**Justifying Grace**

Please join me in the prayer to the Holy Spirit on page 48 of your purple worship book:

*Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your spirit, and we shall be created, and you shall renew the face of the earth.*

*O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy your consolations. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

One of the pleasures that we as Americans share is a tradition of enjoying great movies. It used to be that we went to the movie theater in droves. Today, we’re just as likely to enjoy movies via Netflix or TV re-runs or cable channels. Many of our favorite movies are seasonal in nature. For instance, each year, we tend watch our favorite cherished Christmas movies once again—everything from *The Nativity Story* to *It’s a Wonderful Life*—which is *my* favorite—to *A Christmas Story*, the tale of little Ralphie, the boy who wanted a Red Ryder BB Gun for Christmas, but was constantly told, “You’ll shoot your eye out!” At Easter, and at other times of the year, we watch our favorites of *those* seasons as well.

In February, there aren’t very many seasonal favorite movies to enjoy, but there is one I know of—the 1993 Bill Murray classic, *Groundhog Day*. In this movie, Murray plays Phil Connors, an arrogant weatherman from Pittsburgh who has traveled with his crew to [Punxsutawney](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Punxsutawney,_Pennsylvania), Pennsylvania to cover the story of the famous groundhog, [Punxsutawney](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Punxsutawney,_Pennsylvania) Phil, in order to report on whether or not he sees his shadow, predicting how much longer winter will last. I’m sure *this* past winter there were a lot of people watching groundhogs!

Phil finds himself trapped in a sort of time warp, where he re-lives the same day—February 2, Groundhog Day, over and over again. Eventually he decides to try to win the heart of his producer, Rita. Remember I said that Phil was arrogant? Well, not surprisingly, Rita is *not* interested in him—in fact, she is confused and suspicious of his attempts to be nice to her. Of course, she doesn’t remember anything that happened on the *previous* Groundhog Days, so each new day, Phil has to start all over again, and, each new day, she doesn’t respond any more positively. As he attempts to win her heart, something inside Phil changes, and he becomes a better person. He does many good things around town, helping people in many different ways. Eventually, instead of trying to manipulate Rita into loving him, he starts to try to really get to know her and the things that are important to her. In time, he really does fall in love with her, and Rita falls in love with him.

Now, obviously, our God is *not* like Phil in *many* ways. Our God is, and always has been, all-*good*. There is no change of heart required in God. But there is a very important way in which even poor, imperfect Phil teaches us about God. Like Phil in his pursuit of Rita, God *never* gives up on us. No matter what it takes, no matter *how long* it takes, God is seeking our hearts and our lives. God’s plan is, and always has been, to win our hearts forever.

The title of this talk is Justifying Grace, and my name is Eva Marie Wolfe.

Our God is complete without anyone or anything else—God does not *need* anything. And yet, God is a creator, who saw fit to create the entire universe. The book of Genesis tells us that God created the heavens and the earth, day and night, the sea and the dry land, the plants and the animals, and finally, that God created human beings. And God saw, at each step of the way, that all of this creation was *good*, and in fact, in the book of Genesis, chapter 1, verse 31, we learn that God looked at everything that God had made, and declared that all of creation was not just good, but *very good.*

No, God did not *need* anything. Nonetheless, God created the entire universe, and God *loved* all that was created.

Unfortunately, human beings often do not understand or accept the love of God. Because of our stubbornness in refusing to see God for who God is, we cut ourselves off from this source of love and life. In the book of Luke, chapter 15, (Luke 15) we read the story of the prodigal son. This man was the younger of two sons. Normally, of course, he would not have his share of his father’s possessions until his father was gone. But he didn’t want to wait for that day to happen. He wanted it *now*. He offered a great insult to his father by asking for his share of the estate to be given to him. In essence, he was saying to his father, “I wish you were dead.” He was willing to give up his family relationships for the sake of the things that he desired.

