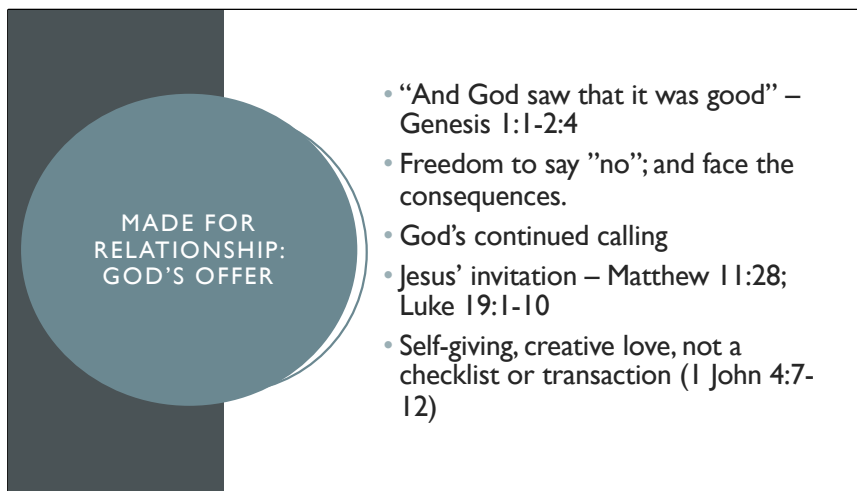
And I have never been unloved.

You have never been unloved.

Our wrong choices can't stop God's love and grace.

Our history doesn't have to be our destiny.

Our history doesn't have to be our destiny.

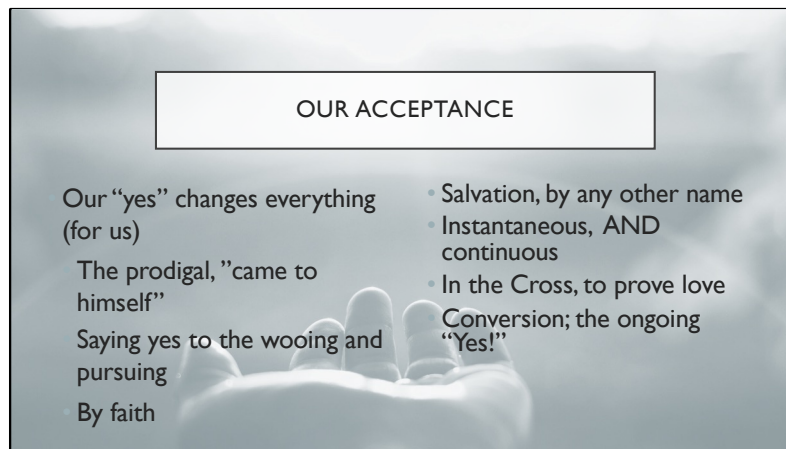


Throughout scripture we see, again and again, the theme of God calling humanity, individually and together, back into the relationship we were created for.

Jesus calls us, “Come to me, all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest.” (Mt 11:28 CEB)
He came to seek and to save the lost (Lk 19:10), a good shepherd, even when the sheep had taken itself to a far distant country (Lk 15:4,13).

This is the God who gives himself for us and to us, this is the relationship we’re invited into, self-giving love, with God and with each other. (1 Jn 4:7-12)

Lives of meaning, and purpose.



Justifying grace is God’s unmerited favor at work when we say “yes” to the relationship that God offers us in Jesus Christ.

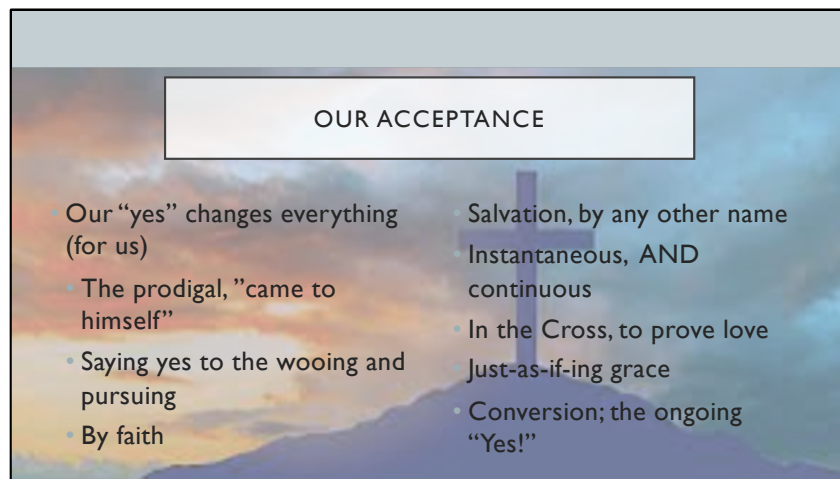
God’s gift of love for us and grace towards us doesn’t change, but our acceptance of that gift changes everything.

When we stop running away, when we stop wallowing in our misery, when we come back to ourselves, remember our true selves, we return to who we were always created to be: beloved children of God.

If we think of God’s love drawing, calling, and pursuing us, we can understand the change that happens when we say “yes” to the one who asks us to commit. Just like the “I do” and “I will” at a wedding is meant to begin a lifelong commitment in human relationship, our “yes” to faith in God through Jesus is the beginning of an eternal commitment to Christ and his church.

