

A BIG HAIRY AUDACIOUS GOD (BHAG):

3 Flavors of Grace.

Acts 9:1-20; Romans 5:1-11 Trinity United Methodist Church (Elkhart, IN)

May 29-30, 2010 Dr. Mark Owen Fenstermacher

Over the next few weeks we are going to be pushing you. We are going to challenge you to dig deep...go deep. As we explore some of the really big, tough, hard-to-get-hold-of mysteries about God.

We've called this series of messages **Big Hairy Audacious God**. It's kind of a crazy title for a series of sermons. If it offends you, I'm sorry. Really. And would remind you that today's message is about grace.

If you know anything about the Christian worship calendar, you know that today is Trinity Sunday (Weekend). But we're not preaching on the Trinity today. We're dealing with that in a few weeks. So you may wonder why the preacher didn't plan to preach about the Christian belief in a God who is dynamic, Three Persons in One, on Trinity Weekend. I don't know. Seems like we weren't paying much attention to the calendar. I'd like to remind you, by the way, that today's message is about grace.

Let's go to work, okay?

Are you ready?

Let's pray: *May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

The Meaning of the Word.

Let's take just a moment and look at the meaning of the word grace.

Biblical.com defines grace as *showing love and kindness to someone who does not deserve it*. The web site goes on to say this: *The heart of the Bible's message is God's grace. He loves people and saves them even when they are fighting against him.*

This last word, about the meaning of the Christian word grace, comes from Will Willimon. Will used to teach some of us preaching at Duke. Now he is serving his time as a United Methodist bishop down South. Will says that grace is a gift.

I want you to remember that, okay?

I don't want you to forget that, okay?

To plant that phrase inside your head and heart, I'd like you to repeat it with me: *Grace is a gift*. That's pretty good. Let's try it again: *Grace is a gift*.

Flavor #1: Prevenient Grace.

Someone told me the St. Joseph River, when it gets to South Bend, has currents that move in different directions at different depths. That's sort of the way it is with God's grace as it is described in the Bible: grace is actually three currents. John Wesley, the Church of England priest who began the Christian renewal movement, the revival, we call Methodism, saw this clearly: grace comes in three ways. Grace comes in three flavors.

The first of these is prevenient grace. The word prevenient means “coming before.” The Bible shows us, again and again, how God makes the first move. How God is at work to heal us, to save us, to make us whole, to set us free, to love us, to bring us back into a loving and real relationship with himself, even when we don’t see or understand or sense that work of God.

God takes the first step.

God takes the initiative.

God doesn’t wait on us to take the first step: God always moves towards us before we even think of moving towards God. That is prevenient grace.

Look at the Parable of the Great Banquet in Luke 14:15-24. Jesus tells a story about a man who was throwing a party. Giving a feast. But the people who were invited to the party had other things to do. Important stuff to take care of. They really couldn’t be bothered with something so ordinary, so non-productive, as a party.

So the owner of the house got angry. Told his servants to go out quickly into the streets and the alleys and (:21) *bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame*. The invitation came. Which was sort of a surprise. Because when you spend your life back in some dark alley, working on a loading dock, or shoveling manure, you don’t expect to be invited to a great feast.

We have a God who doesn’t wait on us to come to the party, to show up at his door, but who comes looking for us. Makes the first move. Takes the first step. To be with us. To bless us. To share his best stuff with us!

Look at those opening verses in Luke 15. Read through *The Parable of the Lost Sheep*. Jesus tells a story about a shepherd who had one hundred sheep. One of the sheep gets lost. The shepherd, Jesus says, goes after the lost sheep. The sheep in question, I suspect, has no idea that the shepherd is out looking for him. Climbing the hills. Scrambling down into the ravines. Cutting his feet and legs up as he searches and searches for the sheep. The sheep is totally oblivious to the effort the shepherd is making to find him...or her. The shepherd keeps hunting for that one lost sheep, Jesus says, until he finds it.

