

What Grace is Mine
Pastor Dick's Final Message
December 30, 2018

Call to Worship: Psalm 40:1-10 (NIV)

I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry.

² *He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire;
he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.*

³ *He put a new song in my mouth, hymn of praise to our God.*

Many will see and fear the Lord and put their trust in him.

⁴ *Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord,*

who does not look to the proud, to those who turn aside to false gods.

⁵ *Many, Lord my God, are the wonders you have done, the things you planned for us.*

*None can compare with you; were I to speak and tell of your deeds,
they would be too many to declare.*

⁶ *Sacrifice and offering you did not desire— but my ears you have opened—
burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require.*

⁷ *Then I said, "Here I am, I have come— it is written about me in the scroll.*

⁸ *I desire to do your will, my God; your law is within my heart."*

⁹ *I proclaim your saving acts in the great assembly; I do not seal my lips, Lord, as you know.*

¹⁰ *I do not hide your righteousness in my heart; I speak of your faithfulness and your saving help.
I do not conceal your love and your faithfulness from the great assembly.*

Scripture Reading:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

³ *For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you...*

⁹ *Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³ Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.*

⁴ *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.*

¹⁷ *Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.*

²⁰ *On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."*

²¹ *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Romans 12:1-4, 9-21 (NIV)*

The Call to Worship and the Scripture reading this morning were the same passages that I had read at my ordination service 13 ½ years ago. Why? Because they are my life verses. They both speak of what God has done for me and my response. The only discrepancy between my account and that of David's in Psalm 40 is found in verse one, I didn't wait patiently for the Lord, he waited patiently for me!

Throughout the Advent season several among us shared their personal testimonies of how God had worked at specific times in their lives. This morning as I conclude my time as one of the pastors of Oak Grove I would like to share my personal testimony. Why? Because my personal testimony has really nothing to do with me, it is about how God has worked throughout my entire life.

For some of you, if not many of you, you have heard this story before, or at least parts. But I have been requested by some to share it once again since many of you were not here when Oak Grove called me sixteen years ago, or many of you were very young at the time, or some of you just plain forgot. I will leave it to you to decide which category you want to be placed in.

I grew up in a suburb of Buffalo, New York to a very faithful Roman Catholic family. I don't remember but I am told that I was baptized as an infant. We went to church every Sunday, that is until they changed it so you could go to church on Saturday afternoon or evening, then we went to church almost every Saturday. I attended Religious Education and participated in all the rituals of the church, including celebrating my first communion in 2nd grade and my confirmation around the age of 15. I was married in the Roman Catholic Cathedral in downtown Buffalo at the age of 21.

It was the year following that when I was able to follow my dream, what I believed was God's call on my life at that time, and I joined the New York State Police. I went away to the police academy for six months, coming home only on weekends. After graduating from the academy my first assignment was about two hours away from my house. I would come home on my days off and once or twice during my work week. It was during that time that my two sons, Tim & Joe, were born. I became consumed by my job and relating to the people that I worked with.

Something else happened during that time period. I drifted further and further away from any relationship with God the Father or Jesus Christ. I also drifted far away from living the life a Christ follower should live, but I justified it by saying to myself "it must be okay because that is the way most everyone else around me is living, and most of them call themselves Christian." It was during that my wife and I divorced.

A couple years after that something happened that changed the trajectory of my life. On a hot July morning I received a phone call from my mother saying that my father had died suddenly and unexpectedly in his sleep. He was 59 years old. It had only been the precious couple of years that my father and I began having a relationship, apart from that of father and son.

With the exception of Mary and I getting married shortly after, those were some of the darkest months of my life. So much so, I asked for a Bible from my mother for a Christmas present. Apart from Jesus himself, it was the best Christmas present I ever received. I wanted to know

what the Bible said about divorce, as well as other things. Deep down, or maybe not so deep down, I knew I was not living the type of life God wanted me to live. Growing up Catholic, at that time, we were not really encouraged to read the Bible on our own. As I began reading the Bible on my own I just couldn't get enough. I discovered that divorce is not God's ideal and that it is sin, but like all other sin it can be forgiven if confessed and repented of. Most important it was through reading God's Word, the Bible, when I developed a relationship with Jesus that I had never had before. I kept on reading the Bible each and every day, Mary and I grew in our relationship with one another, and we had our two daughters, Emma & Erin.