We know the story. The son spent all of his inheritance, probably a lot sooner than he thought he would, and he eventually took a job feeding pigs to support himself. This was a very lowly thing for him to do, for as a Jewish man, he wasn’t permitted to *eat* pigs and wouldn’t have been permitted to profit from a business that sold pigs for food—and frankly, there wouldn’t be much other reason to raise pigs, would there? The Jewish prohibition of raising pigs is so strong that when I was in Israel a few years ago and I wondered about seeing a pig farm there, it was pointed out to me that the pig’s *barn* was raised up off the ground so that their feet would never touch the Holy Land. But this young man we call the prodigal son was so desperate that he would do even this job of feeding pigs. And he was so hungry, that Luke tells us in Luke chapter 15, verse 16 (Luke 15:16) that this man longed to eat even the slop he was feeding to the pigs, but no one offered him anything.

That was when he decided to go home.

Now, there was nothing for him at home. He’d cut off all his relationships. He knew better than to expect his life to be restored to what it had been. But he also knew that no one there ever went hungry. So he swallowed his pride, and turned towards his father’s house. He decided what he was going to say: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." (Luke 15:18-19).

Luke tells us that when he was a long way away, his father saw him and ran to him. This *dignified* Jewish head of household, filled with longing for his son, had been watching for him, even long after the son had left. The father cast aside his own well-deserved dignity and pride and *ran* to this faithless son, and he put his arms around him, disregarding the mud and the pig slop and the smell of the young man, and he *kissed* him. (Luke 15:20)

Immediately, the son started on the speech he’d been rehearsing all the way back: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son...” But he didn’t even get a chance to finish. His father wasn’t listening to that speech. He was celebrating that his beloved child, who had been lost, had returned home.

You can’t turn off God’s love. There isn’t anything you can do to stop God from loving you, from longing for you, or from being prepared to give you eternal life, regardless of the fact that you don’t deserve it. And God put into our souls a desire for God that is so strong that, no matter how far we have strayed from God’s side, we can’t ever be fully satisfied until we are in relationship with God. Let me say that again: We can’t ever be fully satisfied until we are in relationship with God. There is nothing on earth that can truly satisfy us—not money, not sex, not power. Nothing. Only God.

The central theme of the Bible is the story of God calling us back into the relationship for which we were created. (Pause)

Jesus stepped down from his heavenly throne in order to call us to *accept* the relationship that God offers to us. Even though many of us have tried to *earn* our way into relationship with God by trying to follow all the rules, there is no way that we can follow *all* of the rules all the time, and therefore there is no way that rules and regulations can lead us to God’s side. It is only through God’s offer of grace, and our acceptance of it, that we can be saved.

Justifying grace is at work from the very moment that we say “yes” to the relationship that God offers us in Christ. Our acceptance of grace changes everything about our lives. I’ll repeat that: Saying yes to God changes everything about our lives.

In the story of the prodigal son, we see justifying grace in the son’s turning away from his miserable situation and returning home. In the same way, *we* are restored to an eternal relationship with God , who knows us and loves us with an eternal love, no matter what we do or say to turn away from God. God loves and knows us better than we know and love ourselves.

Saying yes to God changes the nature of our relationship with God. It moves us forward to an entirely *new* level of relationship, in much the same way that saying “yes” to your fiancé moves you to a whole new level in a human relationship. When we say “yes” to a marriage proposal, that moment marks the beginning of a lifelong commitment to a shared life. In much the same way, our saying “yes” to God marks the beginning of our eternal commitment to Christ and to the church. (Pause)

That *one* moment of commitment marks us as being saved. Salvation, however, is a continuous process. It is correct for us to say, “I *was* saved by grace, I *am* saved by grace, and I *will be* saved by grace.” I’ll repeat that: “I was saved by grace, I am saved by grace, and I will be saved by grace.” The salvation never ends.

In the Bible and in Christian experience, we come to know this experience of justifying grace through several different words and phrases: “Salvation, healing, conversion, having one’s sins forgiven, being born again.” They all mean the same thing: justifying grace is at work in our lives.