The story, of course, isn’t about a sheep and a shepherd. No, the story is about God and us. You and me.

We have a God who loves us long before we may ever be aware of it.

We have a God who is at work to bless us and heal us and save us and bring us into a relationship with him before we may ever be aware of it.

And look, please look, at those amazing words in Romans 5:6-8 (TNIV): *You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

God climbs up on the cross and dies for us. To show us the depth of his love for us. And God does that when we are dead in our sin. Unaware of what is being done for us. Oblivious to the gift of grace God is offering us on the cross. We’re clueless. Asleep at the switch. Totally out of it. Messed up. And God does this for us...God takes the first step.

You may not be able to see any sign of God in your life.

You may wonder where God has gone.

The Bible says God is at work. It may not be obvious. But God is at work. Tugging you back towards life. Towards healing. Towards wholeness. Towards himself. Sometimes all we get, you know, are little clues? Sometimes all we get our little moments. Sometimes the only evidence of the work of God, the love of God tugging on us, is our restless, aching hearts. St. Augustine said God made us for himself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God. Sometimes the only evidence we have of the prevenient, seeking, grace of God is our hungry heart. Or the questions that haunt us about life. Where we come from. Where we're going. Who we are. Who we will be. Why there is this persistent, compelling conviction down deep that we're not alone...never really alone...but being held, guided, by Someone. Sometimes the signs of God's prevenient, working grace are the hunger...our questions.

I like to lose myself at a beach down on the tip of Estero Island in Southwest Florida. I swim. Walk the beach. Keep my eyes open for dolphins. When I go out into the water you can sometimes tell that the tide has turned. It's not obvious. Not at first. All you feel is a gentle tug on your legs. The tug is in a different direction than it has been before. You almost don't notice it but you do. That's the way prevenient grace can sometimes be. There are times when God does something big and obvious and loving, the way God stops Saul while he is on the road to Damascus. But often God works in us in a way that is so gentle, so subtle, it is easy to miss.

All this week I have been thinking about a moment that took place when I had been in the ministry for just over eight years. A man in his early 60's stopped by. He was a good man. A man who loved God. I had heard about him, known of him, when I was in high school and college.

He had just stopped by the church office one summer afternoon to say "hi." As he sat on the other side of my desk, the man got this silly looking smile on his face. Leon said to me, "You know I've been praying for you since you were in high school. Some of us have been watching you since you were in high school, and we've never stopped praying for you."

I didn't know what to say.

My life, I realized, had been shaped by prayers and faith and love and grace in ways I had not known about.

You know the words of the hymn: *I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see.*

I once was lost...but now am found.

Prevenient grace. That's the first flavor of God-given grace.

Flavor #2: Justifying Grace.

Okay. Before we talk about the second kind of grace, I would you to repeat that phrase we said earlier: *Grace is a gift.* Would you repeat that with me? *Grace is a gift.*

Now, let's talk for a few minutes about the second flavor of grace: justifying grace.

A teacher was testing the children in her Sunday school class to see if they understood the concept of getting to heaven.

She asked them, "If I sold my house and my car, had a big garage sale and gave all my money to the church, would that get me to heaven?"

"NO!" the children answered.

“If I cleaned the church every day, mowed the church yard, and gave all my food to the people down at Church Community Services, would that get me into heaven?”

“NO!” the children replied.

The teacher was smiling. The kids really “got it,” she thought. She was so pleased. “Well, then,” she said, “if I worked at the Humane Shelter and saved animals, and if I cooked meals at Faith Mission every week, and if I never said a bad word, and I was so nice that everyone liked me, would that get me into heaven?”

Again, the children all answered, “NO!”

The teacher was so thrilled. “Well, then,” she finished, “then how do I get into heaven?”

A 5-year old boy shouted, “YOU GOTTA BE DEAD!”

