

**The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – March 14, 2021 – When Grace Appears
Ephesians 2:4-10 and Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22**

Those who struggle with alcohol and drug addictions often like to keep those conditions hidden, lest they be judged and scorned by others. But workaholism is different because it is visible - out in the open where it is easy for all to see. Oftentimes, workaholics are perfectionists. They are solution-oriented. No problem seems too daunting for them. And they are always on the move, producing or accomplishing something.

The late Elbert Hubbard used to say: “If you want anything done, ask a busy man to do it.” Undoubtedly, we all know those who are so diligent, so reliable, and so steadfastly devoted to their professions that the accolades pile up. They are the recipients of praise and admiration, fast-tracked for promotions, and celebrated with raises. Colleagues pat them on the back for a job well done and tell them that they’ve *earned* it.

But one’s success can just as easily become one’s downfall. And workaholics are particularly vulnerable to the mistaken belief that their works will finally save them. The rationale is simple enough: if hard work helped them to ascend to the upper reaches of the corporate ladder, then, surely, just a bit more work will help

them climb all the way to heaven, right? It sounds like a page from Max Weber's famous book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. And it reminds us that merit-based reward systems are so ingrained in our culture and in our collective psyche that it is hard to imagine another way.

For these reasons, it comes as profoundly shocking news when scripture teaches that we cannot earn God's favor. That there is no minimum threshold of good deeds required to purchase admission in the hereafter. And that not even heroic or seemingly selfless acts can ensure our salvation. Instead, the Christian journey is relentless in its insistence that grace is all that we have, and that grace is all that we need.

In the parables, God is likened to a father welcoming a wayward son home. To a landowner who insists on paying a group of day laborers an equal wage, regardless of how many hours they worked. And to a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep behind in search of the one who is lost. In each of these examples, the message is clear: you cannot earn your way into heaven.

But where does this leave the workaholics? The overachievers? And those who boast of earning all that they have? Well, for starters, it upends the conventional

wisdom for all who fiercely resist being needy and dependent. And it provides a much-needed corrective for entering into the mysterious rhythms of God's grace.

Jerry Sumney writes, "we cannot comprehend the enormity of what God has done for us without recognizing the depth of our need."¹ And amazingly, in the midst of our stubbornness, our disobedience, and our shortcomings, God chooses love. In our first lesson this morning, we learn that "God saves through Christ because it is God's nature to love deeply, even those who have turned away."² Therefore, "we are saved by grace through faith and not by works."³

Each year, with Christmas approaching, Westminster proudly displays an Advent wreath as part of our worship setting. The centerpiece is a large, white Christ-candle, which serves as a reminder of the ever-present light shining in the darkness. The Christ-candle is accented by four, additional colored candles, each highlighting one week of the journey leading up to Jesus' birth.

We light the blue candles on the first, second, and fourth Sundays in Advent. But on the third Sunday, right in the middle of the Advent journey, we join in a

¹ Jerry L. Sumney, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 2*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press: 2020), 83.

² Sumney, 84.

³ Sumney, 84.

medieval tradition of lighting a pink candle to celebrate Christian joy amid a penitential season. And I mention all of this now because, today, we have reached a similar milestone in our journey toward the cross.

Anna Bowden writes, “We have spent the last three weeks with our heads down, looking at the road, making note of every bump and wrong turn along the way.”⁴ Now “we stop and take a moment to look up and remind ourselves of where we are going.”⁵ This week, we pause, we rejoice, and we celebrate as we “look ahead in anticipation of the resurrection of Jesus.”⁶ Then, only after this brief glance forward, we resume our journey with the reassurance that what is necessary has already been accomplished. We put our heads back down and resume our journey to the cross.”⁷

Today, we allow God’s grace to flow over and through us. And we give thanks for this passage from Ephesians for reminding us that the journey to the cross, “this season of penance, is followed by a journey out of the grave.”⁸ Today, we affirm that “grace follows transgression” and that “life follows death.”⁹

⁴ Anna M. V. Bowden, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 2*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press: 2020), 85.

⁵ Bowden, 85.

⁶ Bowden, 85.

⁷ Bowden, 85.

⁸ Bowden, 85.

⁹ Bowden, 85.

Earlier this week, grace appeared when my five-year-old son gave me a bear hug, and told me that he loves me. When I thanked him for the hug and told him how much I love him too, he replied, “but I love you more.” The very next day, grace appeared when, in conversation with Kyle Vuchak, I learned that Kathryn is expecting their third child on Wednesday.

Grace appears whenever the sun is shining, and we have a free afternoon to go hiking, or boating, or to sit by a campfire, or to enjoy a simple picnic at the park. Grace appears in neighborhoods near and far when friends emerge following months of isolation, and when vaccines are administered in the midst of the darkness of a yearlong pandemic. Grace even appears in Session meetings – did you know that? Where it often emerges in the midst of challenges addressed by thoughtful leaders who share valuable insights, reach consensus, and envision a way forward. And you know what? We haven’t earned any of it.

In a few moments, we will gather together at the table of our Lord. And we will boast, not in what we have accomplished, but in what God has accomplished for us. And at this table, we will discover grace sufficient for all of our needs. May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.