Sunday, March 9, 1997
WHAT IT MEANS TO EXPERIENCE GOD'S GRACE
John 3:14-21

One of the most useful metaphors for understanding life from birth to death — as individuals, as families, and as communities — is to think of it as a journey.

As you travel life's journey, it is necessary at times to unpack and repack your bags, as I outlined in a sermon some weeks ago. You could be carrying a lot of things that are not necessary and would be better left behind. You might also discover that there are some things you forgot to pack that could help you deal with the difficulties and problems that are a part of every journey.

There are also times in your journey through life when you are tempted to place too much emphasis on reaching a destination and fail to enjoy the scenery and opportunities along the way. Or, you can make the opposite mistake and wander through life with no sense of direction or destination in mind.

As with all journeys, there are beginnings and endings, stopping places and starting places, detours, holding patterns, destination checks, forks in the road, becoming lost, and being too proud to ask for directions.

One of the most useful aids to have with you as you travel on your life's journey is a map or a trusted guide and a compass to keep you pointed in the right direction. While it is true that each one of us must travel our own journey — no one else can travel it for you — it is important to learn from the experience of others.

That's what a map is — the experience of someone else who has gone that way before. Sometimes the map is drawn or printed on paper, and at other times, it can be in the form of stories and teachings. While listening to the dangerous twists and wrong turns in someone else's travels may not keep you from walking directly into some of the dangers or making some of the same mistakes, hearing other men's and women's stories can provide you with maps for your own journey.

One way of understanding the Christian faith is to think of it as a map for your journey through life — a map beginning with the experience of the Hebrew people and their relationship to the one God, and continuing with the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus, followed by the adventures of the church through the centuries.

During this season of Lent in this sermon series, we have been looking at some of the most important directions for life's journey on this map, which are contained in the teachings of Jesus.

The first sermon in the series, What It Means To Repent, reminded us that there are times in our journey when we have to turn around and go in a different direction.

The second sermon in the series, What It Means To Deny Yourself, taught us that if we are to meet life's difficulties successfully, we need to deny ourselves, take up our cross, face life's difficulties, and see them as opportunities for growth. When we do that, we are following in the way of Jesus — and there's no better guide for our life's journey.

Last week, in the third sermon in this series, we were cautioned to be careful lest we corrupt the holy as we travel through life. When the holy is corrupted, life itself loses its meaning and joy.

Today, in the fourth sermon in this series, What It Means To Accept God's Grace, you will discover that "grace" is like a compass on your journey — a compass that always points you back toward God and is always available to you. All you have to do is accept it.

One of the best descriptions of the grace of God is found in the gospel of John: "God so loved the world that God gave the only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

If a survey were conducted among people who know something about the Bible and the question was, "What is your favorite Bible verse?" I suspect John 3:16 would be high on the list.

This proclamation from Jesus tells us of God's grace — of God's unconditional love not only for us but for all of creation. "God so loved the world." The passage does not say that God loves only church members of one denomination, or only good people, or only those who follow God's rules — but God loves all of us and all that God has made. The passage goes on to say that we cannot in any way earn God's love — it is freely and unconditionally offered. All you have to do is believe it and receive it. It is God's good news.

Yet there is a prevailing tendency to believe that you need to earn God's love or favor by performing certain religious duties. It's what I call a persistent Christian heresy. I was talking with a woman last week, and she told me about a conversation on religion she had with someone where she works. The individual told her that she reads the Bible each day for one hour and that this was a necessary activity for a person to be loved by God.

Certainly, I agree that taking some time each day to read the Bible can be a very useful spiritual discipline, and I would encourage it. But to imply that doing so will make God love us more than someone who does not do that is to misunderstand God's grace.

Regular study of the Bible can certainly help you to be more aware of God's unconditional love and aid you in becoming more loving and forgiving toward others. In other words, it can change you for the better, but it would not change God's love for you, which is constant and unconditional.

It's like prayer. The purpose of prayer is not to change God but to change us. No prayer can make God more loving than God already is, or has been in the past, or shall be in the future. Prayer, however, can attune us to the spiritual forces around us and within us and help us become more loving human beings.

Yet the belief that we somehow have to earn God's love has been an abiding one throughout the history of the Christian Church. Another way to state this heresy is that God loves some people more than others because they are more religious than the rest of us. It's the heresy of self-righteousness. Read the letters to the editor in the daily newspaper, and you can find many examples of this attitude.

