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Matthew 11:25-30; John 20:17
June 6, 2021

A Journey into the Country of Grace **Week 1: Invitation to a journey**

Good morning. I am so happy to be here with you and to get to support pastor Chris by preaching this summer while he is on Sabbatical. Chris and I have been good friends ever since our family moved to Camas back in 2013. I was a new pastor to the area and Chris welcomed me with open arms. One of my early vivid memories of Chris was that whenever the group of pastors in the area would gather together over lunch, at some point in the conversation Chris would invite us to go a little deeper by posing the question “How is your soul?” Now that is not an easy question to answer! But Chris would ask it anyway, and he was always ready to go first if need be. I have great respect for Chris, and I consider it a great trust and a privilege to get to serve him and you all this summer by sharing and teaching from the scriptures here on Sunday mornings.

Our theme this summer for our times together is going to be *A Journey into the Country of Grace*.

- Grace: for us to understand the radical nature of God’s grace we are going to have to empty ourselves of all our prior ideas about grace. They are far too small.
- Country: the wide and spacious land of the life and love of God
- Journey: because we will be traveling step by step along a path to help us get there. This will involve some shedding of clothes that are ill fitting along the way. Each week we will travel a few more steps together.

Before we continue, I have a question for you:

- *What do you want for your relationship with God this summer?*
 - Are you satisfied with your relationship with God as it is? Do you ever wonder if there is more to this life in Jesus than you have yet experienced or known? If it were possible to know the love of God more deeply than you do now, would you want that? What do you long for with God?
- What do you desire in your relationship with God this summer?

Tell him right now (and if you don’t know, just tell him that)

God, would you please reveal to each one here today what You want with them this summer.

Lord, what is your invitation for your child here today?

Who am I? What's my story?

Since today is the beginning of our summer series together, as a way of providing some context, I want to take some time to properly introduce myself.

The basics:

I grew up in a Presbyterian Church in San Carlos, CA, and since graduating from college have served 20 years of my life in three more Presbyterian churches.

- Married to Sharon for 31 years
- Lived outside the USA for 12 of those years (China, Canada, Scotland)
- 3 kids
- Currently work part time as a Chaplain at PHSW

You already heard that I did a doctorate in trinitarian theology in Scotland. Why did I do it? Thank you for asking....

In my late 20's I entered seminary, less because I knew I was called to be a pastor of a local church, and more because I had a lot of questions about the gospel story I'd been handed in my teens. By that time I had been through college, followed by 4 years as a full-time youth minister, plus another 2 years as a missionary teaching English in China.

I'd set the trajectory of my life toward serving God, and I believed the gospel was good news, but truth be told, I still lived under the shadow of a nagging dis-ease about the character or heart of God. I may have sang songs about God's goodness and love, but deep down, in the bottom of my soul, I still doubted, "Is God really good? Is he really *for* me?"

There was something in the gospel I had been taught that sat like a wet blanket over my soul, casting doubt at the very heart of gospel – the character of God.

Doubts about the heart of God for you will poison your desire for closeness with that God. Yesterday my daughter Kaili threw away an entirely 'good' slice of watermelon because she noticed an ant crawling on it. The single tiny ant had spoiled the whole thing for her. (I would have done the same). A dent in the character of the God we believe in will poison our ability to trust that God.

The gospel I had picked up here and there through the church and from various camps, conferences, and books was entirely focused on forgiveness. Sin was 'missing the mark' of God's perfection, and compared to God's perfect standard, even Mother Teresa fell short and deserved condemnation. Along with the rest of the human race, I was separated from God and deserved hell.

Everything was framed like a court case: I was guilty; the Father was the Judge; the devil was the prosecuting attorney; and Jesus was my Advocate. God (the Father) 'had' to punish sin (i.e. "me") 'because of his justice'. But because he is 'also' loving, God came up with a compassionate solution to deal with my crimes: Jesus would take my place and God would punish him with the penalty that I deserved. Now, when God looked at me he wouldn't see me, he would see Jesus because Jesus stood between me and God. This, I was told, was the essence of grace. This was the essence of the gospel. This was the good news. The weird thing for me was if I were to describe a human father the way God the Father was depicted in this version of the gospel, I'd think he was a monster.

I certainly felt gratitude for God's forgiveness, and I was thankful to be chosen to receive his grace, but the fact of God forgiving me did not automatically make me love him. Doubt about God's heart toward me continued to act like a wet blanket over my soul, making it hard to sing songs like we did earlier this morning ("I'm overwhelmed by his love").

So there I was in seminary, with my pile of questions and unspoken doubts, ready to learn.... That was 25 years ago. The seminary I had chosen was Regent College, in that other Vancouver, BC. While I was at Regent, I had the privilege to sit under many well known teachers – people like J.I. Packer (*Knowing God*) and Eugene Peterson (*The Message*). I chose Regent College largely because of the chance to learn from Eugene Peterson and so while I was a student there I took every class I could from him. Just to make sure I didn't miss anything, I got a job as a "taper" which meant I got paid to sit in on his classes and press the 'record' button.

