



First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC
Fourth Sunday in Lent
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Not Your Own Doing

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The Lesson: Ephesians: 2:1-10

All right everyone. Time to think back. Think back to a time in your life when you found yourself squaring off with a partner of some kind. Maybe it was at an eighth grade dance? You spot someone from across the floor. You lock that person in. And you wait. And you wait. And you wait. Or, maybe it was your first kiss. It could even be something more platonic, say the first time you had coffee or lunch with a good friend. Whatever scenario comes to mind, my question is this: who made the first move? Who took the initiative to make it happen, whatever the “it” is? If you were lucky, maybe it was a mutual thing and neither person had to worry about what the response of the other would be. Usually though, someone has to, in the words of the 80’s rap singer Young M.C., “bust a move!” Even remembering one of those potentially awkward times—the risk of rejection and embarrassment—gets me all nervous and shaky inside. Don’t even try to tell me you can’t relate! Well, now that I’ve got you warmed up, I’ve got another question for you. Ready? When it comes to your relationship with God, who made the first move there? ... Who initiated? I’m dying to know what you all are thinking right now. There may not be a moment to pinpoint on a calendar, or an exact location like say the junior high school gymnasium in Wayne, New Jersey, but supposing most of you consider that you have some relationship with God, just who started it?

I've been feeling more perplexed than usual this week, and that question is only the beginning of it. Truth to tell, this passage from Ephesians did a real number on me, and especially the line that reads: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your doing; it is the gift of God." Here Paul is expressing one of the most basic theological axioms of our faith tradition. Usually, I'd read right through it. Yeah, yeah, Paul, I know, saved by faith, grace is a gift. Yup, got it. But this week, I've been especially vexed. Throughout the ages, Christians have believed that our wayward and originally sinful nature as human beings cannot be overcome by our own efforts. Salvation is "not the result of works, so that no one may boast," Paul writes. The idea here always reminds me of an old *New Yorker* cartoon that was surely a reaction to some Greenpeace "Save the Whales" campaign. The drawing is of two plump whales floating near the top of the water. The one whale says to the other: "Well, yes, but can they save themselves?" It's a question to which most Christians answer, "Well no, we can't." It is only by the sheer grace of God that we are saved from the bondage of sin and death and brought to freedom and to new life. Though this language of salvation may sound a little old school to some of you, you can appreciate how it speaks to some of the deep and lasting questions about God and human nature. This tenet, especially the part about how our salvation is "not of our own doing" always strikes in me a chord of resistance. I mean...I don't *always* want to boast about having a part in working out my salvation, but I wouldn't mind a supporting credit every once in a while, you know for putting my freewill to such good use.

Mary reminded me this week of the 5th century British monk Pelagius who was deemed a heretic for questioning the doctrine of original sin and so creating an opening for humans to have a role in their own salvation. Pelagianism was harshly criticized by Augustine who believed that even our faith itself, even the very desire for God in the human heart, was a gift from God, and that human beings had absolutely no role to play in our salvation. Don't you just love these early theological controversies? Don't answer that. But hopefully you can begin to see why I've been so puzzled this week. Turns out there even grew to be a, get this, Semi-Pelagian viewpoint which held that humans could, of our own free will, turn to God and that then God would grant them the grace to continue in the new life. This resembles that notion that if you take one step towards God, God takes two steps toward you. And speaking of two steps, have you figured out yet just who you think made the first move in your own dance with God?

You might be thinking that all this theological mumbo-jumbo, as a secular friend of mine likes to call it, doesn't *really* matter but for me, this past week, it has mattered enormously. All week long, I've been finding in myself a new level of resistance to this

line from Paul. Maybe it's what our Puritan ancestors meant by a moment of "despairing of salvation." I've been thinking and reading and writing about this concept of salvation by grace alone for years. For the most part, I like it, a lot. Perhaps like some of you, I am confident in the fact that I cannot save myself, and that humanity, left to our own devices, cannot save the world. I have come to rely on and trust and need God's mercy in my life, God's companionship in my loneliness, God's promise in my fears. But for some reason, this all hit home at a deeper level this week. If our salvation is truly a gift, which we can presume begins in and grows out of our relationship with God, and if it is not of our own doing, then the answer to the question I asked you all minute ago, "Who made the first move—you or God?" should be clear. God initiates! God busts out and breaks into our hearts, into our lives, into our humanity, maybe even before we know what hit us. What is left for us then is to discern (there's that word again) an appropriate response. Mind you, this is not a once-and-for-all exchange. If we take a more gradual view of our salvation as being a process of transformation and opening and centering our lives in God, God is initiating constantly. Some would even say that by God's grace, God is already deep within our being, praying within us without us knowing it, God in the depths of our being calling out to the very ground of our being itself. It becomes ours to channel this responsiveness, each and every day, and stay out of the way. To revert, if you will, to the eighth grade analogy, we don't make the first move with God. We don't ask God out! God asks us out! And if you ask me, that's a way scarier thing! I mean, how can you say no?

