

“The Trace of Grace”  
Ephesians 2:1-10  
August 13, 2006

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Some people are born "fixer-uppers." Those who love to buy old houses with peeling paint, leaky plumbing, tiny kitchens, too few bedrooms and no closets. They don't see any of these qualities as deterrents – only the promise of some future project that needs to be tackled.

Fixer-uppers are never happier than when their living rooms are full of sawdust and their bathrooms are full of holes. They love to wake up to the sound of protective roof tarps flapping in the wind. For these folks there is nothing more fun than eternally being "under construction."

The truth is that all of us are continually "under construction." In the final verse of this morning's scripture lesson, the writer insists that as men and women saved by grace, we are now called to personified good works. Because we are "in Christ Jesus," we can do more than build "good works." We can become a good work. We can be a good work. Turning our life into a "good work" is the ultimate fixer-upper project, the real lifelong construction project. Becoming a "good work" means reconstructing our lives by seeking to live like Jesus.

Thankfully, God is a determined and ceaseless "fixer-upper." As the epistle writer notes, God is "rich in mercy" and continues to pour out the gift of divine grace to us throughout our lives. Only this constant infusion of grace makes it possible for the construction project to continue.

- What is the blueprint God would have us follow?
- What is the finished project God has in mind as the goal of all our "good works"?

It is the creation of the most "grace-full" structure ever conceived – the spirit-filled body of Christ, a community of disciples we call the church.

The design for this most grace-full place is built around three main structural supports. In order to stand strong and unwavering, it must be a community where the trace of grace is threefold.

1. We are to be a faithful people
2. We are to embody God's love and
3. We are to be eternally hopeful

We are in the midst of remodeling the front entrances of our church so that it will be clearer where to enter; so that the front of our church will be more inviting.

Once the project is completed will those who enter find the trace of grace at work in our spiritual lives and in our family of faith? For when our doors are fully opened for the entrance of God's grace, the spirit celebrates the richness of God's gift.

### 1. Are we Faithful?

Without the basic pillar of faith, there can be no confidence in whatever else the community may undertake to construct. Without faith, doubt and fear can creep in like termites, nibbling away at our spiritual foundations. A genuinely faith-based spirituality is buoyed up even when the ground may seem to be sinking right out from underneath everything.

Faith in the power of Christ's sacrifice and in the ultimate and eternal victory Christ won for our sake keeps all other conflicts and difficulties in perspective. Even if a toilet leaks and fellowship hall is flooded, even if we buy the house next door and we aren't sure what to do with it; even if ministers and staff come and go; even if we don't have enough parking; faith endures. Frederick Buechner writes:

Grace is something you can never get but only be given. The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are, because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you that I created the universe. I love you. There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you reach out and take it. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too. *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*

### 2. Are we Loving?

If faith is the essential pillar that holds our spiritual community up, then love is the cross-beam that reaches between and offers support by bracing one against another. Love must be "laced" throughout a Jesus spirituality, for love was the motivating force behind all Jesus did and said. Jesus offered his love to each of us because he saw in each of us a dire need for grace and mercy. Love is a lure that attracts our starving spirits to the richness of God's grace.

Consider Jesus' loving response to the woman taken in adultery and the crowd poised to stone her. Instead of judging her, Jesus responds with love and compassion.

Jesus' first instinct is to be compassionate. His heart reaches out to the woman. She is the one facing the death threats. The crowd wants Jesus to come over to their side. They want his endorsement so they can apply the letter of the law. But Jesus says "no" to legalism. His compassion compels

him to stand with the woman. He is more concerned about giving the woman a fresh start and God's grace than he is about staining his own reputation by associating with her. In Jesus' mind, no one in the temple is innocent. Everyone in the scenario is in need of grace and mercy.

Greg Louganis the Olympic gold-medal-winning diver some time ago revealed in his book; "Breaking the Surface" that he was HIV positive and gay. After his book was released in 1995, Greg went on book signing tours and wherever he went, he was met by "Christians" from local "churches" that had organized to greet him with banners and signs protesting his homosexuality.

When asked on the "Today" show how he handled such heckling and harassment, he replied, "I've learned that you can't meet hatred with hatred. I try to love them and listen to them and greet them in as good a spirit as I can."

- Are we extending a hand slap or a handshake to others in need?
- Are we responding to others in love and compassion or in judgment and arrogance?
- Are we always looking for ways to inject Christ's love for others into our community?
- Are we asking before anything else: Is this a loving response to the pain and need we face?

A love-laced church takes Christ's own sacrificial love as its guide for action.

### 3. Are we Hopeful?

Hope is the kind of pillar that would hold up one of those grand "flying buttresses" that protrude from ancient cathedrals. Hope supports, but it also propels us forward. Without hope, a Jesus spirituality has no future--and the promise of a glorified future is integral to the gift of grace God offers. The future is something we must always be preparing for, not just waiting for.

In his extensive research on "low-hope" vs. "high-hope" people, psychotherapist C. R. Snyder isolates the unique "Hope to Cope" mind/body/spirit skills of high-hopers. (*C. R. Snyder, "The Psychology of Hope: You Can Get There from Here"*)

Minimize the negative sense that "This too shall pass"	Establish an outward, problem-solving focus	Exercise
Call on friends more readily – to establish intimacy and deeper relationships		Laugh
Practice healthful behaviors		Pray
Age gracefully		

Henri Nouwen writes in his book, "With Open Hand," that:

"Hope means to keep living amid desperation and to keep humming in the darkness. Hoping is knowing that there is love; it is trust in tomorrow; it is falling asleep and waking again when the sun rises.

In the midst of a gale at sea, it is to discover land.

In the eyes of another, it is to see that he understands you.

As long as there is still hope, there will also be prayer and God will be holding you in his hands."

Can we trace God's grace coursing through our lives? Can we feel God's grace continuing its work within and through us for the entire course of our lives – expanding, remodeling, modernizing, pushing out walls, and opening up new doors and entrances?

Will this church be a family of faith that is: Ever faithful, deeply loving, and eternally hopeful?

"For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." (v. 10)

**Amen!**