At the end of my 2nd year, during summer school, I was working my recording job for a class being taught by a visiting lecturer from Scotland and to make a long story short, the Holy Spirit used that class to change my life. The teacher was Alan Torrance and the class was based largely on a book called *The Mediation of Christ* written by his uncle Tom who was arguably the most significant English speaking theologian of the 20th century.

As I sat in that class and listened to Alan Torrance teach with such contagious joy and passion and clarity, and then as I read Tom Torrance's book, my theological world got turned upside down and inside out – in such a good and true and beautiful way.

I have that book here with me today and, let me tell you, it is well worn and heavily marked up. To be completely honest, while I'd been a Christian for over 15 years, in that class, two years into my seminary training, I felt like I was hearing the goodness of the gospel for the first time.

My encounter sent me on a new trajectory which has been very much a joy-filled quest to mine the resources of this tradition for the sake of the church. Why hadn't I heard this growing up? Why was this so different than the way others described the gospel? How might this transform hearts and lives so that the people of God could live free from fear and full of joy the way that Jesus did?

My first stop after seminary was to serve as a pastor for Spiritual Development at a large presbyterian church in Sacramento. I began to share what I had learned, but I felt like I was just skimming the surface of the issues. Eventually I felt a pull toward further formalized education on this subject, and in 2007 this led to selling our house and cars, and moving our family of 5 to Aberdeen, Scotland for me to pursue a doctorate. At the time I was unaware that the large majority of people who enter a PhD program do not finish. About 2x a year I thought about quitting. Had I known that it would take me 7 years to finish, I never would have taken the first step. What held me together during that time was a clear sense that God had called me to this, and that the church needed to hear the beauty of this gospel of grace in a way that naturally evoked a heart response of love and joy.

We lived in Scotland for 6 years from 2007 until 2013. When my visa was unable to be extended any longer, I still needed one more year to finish, so I had to leave the country and find a job that would give me the flexibility to finish up. In August of 2013, we moved to Camas in response to a call from Columbia Presbyterian Church. Two years ago, that relationship ended, and while the transition has been difficult, I am free now to devote most of my time and energy to writing, coaching, and teaching.

So, what was the turning point I experienced in that class 25 years ago that has so radically messed with my life?

Listen to the Word of God: Mt 11:25-30

25 At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. 26 Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do. All things have been committed to me by my Father. 27 No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

What if you could have what Jesus had?

Here in this passage, Jesus is telling his disciples that he has the ability to reveal the Father to them so that they can know the Father like he knows the Father.

v.25-26: Jesus knows the Father. He is not like the proud who are wise in their own eyes, or the intelligent who eat from the tree of knowledge independent of God. He trusts the Father like a little child, and so the Father has revealed himself to the Son.

- Jesus knows the Father. He knows the Father not just in some eternal sense, but as a human being, from *inside* our broken and confused human condition.

v.27: There is an exclusive relation of knowing between the Father and the Son. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son. It is a loving communion that goes back into eternity, and it shows how different you and I are from God. By ourselves, we have no access to God. God is God and we are not.

And yet...here is Jesus, and he is one of us. God as a man, as a human being, and he knows the Father from our place and in our position.... And he has come to reveal the Father to us.

Jesus desires to share his sonship with us (Mt 11:28-30)

Everything he has experienced with his Father he is going to share with us. This is his mission –

²⁸“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

What is Jesus’ yoke?

- In that day a Rabbi’s yoke referred to their teaching and their way of life.
- Jesus’ teaching is about life with the Father, life in the Father’s kingdom; and his way of life is one of complete dependence upon the Father through the Spirit

This, my friends, is the heart of the gospel.

- In Jesus Christ, God is inviting us into that relationship. What Jesus has by nature, we are being included in by grace.

The Christian life is the gift of participating in the Son’s relation with the Father by the Spirit. *Jesus’ entire mission is about sharing his Sonship by adopting us into his family.* And so when we pray, we are invited to pray **with** Jesus, “*Our Father....*”

I believe this was the heart of the ‘good news’ that really energized the first Christians and which was at the center of their teaching and preaching was that *Jesus was with the Father*, and that somehow *we are included in that*.

And so in John 20:17 he says to Mary: "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

This is a profound reality. Think about it.

This is the first post-resurrection story in John's gospel...

- Jesus is saying "I am going to be with the Father, and he is also your Father. You are going to be included in the relationship that I have with the Father. I am taking you with me into the presence of God."

It was this new reality that energized the first Christians. These first Christians were Christians, not simply because they believed stuff 'about' Jesus. They were Christians because they had been ushered into a supernatural fellowship *with the Father* through the Son.