Finally after several years both of us realized that we needed to find a church to attend and to raise our two daughters. The trouble is we didn't really know where to look. Mary grew up Baptist, myself Roman Catholic, quite the mixture. We visited a couple of churches, though I must say Mary was more faithful with that than I was. My worshiping community on Sunday's was a group of people who trained dogs together – from morning to evening, once again not a very faithful group of Christ followers. One Sunday I came home and Mary said I think I found a church. I said, "oh yeah, what kind?" She said a Mennonite Church. I said okay, I'll try it. After all I had no idea who Mennonites were. I went to church with Mary, Emma and Erin the following Sunday having no preconception of who the Mennonites were. What stood out to me was that everyone was carrying their Bibles into church. The people were friendly and they welcomed us. The pastor preached from the Bible and most everyone followed along from their Bible. The people shared about what was going on in their lives during the week, where they had seen God at work and what concerns they needed lifted up. Though at that time, especially at the beginning of my journey, I thought there were some who shared a little bit more than I needed to know. The people prayed together.

That's when it came to me, this is what church is supposed to be about, this is the church that I have been reading about in the Bible, especially Acts 2.

The following Sunday we went to Sunday school which was before church. Again I was surprised that the primary focus was on studying God's word together and trying to discern how it applied to our everyday lives. Then they mentioned about staying after church for something called a pot-luck. It was something they did on the first Sunday of every month. Attending our first pot-luck sealed the deal!

Over the next year or so our faith grew. The church accepted us for who we were and where we were at in our faith journey, but at the same time they challenged us, encouraged us, to grow in our faith. Eventually Mary & I knew we needed to be re-baptized. For me I viewed it as my original baptism because I certainly could not remember my infant baptism and I couldn't even remember my confirmation and if I really understood if I was accepting Jesus as my Lord and Savior on my own.

I can remember asking the pastor, who I had come to know and love, just prior to my baptism, "how do you think the people are going to be with my Catholic background and the divorce in my past." His response, "I think they are going to be okay with those, for a couple they might struggle with being a police officer." At the time I couldn't really understand that. I was still pretty early on in my discipleship journey.

Mary and I became more and more active in the church. She became the secretary. I taught youth Sunday school, then adult Sunday school, served on church council. Then, what we thought was a tragedy struck, both for Mary and me, and for the church. Our much beloved pastor announced that he was feeling called by God to pastor at another congregation.

While it was a sad time for the congregation when he left, it was also a time of growth for many of us. I was asked if I would consider preaching on a rotation with three others. I had done some public speaking before but never preached. I begrudgingly said I would give it a try. After some time one of the elders asked me if I would consider doing some hospital visitation with him which worked with my schedule since I was mostly working nights.

Then one evening I was driving to work for the night shift, which after being promoted to Sergeant I found myself working once again two hours away from home. While I am often a pretty slow learner, over the years I have learned some things. One of those things being that if you want a healthy marriage it's best to be home as often as possible. As I was driving that night all the sudden I had this overwhelming feeling come over me and I had tears coming down my face. So much so I had to pull over to the side of the road and I heard God speaking to me saying, "I want you to be a pastor." I spent the rest of the night trying to figure out how I was going to tell Mary when I got home in the morning.

I'd like to say I jumped on God's call, but I took my time. I wanted to make sure that is really what God wanted me to do. I continued to help out at church whenever and wherever I could. I took some classes at a Christian college, then went to seminary. And I was still grappling with the Mennonite/Anabaptist position on non-violence and non-retaliation. Then came Sept. 11, 2001. There I was watching the towers come down wondering if my older brother who had just taken a job in New York City was in one of those buildings. After finding out that he was safe I thought to myself it was good that I lived some 400 miles away from NY City. A few days later at about 2:00 in the morning I found myself standing looking down at the rubble as emergency workers were sifting through it still trying to find anyone who might still be alive. Of course you knew by looking at the utter destruction that there wasn't much chance of that.

I can remember standing there, surrounded by other emergency services personnel, some who had a family member somewhere in that rubble, and I can still remember the words that were echoing throughout from many who were present, "we need to just go kill them!" I thought to myself, "who are we going to kill and what is that going to solve?" That is when I became keenly aware of the fact that we can't overcome evil with evil, but only with good." While I do not believe that no Christian can be a police officer, in fact we need more Christ followers to be police officers, but for me I knew it was time.

As I was about to graduate from seminary, I found a posting for an Associate Pastor position at Oak Grove Mennonite Church in West Liberty, Ohio.// Then the moment of decision came, was I going to do what I felt God was calling me to do – give up my life as I knew it, one that I had grown pretty comfortable with, great pay and benefits, about as secure of a job as one could find, and follow God's calling to be a pastor having absolutely no idea if I could do it.