By the way, if its occurred to you yet that I'm starting to sound a lot like a straight, white guy as I spin out these dynamics and my particular concerns about them, well, take a look. A part of why I struggle with texts like these is that they remind me of how utterly powerless I am in the grand scheme of things and how I'm in no way getting a jump on or making the first move on God. As a guy, for better and for worse, I'm used to popping the questions! I'm used to being the cause of making things happen! I'm used to having that power to decide when and where and with whom I'll be talking! What makes matters worse, as an American, the self-deterministic, individualistic, "me-first" values of our culture have inevitably shaped me in some way, no matter how hard I have tried to resist. In some deep and almost sub-conscious way, if anything is not of MY own doing, it starts messing with my deeply American and masculine mojo! Just when I thought I had done my work on these issues, having gone through diversity trainings and GLBT workshops at *the* "PCU," Politically Correct University, I come up short where? In my relationship with God?

In a moment of quiet and meditation this past week, I was wrestling with this passage, and an image of a piece of land came to mind. Knowing and believing at some level that my life is a gift to be shared, I could look out over the terrain of my inner life say with some confidence, it's all yours God. And, then I realized, it was all God's except for this one tiny piece of territory right under my feet that I would not let go of. I thought to myself, "Man, I've given up a lot for God!" "I've surrendered a lot to God." I'm not talking about things, mind you, or even time, or even my vocation. I'm talking about the amount of space I've been trying clear out in my heart for God. I'm talking about the ego-space that I have surrendered to my soul so that God will be welcome and can sit just about anywhere in my inner house. Just about anywhere, that is, but my lazy chair from where I can maintain my remote control, thinking I can turn God on and off! After all, if I feel like it, I can just assume the position that God does not exist and turn God off as if with the touch of a button. Who am I kidding? As it turns out, I have been making a partial surrender when I know what God is asking of me is total. This is not a victims' or enemies' surrender, mind you, made under some threat of force. This is a surrender of all resistance to a Love and Truth that loves me and knows me better than I know myself! But can't we hold on to just a little power, control, space that is JUST for us?

The great 20th century theologian Paul Tillich once preached in the language of his era that "man cannot stand the God Who is really God. Man tries to escape God, and hates Him, because he cannot escape Him. The protest against God, the will that there be no God, and the flight to atheism are all genuine elements of profound religion." Profound religion! Well that's comforting, but at what cost? Tillich goes on to say, "There is no ultimate privacy or final isolation. We are always held and comprehended by something that is greater than we are, that has a claim upon us, and that demands response from us. The most intimate motions within the depths of our souls are not completely our own. For they belong also to our friends, to humankind, to the universe, and to the Ground of all being, the aim of our life. Nothing can be hidden ultimately."

No matter how much I try to convince myself otherwise, there is no little corner of my inner landscape where I can shut God out. Not even for a moment. No road on which I can drive my car and blast my stereo and take a break from God. There is no way of ever, ever being truly alone because God has already made the first move, straight to the core of our beings, and there, within us, God's spirit waits for our response, always ready to shower us with grace upon grace.

Most of the time for me and I hope for you too, God's grace is the farthest thing from a burden. I've experienced God's grace and I know what a sweet and precious and amazing thing it is. I know and believe in my bones that it has the power to heal, to

liberate and to save. But...but, grace also has the power to obliterate! Grace obliterates all the other power to which we cling, including that power-filled myth of our self-determination. I confess: there have been times this week when a part of me has not been able to stand the God who is really God, the God who strips my ego of every last ounce of power and of self-sufficiency. And yet, this is the God I pledge to love with all my heart, and all my mind and all my soul.

St Theresa of Avila once wrote “We can only learn to know ourselves and do what we can—namely, surrender our will and fulfill God’s will in us.” When we surrender ourselves to God’s grace, we come to realize that all we do and all we are is but a response to God’s initiative. And I wonder if that’s why this passage has been too tricky for me this week. I’ve spent enough time waiting around and unwittingly expecting God to respond to me. Our prayers so often ask things of God, for strength, for wisdom and for courage, hoping God will in some way respond to us. If God is truly first, if God is always initiating, we would do well to surrender our needs which God already knows and ask, “What is our response to you, this day, O God?” What is our response to you, in this hour? What is our response to you, in this moment?” To make this question a part of our practice of our daily discernment could help to ingrain in us the trust that God is there, always there, eternally there, no matter what our current intellectual position on the matter is, no matter what our mood, no matter what our need. With this trust, we may learn a total surrender of our lives to a true communion with God. We may, finally, let the God that is at the core of our being, speak to and with the God that is the ground of being itself.

In closing, I leave with you a few lines from Howard Thurman’s “Meditations of the Heart.” More than most, Thurman clearly understood what it means that we are saved by grace, and not by our own doing. He writes: “I surrender myself to God without any conditions or reservations. I shall not bargain with [God]. I shall not make my surrender piecemeal but I shall lay bare the very center of me, that all of my very being shall be charged with creative energy of God. Little by little, or vast area by vast area, my life must be transmuted in the life of God. As this happens, I come into the meaning of true freedom and the burdens that seemed unable to bear are floated in the current of life and love of God.”

And our first response, now as always, must be, “Let thanks be to God!” Amen.