They believed that somehow the intimate relationship/communion/fellowship that Jesus had with the Father now involved and included them. And that's what they preached.

Two biblical-theological pillars stunned me: the Father-Son relation of the Trinity and the Ascension

The thing that drove me then and continues to inspire me now is the vision of sharing in Jesus' relation with the Father through the Spirit. That vision is summarized by two biblical and theological pillars:

The Father-Son relation (in the Spirit) at the heart of the Trinity: The second is the relationship of the Father and the Son in the NT. The center of the NT is Jesus' relation with the Father. This relationship is not a temporary event, but an eternal commitment.

The Ascension: The first is summed up in the ascension which tells us Jesus does not abandon his humanity. That means the grace of the incarnation is not just a temporary necessity, but an eternal commitment (In Jesus, God did not become human just for 33 years, but *forever*)

- The incarnation is not a temporary event in the life of God, but an eternal decision of the Father, Son, and Spirit to carve out a space for humanity to be included in the life and love of God.
- The incarnation did not end after 33 years once a job was done, but continues and will never cease, for by it God, because of his unchanging self-giving love, has established a relationship with his creation on which he will never go back. Jesus is not an instrument by which God accomplishes our salvation; *Jesus is our salvation*. Now, as a man, Jesus is face to face with the Father, in utter at-oneness.

- The Ascension tells us that Jesus is not just our Savior, he *is* our Salvation Jesus is forever the mediator/connection. Jesus stands with feet firmly planted on both sides of the divine-human relationship.
- Jesus is on both sides of our relation with God (our side and God's). If Jesus is on my side of the equation, then I am not alone – ever. I am not left to my own independent autonomous response. I am included. I am in and with him before the Father. He is both the God I pray to and the man I pray with. I am included in Jesus' life in and with the Father by the Spirit. In him I am forgiven, reconciled, and justified. I am adopted. I am secure – as secure as the risen Son himself – for he will never ever let me go. My life is hidden with God in Christ (Col 3:3).
- In him I do not lose my life, I find it - in union and communion with Jesus, the personalizing Person. In sharing in Jesus' life, I learn from Jesus what it means to be fully and properly human. I become properly human or “humanized” as TF Torrance liked to say.
- Salvation is not about getting ‘in’, but about being healed of all the ways we have become broken and wounded. God's goal for us is nothing less than a re-creation of us from the depths of our darkness that we might become fully human as Jesus is in and with the Father. God is not satisfied by a legal transaction; he is only satisfied when his creation is restored and gives its free Amen to his love.

Taken together, the implication is that right now, Jesus of Nazareth is at the right hand of the Father as a human being like you and I. He is there holding a space for you and I and all humanity in the life of God.

This is a game changer. Salvation in Christ is not a legal transaction; it is a love story, the greatest love story ever conceived. This represented a radical moving of the goal posts - my goal, as a believer, was not just to get ‘in’ to heaven; the goal was union with God, to indwell and to be indwelt, to be filled with the fullness of God, to know and participate in his love. This finally began to make sense of so much of the NT, especially the letters of the apostle Paul who seems to be obsessed with the fact that we are “in Christ” (so much so that he uses the phrase over 100 times).

If we ask, “What is the good news?” the answer we are given in the NT is, “We are included in the life of the Trinity!” The Trinity is not a problem to be solved; it is a relationship to be experienced. In Christ, through the Spirit, we have a (safe and secure) place with the Father. In Christ, we have a new identity as children of the Father through the Son in the Spirit

If his commitment to us is unending, then his intentions for us are covenantal on a level I could barely grasp.

A New Identity – as children of the Father through the Son in the Spirit

Jesus' entire mission was to lead us to the Father so that we can join him in praying "Our Abba, Father, who art in heaven..." We pray 'our' as a community, and as those who pray with Jesus, as those adopted into the relationship he has with the Father.

The Christian life is the journey of learning from Jesus to live as children of the Father.

This is reality.

And if this is reality, then the main question for each one of us is this: do I live each moment of each day as if this is true? Am I living my days inside the reality that Jesus has united himself to myself so that through the Holy Spirit I can share in his relationship with the Father?

If this is our most basic identity, then the question is: do we want it?

What do you want with God this summer? What is the longing of your heart? God's longing for you is so much more than just to get you into heaven. God's longing for you is communion, love, to share life, every single moment, that you would know him the way that Jesus knew him.

And as we learn to live this way, the voices in our head that tell us "I am not enough," the anxieties and fears that drive us like slaves to prove our worth...they will begin to lose their power, for they have nothing to stand on.

Jesus says "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Prayer and transition to communion

Jesus invites us to receive what he has given.... This table is a tangible representation of his gift. He does not give a 'thing' called eternal life. He does not give a 'product' called grace. He only has one gift for you. Himself.