I've often wondered why this heresy has been, and still is, so persistent. One reason might be that if you believe that by performing certain religious rituals you can earn God's love, then by so doing you can make yourself better than others.

Jesus told a story that illustrates this point. He said there was a very religious man who went to the temple and prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people. I fast twice a week. I say my prayers every day. I give money regularly to the church," implying that therefore, God, you love me more than others.

Another reason this heresy is popular is that it has been used by the institutional church to gain power. If one can gain God's favor through fulfilling certain religious duties, and if the church is the agency that defines what those duties are and keeps track of whether or not you are doing all the right things, then the church appears to have a monopoly on salvation.

But if individuals have direct access to God as Jesus taught, and if God loves and accepts all people — no matter who they are, what church they attend or don't attend, or what kinds of sins they have committed — that's something quite different. Then, the institutional church no longer has a monopoly on God's love, or acts as the gatekeeper to heaven; rather, the church becomes a community of people who have accepted God's love and forgiveness and want to spread that love and joy to others.

The church becomes inclusive rather than exclusive. Then a primary function of the church is to tell others about this loving and forgiving God. The church exists to live out and spread God's good news.

Earlier in the gospel of John, we are told that the love of God became a human being and lived among us. In other words, Jesus was God's love focused in a human being, and thus Jesus demonstrated that God is more than an object of worship. God is also a loving, guiding presence that surrounds us — a loving power that permeates creation. It's the opposite of such references to God as "the man upstairs," or parents saying to their children, or the church saying to its members, "You had better be good, or God will punish you."

Jesus revealed a God who "makes the sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust." There is no place where God is not. God is not selective. God does not bring trouble into some people's lives and not into others. God is present to anyone who opens their life to God. And even if you try to escape God, God is there anyway.

Thus, you do not have to do anything to earn God's favor or love or forgiveness. You already have that. You only have to accept it and be open to it. You are beloved of God simply because you exist. You can be described as the activity of God living itself out in expression as you. God loves you because God is love, and because God created you, love is your true nature as well. Meister Eckhart put it bluntly when he said that he never thanked God for loving him because God cannot help it — it is God's nature to love.

All of this is called God's grace. Grace is a way of defining the activity of God's love, which works for us and in us constantly. God's grace toward us is not dependent upon any special faith, prayer, or works on our part. Grace is there for all. By the grace of God, no matter how much you feel you have done wrong, you are still loved and forgiven by God. God's grace is not something you have to work for. You can't stop it or start it. It simply is. It's the reason things are never completely hopeless.

This is good news because it means that you don't have to wait until your life is completely straightened out before you experience God's grace. You don't have to worry about making something out of yourself or about being anything special. This can make a big difference in how you travel your life's journey. God's grace is the compass that keeps you traveling in the right direction.

I once heard a personnel manager say that the first thing she tried to determine about a job applicant was whether that individual was intent on "being something" or "doing something." She said, "The individual who is intent on being something is a person who does not have their ego needs met in a healthy way. Such employees are forever attempting to use the job in order to enhance themselves. These are people who are never able to risk anything or act courageously. When they come up to a given problem, they always perceive it on two levels. On the surface, they are asking, 'What needs to be done here?' But on a deeper level, they are asking, 'How can I use this situation to get ahead myself?' Such people have a flawed vision, and very frankly, the higher they get in the decision-making process, the more of a liability they become."

"On the other hand, the individual who wants to do something is a person who has their ego needs met in a healthy fashion. They have themselves off their hands, so they are able to come to a problem situation and ask the single question, 'What needs to be done here?' These individuals are able to sacrifice. They are able to take risks. They are able to make the hard decisions. And though they are rare indeed, the quicker I can identify them and move them up in the decision-making process, the better it is for the business in the years to come."

That's an important distinction, and I would suggest that those individuals who have simply accepted the fact that God loves and accepts them — and that they need not earn God's favor because it is freely given — are the kind of people who are secure enough in their self-esteem to be able to take risks and make the hard decisions. They are not worrying all the time about how to enhance themselves.

When we experience God's grace, we know that things do not have to be perfect to be good. We also know that every gift we have been given would make a good present for someone else and that giving out of the fullness that is already in us only increases that fullness. The more you give, the more you have.

To experience God's grace, then, is like having a compass that will point you in the right direction. And grace is often carried to you by others. Grace is brought to you when you ask for help, even if you call for help for the wrong reasons.

So today, simply accept the good news of God's grace. Accept the fact that you are accepted and loved by God, no matter how unremarkable or unworthy you might feel. You can find no better compass for your life's journey. Amen.