Here is the deal. Here is the truth of the human condition, according to the Bible: we are all dead. We’re less than fully alive. Left on our own, we are going to end up in a bad place.

The Bible begins, you remember, with the story of Creation. God creates the world. Then, God looks around, and creates man and woman. One of the things too many Christians forget is that God, after God created us, looked around and *saw all that he had made and it was very good*. You can look this up in your Bible. It’s in Genesis 1:31. Too many Christians talk like we were made in sin. That right from the beginning we were broken and mean and selfish and lost. But that’s not true: we were made in holiness. We were made beautiful. We were made faithful. We were made to be companions to God.

We were naked, Genesis says, and we weren’t ashamed. That isn’t talking about not having clothes on, you know? It’s the Bible’s way of saying there was nothing in us, nothing in our heart or mind, to hide. To be ashamed. We weren’t playing games. We weren’t working the angles. We didn’t have secrets. We hadn’t wounded one another...betrayed one another. We were willing to let God be God. We were willing to trust God. We were willing to follow God’s operating instructions for life. We were naked and not ashamed. Nothing hidden. So when God came through the garden in the evening, after the sun had started to go down and the dew began to appear on the blades of grass, we didn’t run from him. We had nothing to hide.

You know the next part of the story. Most people know the next part of the story. The Bible tells us that the man and woman decided to play God. They decided they knew better than God what would work...what would be right...what would bring happiness. They decided they could do life on their own. So they ate the fruit from the tree of knowledge.

From that moment on everything was different.

The man and the woman had put themselves -not God- at the center of all things.

The man and the woman decided to do and say what felt right to them, what seemed good at the time, what was going to get them where they wanted to go, rather than listen to the voice of the Creator who had put them together.

So we started running from God. Because of the shame we felt inside. We knew something was broken inside us, we knew we had messed up, we knew we had broken God’s heart, and the last person we wanted to see face-to-face was God. So we started running. And we have been running ever since.

When you can't stand to be with the One you love, because of your shame and sadness over the way you have wounded the heart of the One who loves you most, it's like being dead. Running and hiding and being full of shame, not being able to be with the One you were made to be with, is like being dead.

God decides to offer us a way back to life. God offers us an opportunity to stop running. God offers us a way out of our shame. God offers us a way back into a relationship with himself. And God does all this in Jesus Christ.

What God does on the cross, in the death of Jesus, is say: "You can stop running because this is how much I love you. You can stop hiding because when you're loved the way I love you don't have to be afraid to be honest...be real. You can stop carrying around that load of shame for the wrong turns in your life, for the messes you have created, because on the cross I have said it's old news. The junk in your life is old news. It's done."

Justifying grace wipes the slate clean.

Justifying grace says that whatever debt we think we owe God has been paid.

Justifying grace says we can stop running and hiding.

Justifying grace says that on the cross of Calvary, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God had a choice between treating us with justice or with mercy and God chose mercy.

Look at what Paul says in Romans 5:1 (TNIV): *Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.*

A few verses later (:8) Paul says this: *God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

Some people who read the Bible, who know the story of Jesus, act like God was a God of wrath and anger. Focused solely on punishing those who needed punished and offering mercy to those who deserved mercy. And then, in Jesus, God changed. Something happened on the cross, they say, that changed God. God switched from being a God of wrath and justice, a cosmic accountant, a soul judge, to being a God who loves. A God who forgives. A God who is ready to begin again with those who want to begin again. But what Paul says in Romans 5, actually, is that *God demonstrates his own love for us*. God loved us before the cross. God wanted us to stop running before the cross. God was ready to begin again with us before the cross. But we couldn't see it, we wouldn't see it, we refused to believe it, before the cross.

The cross didn't change God: the cross has the power to change us.

Trusting that God's love is big enough to save us is the key that opens the door to a relationship with God. We stop running.

Faith is tough. Grace is a gift, salvation is a gift, but believing we are loved, believing the cross has the last word in all things, is tough.