This isn’t earned. It’s not a transaction. God offers the gift and we accept through faith.

We call this salvation, the healing of our disconnection from the source of life and the soul-sickness that results, conversion from enemies of God to friends, the rescue from the consequences of our separation from God; forgiveness for the harms we have done and the good we were made for that we left undone. A change so profound that we call it being born again.



It's instantaneous. The moment we turn and place our trust in Jesus, we find that He has always been right there. Some of us can point to that moment, when everything changed.

And salvation is continuous. Relationships grow and deepen. For me, it was a series of moments, a string of "yes'es", until I discovered that I really did believe, and trust, and know my Savior.

It is correct to say I was saved by grace, I am being saved by grace, and I will be saved by grace.

We see this grace in the Cross of Jesus, who gave his life to prove God's love for us, not while we were perfect, or righteous, or even good, but in the face of rejection, undeserved condemnation, and all the violence and humiliation that humanity visits on each other.

Jesus restores our relationship with God, symbolized by the vertical line in the cross, bridging the divide between heaven and earth, making it just-as-if we had never sinned.

And Jesus also restored our relationship with our neighbor, as symbolized by the horizontal line in the cross, and giving us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18-20).

Conversion continues as we keep saying yes to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

We learn about and become ourselves in this relationship.
We learn about God and what we were made to be and do.
We open ourselves to the conversion, the transformation of our will to obedience to God's will.



God says "yes" to us in the act of Creation and again in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

But the real double acceptance is our "yes" to the relationship that God offers us in Christ. It's our faith that God loves us, and there's nothing we can do about.

God who calls us to love with everything we are opens our minds, to see and hear and know – our need, and God's grace to meet that need.

We let God in, to our inner selves, the very heart of who we are.
We find that we need a Savior, and PRAISE GOD, there is a Savior!

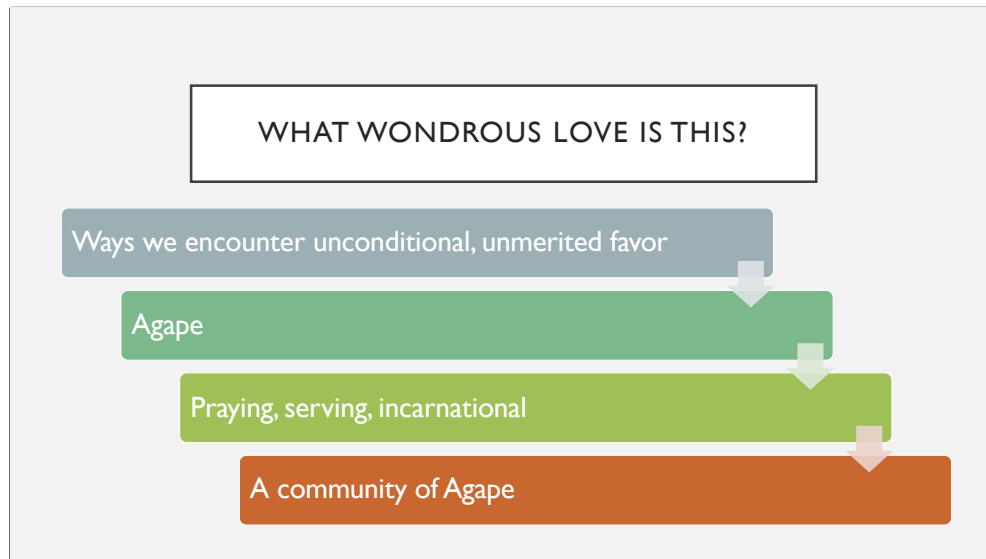
That grace gives us the freedom to break patterns of sin and harm, to let go of the false self we try to make apart from God. To choose instead to be what we were made to be.

This is certainly something that we feel, but we don't depend on our feelings. Even when I can't trust my emotions, I can trust Jesus.

And so, I do the good he calls and commands me to; not because it's how I earn love, but in response to love, rejoicing in my salvation.

Oh brothers, come share this joy, come find this grace, say yes to this mercy, this compassion, this love.

Put your trust in Him alone, and join his mission of healing and wholeness, making disciples of all kinds of people and teaching them to love like He does.



One way that God moves us to the point of acceptance, healing, conversion; to salvation, is through the loving acts of other Christians.

We call this agape, the Greek word for God's gracious unconditional love. The love that Jesus showed, and taught, and commanded, embodied and active.

During this weekend, Christians will express unconditional love to you in sacrificial ways, by praying, serving, and performing other acts of agape – so that you will know more clearly how much God loves you.

Emmaus communities from across the country and around the world have sent letters and other forms of communication to let you know about this "agape" love.

I'll ask the Assistant Lay Directors to share some of these with you now.
{ALD's share letters, binder, posters/banners, 72-hour vigil, etc.}

You can see, God's love is pouring down, flowing all around you, surrounding and saturating this time.

As you prepare to reflect on the love that has saved you, the love that had the power to save even me, and to call me according to his purposes, I pray that you will hear the love that is calling you, and accept this gift of grace.

You were saved by grace. You are saved by grace. You will be saved by grace.

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