Overwhelmingly positive visits with the search committee, the church and the community gave us no out. Sixteen years as of just a few weeks ago we left Buffalo with two feet accumulation of

snow over the previous 24 hours and we arrived in West Liberty to a large crowd of people to help unload the U-Haul and set-up the house. And that was just the beginning of 16 wonderful years.

I would like to say it has all been positive, but there have been a few bumps in the road. Yet, throughout the 16 years the overwhelming majority of the time has been very positive. I am not sure I can find a church that is as supportive of its pastors. There is a reason why this church has a history of lengthy pastorates, and it isn't just about the pastors. In fact one might be able to make the claim that it is in spite of us pastors. You gave me time to grow, generously supported and encouraged Mary and I, and Emma & Erin, in just about every possible way.

By now you are probably asking yourself that "if it has been such a positive experience why are you ending your time as pastor?" That's a good question? It's the same question that most of the people we loved in New York asked us 16 years ago. Mary would probably say, "don't ask me, I just figured out the answer to those who were questioning 16 years ago."

In my last "Dick's Dialogue" for the winter edition of *Oak Leaves* I wrote about some of the things I have learned about being a pastor. The most important thing I have learned that isn't in there is that saying "yes" to Jesus is not a onetime event, it is a lifetime event. In those early years my favorite Scripture verse was Jesus' command in Matthew 4:19, "*Come, follow me, and I will send you out to fish for people.*" I can do that, I like people! At least I thought I did ☺! Since then I've learned that we're called to love those people we don't even like.

I didn't fully comprehend Jesus' corollary command that goes with *Come follow me and I will send you out to fish for people,* that being "*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me*" (Luke 9:23). Or his words at the reinstatement of Peter commanding him to go and feed his sheep, *Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go. . . Then Jesus said to him, "Follow me!"* (John 21:18-19).

Throughout my years I have been blessed not only by a wonderful congregation, a loving and supportive wife and children, but God has also given me some very good mentors. From Roy Walls my first pastor at Clarence Center/Akron Mennonite Church, who died suddenly and unexpectedly at the age of 48 shortly after answering God's call to leave our congregation in New York and pastor a church outside of Denver, Colorado. To Larry Augsburg, and Andy Stoner – your soon to be Transitional Pastor, to Howard Schmitt, your last Transitional Pastor. There is only one phrase of Howard's that I remember and I am not sure if he shared it from the pulpit or at one of our pastor peer meetings:

"For a Christian, I just don't see the word retirement in the Bible." Comfort and retirement is part of the American gospel, it is not part of the Christian gospel. Yes, we might be called to end certain jobs or vocations due to different things – age, illness, etc., but the calling to go out and take (bear) Jesus Christ to the world never ends during our life here on earth. Like Roy Walls, Howard Schmitt would give his life here on earth still answering Jesus' call to follow him at the age of 78.

I pray that I can continue to echo the words of the apostle Paul:

I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me.

Philippians 1:20-22a (NIV)

Why? Because when I look back over my life, none of this is by me. It is all by the grace of God. I don't deserve any of this. In fact I deserve just the opposite. Why God reached down and lifted me up out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; and set my feet on Christ the solid rock and gave me a firm place to stand? The only answer I have is because that is who God is and what He does.

He put a new song in my mouth. In return my whole life should be a hymn of praise to my God and our God. Romans 12:3 says, *For by the grace given me . . .*

By now many of you know that my favorite Christian music writers and singers are a couple from Ireland by the name of Keith & Kristyn Getty. Over the past several years we have sung many of their songs like "In Christ Alone," "By Faith," "Every Promise," "Holy Spirit," "Speak O Lord," and the re-writing of the hymn "Facing a Task Unfinished."

This morning I have asked Kim to sing my favorite song of theirs. Why? Because just like Psalm 40 and Romans 12, it speaks of my life journey. Mostly it speaks of God's work in my life and my response. It is entitled "What Grace is mine."

What Grace is Mine

What grace is mine that He who dwells in endless light
Called through the night to find my distant soul
And from His scars poured mercy that would plead for me
That I might live and in His name be known.

So I will go wherever He is calling me.
I lose my life to find my life in Him.
I give my all to gain the hope that never dies
I bow my heart take up my cross and follow Him.

What grace is mine to know His breath alive in me.
Beneath His wings my wakened soul may soar.
All fear can flee for death's dark night is overcome.
My Savior lives and reigns for evermore.

So I will go wherever He is calling me.
I lose my life to find my life in Him
I give my all to gain the hope that never dies
I bow my my heart take up my cross and follow Him
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