That is why Paul, in Ephesians 4:14-19, is driven to his knees where he prays for the Jesus followers in the young church at Ephesus. He knows that being whole, being alive, being saved, has to do with believing in God's justifying grace.

So Paul prays this prayer: ¹⁴ *For this reason I kneel before the Father,* ¹⁵ *from whom every family* ^[a] *in heaven and on earth derives its name.* ¹⁶ *I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being,* ¹⁷ *so that Christ may*

dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸ may have power, together with all the Lord's people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now there is a danger in this: the danger is that we start thinking it is the quality of our faith that saves us. A friend of mine was worrying about this one day when I stopped by for a visit. He was wondering if his faith was good enough. He was wondering what more he needed to do to get his name in “the book of life.” I told him, “Jesus says to love the Lord our God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength, and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. But our love for God is never total. Never perfect. Flawless. Some days our love is stronger than others. That’s the way it is with faith: sometimes our faith is strong, tough, triumphant, and some days we’re not so sure. God doesn’t demand flawless love or faith that hasn’t got a speck of doubt. What saves us isn’t the perfection of our faith but it is the power of God’s love for us...but trusting that we are loved like that can be a very tough thing.”

Then, we talked about that man in the 5th chapter of John. Who was lying by the pool. Who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. We talked about how Jesus showed up and healed him...saved him...even though the man didn’t ask for it, didn’t appear to deserve it, and never bothered to thank Jesus for the miracle. Jesus showed up and loved him. That’s it!

And we talked about the way Jesus, when he is hanging on the cross, hears one of the criminals say to him, “*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom*” That’s all the man says. The man doesn’t make any formal statement of faith. He doesn’t recite some religious creed or quote the words of a hymn or psalm. He doesn’t show Jesus a certificate that proves he has been baptized by immersion as an adult which is, of course, the way some people say it must be done. No, the only thing the man says is “*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom*” and Jesus answers, “*Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.*”

My friend then said he was haunted by the memory of the bad things he had done. During some earlier chapters in his life. I reminded him that the cross says that stuff is done. No longer on the books. No longer being held against us.

Isn’t this what we see in Acts 9:1-20? Saul has been doing all kinds of awful stuff to those early Christians. Trying to break the church. Doing his best to discourage every Jesus follower he can find. Then, when Saul is on the way to Damascus to mess with people there, beating them and dragging them off to prison, Jesus shows up. Jesus has been out there, along the highway, waiting for Saul to show up. Jesus shows up. There is a burst of bright light. And although Saul’s eyes are temporarily blinded, his heart finally sees that Jesus is the Son of God. The Messiah. Savior. Lord.

Like some sort of a helpless baby, Saul is led into the city.

The Lord then goes to a Christian named Ananias, and Jesus tells Ananias to go to Saul. Lay hands on him. Greet him as a brother in the faith. Because God has plans for Saul. Ananias doesn’t want to do it. Ananias knows Saul has been a murderous rascal. Ananias starts listing all the junk Saul has been doing, and God says, “That’s done. That stuff is done. That’s over. That’s past.” Ananias objects and God insists: “That’s done. That’s old news. That’s past. Saul is becoming something...someone...new.”

Near the end of our conversation, I encouraged my friend to take his eyes off all the sin and junk and wrong turns in his life, and focus on the cross. Keep his eyes on the cross. "Do you have a cross around the house?" I asked him. He reached over and picked up a small wooden cross that was sitting on an end table. He picked it up and it fit his hand perfectly. "Trust the cross," I said. "Trust the cross. That stuff's done. You're good. You're in."

Justifying grace.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved; how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed. Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come; 'tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.

Justifying grace.

Will you repeat that phrase with me, again? *Grace is a gift.* Let's try that again: *Grace is a gift.*

Justifying grace. That's the second flavor of God-given grace.

Do you dare believe it? Will you accept the gift?

Flavor #3: Sanctifying Grace.

Sanctification is a process, a miracle, God does in us where his grace begins to change us.

God is at work in our lives, Paul is saying. God is changing us. Changing things. Deepening us. Making us over so that more and more we begin to resemble Jesus.

In 2nd Corinthians 5:17 Paul says if anyone is in Christ they are becoming a new creation.

I have a friend who "turns houses." He goes in, looks at a house, and does what it takes to make the house right. He tackles things many of us would never touch. Repairs plumbing. If the wiring needs to be re-done, he redoes the wiring. Replaces windows. Rebuilds floors. Whatever it takes. God, through the Holy Spirit, is in the business of "turning lives." Tackling things that need to be tackled. Getting what is broken working. Hauling off what needs to be hauled off.

There is a wonderful passage in Ephesians 4:12-16 where Paul talks about how God has put us together in the church so we can help one another grow up. Pauls actually says, in verse 13, that the purpose is for us all to *reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*

The apostle goes on to talk about how we may start out as spiritual infants, when we say "yes" to God in Jesus Christ, but that isn't where God wants us to stay: ¹⁴*Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.* ¹⁵*Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.* ¹⁶*From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*

Matt Chandler is the lead pastor down at The Village Church in Highland, Texas. He talked, in an article last Summer in *Leadership* magazine, about creating an environment of growth in the church. Letting people know it is okay not to be okay. It's okay to struggle and know that sanctification, growing into the image of Christ, takes time. We're all struggling with sin.

For example, one Sunday they were using a four minute video in worship. The man in the video was in a bad spot. A really tough place. He was frustrated with where he was spiritually. He was tired of dealing with some sinful junk that stubbornly resisted his attempts to overwhelm it. He was nowhere near where he wanted to be, Matt remembers. In the middle of his video testimony the man began to cry. He began to wipe away tears. He couldn't say anything else. So they stopped recording. But -with the man's permission- they used the video in worship. To show the reality of growth. How tough and ragged and long-term it can often be.

Matt says they open up the whole subject of change, of sanctification, by asking two questions at their church. The first question is this: What stirs your affections for Jesus Christ? The second question is this: What robs you of those affections?

The pastor explains: *Many of the things that stifle growth are morally neutral. They're not bad things. Facebook is not bad. Television and movies are not bad. I enjoy TV, but it doesn't take long for me to begin to find humorous on TV what the Lord finds heartbreaking.*

The same goes for following sports. It's not wrong. But if I start watching sports, I begin to care too much. I get stupid. If 19-year old boys are ruining your day because of what they do with a ball, that's a problem. These things rob my affections for Christ.

I want to fill my life with things that stir my affections for him. We want our people to think beyond simply what is right and wrong. We want them to fill their lives with things that stir their affections for Jesus Christ, and as best as they can, to walk away from things that rob those affections - even when they're not immoral.

What stirs your affections for Jesus Christ?

The second question is this: What robs you of those affections?

How would you answer those questions? How would our lives change if we began to take those questions seriously?

Growing, embracing a new way of living, becoming mature in Christ, is hard, real, honest, ragged work. It is something the Holy Spirit does in us as we invite God in to work in us...work us over..."turn us."

My hunch, today, is that most of us are struggling to accept one of these kinds of grace. Some of us don't see or believe God is around, or God cares, and so we need to pray to receive the assurance of God's prevenient grace.

Some of us have a terrible time believing that God would really love someone like us. We are carrying all this baggage and guilt and regret. We are the ones praying to receive and believe in God's justifying grace.

And there are those of us who have accepted the fact that God loves us in Christ, and that we can stop running, but we are stuck spiritually...morally. There is junk in our life that we have not dealt with, faced, and so we are praying for God's sanctifying grace to help us do the hard work of creating a new kind of life...making us into a new person.

Grace is a gift. How will you, this day, receive that gift?