I’d like to tell you a story that may help us to understand the impact of justifying grace in our lives. Fiorello LaGuardia was the mayor of New York City during much of the Great Depression and all of World War II. Though it was perhaps an unusual name for a man, LaGuardia embraced his given name, Fiorello, which means “Little Flower.” He always wore a carnation in his lapel. And since he was only five feet four inches tall, New Yorkers loved calling him “the Little Flower.” But he was by no means a timid man.

Brennan Manning, who wrote the book, The Ragamuffin Gospel, tells us that LaGuardia “was a colorful character who used to ride the New York City fire trucks, raid speakeasies with the police department, take entire orphanages to baseball games, and whenever the New York newspapers were on strike, he would go on the radio and read the Sunday comics to the kids. One bitterly cold night in January of 1935, the mayor turned up at a night court that served the poorest ward of the city. LaGuardia dismissed the judge for the evening and took over the bench himself.

Within a few minutes, a tattered old woman was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told LaGuardia that her daughter's husband had deserted his family, her daughter was sick, and her two grandchildren were starving. But the shopkeeper, from whom the bread was stolen, refused to drop the charges. "It's a real bad neighborhood, your Honor." the man told the mayor. "She's got to be punished to teach other people around here a lesson." LaGuardia turned to the woman and said "I've got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions--ten dollars or ten days in jail." But even as he pronounced sentence, the mayor was already reaching into his pocket. He extracted a bill and said: "Here is the ten dollar fine which I now remit; and furthermore I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant." So the following day the New York City newspapers reported that $47.50 was turned over to a bewildered old lady who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren, fifty cents of that amount being contributed by the red-faced grocery store owner, while some seventy petty criminals, people with traffic violations, and New York City policemen, each of whom had just paid fifty cents for the privilege of doing so, gave the mayor a standing ovation.

Like Mayor LaGuardia, Jesus has paid the price. Instead of a ten-dollar bill, Jesus gave his life to prove God’s love for us. As Paul writes in the book of Romans, Chapter 5, verses 8 and 9 (Romans 5:8-9): “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners, Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him.”

Jesus restores our relationships in two ways. We can look to the cross to help us understand this. The vertical line on the cross, going up and down, demonstrates for us that Jesus’ sacrifice restored our relationship with God. (Pause) The horizontal crossbar, going straight across, demonstrates that he restored our relationships with each other.

Even though our salvation comes to us at the *moment* of justification, the conversion process *continues* as we *keep* saying “yes” to Jesus. *As* we keep saying “yes,” we come to understand ourselves better and we acknowledge that we have a continual need for Christ—we are *moving* towards perfection, but we need Christ to help us on this journey. We also come to understand God better, and we seek more earnestly to follow God’s will throughout our lives. And finally, as we keep saying “yes,” we begin to practice the spiritual disciplines that will help keep our relationship with God strong. We pray, we read Scripture, we meditate, and we are active in obedience to the conversion of our own will to God’s will.

Justifying grace is a *double* acceptance.

First, God says “yes” to us. God has said “yes” to us in creation, and God said “yes” to us at the cross. Then we *respond* by saying “yes” to the relationship that God offers us through Christ.

But God does not force us into relationship. It has to be *our* decision to return. Just as the father waited and watched for his prodigal son to return, so *God* waits and watches for us. And just as the father hugged and kissed his ragged and smelly son, so God embraces us, surrounding us with unconditional love.

And so we can step out in faith, in an act of trust and self-denial, knowing that our faith will be rewarded. God calls us to be disciples of Jesus Christ, our Savior. We respond with trust and obedience. (Pause)

We participate in good works and in acts of obedience to God. We understand that we don’t earn our salvation that way. It’s actually the other way around. *Since* we have won salvation through Christ, we live as Christ calls us to do. We participate in acts of *piety*—the spiritual disciplines—and in acts of *mercy*. The *mission* of every believer—not just pastors, not just missionaries—is to join in *God’s* mission and make disciples of Jesus Christ. I’ll repeat that: We all join in God’s mission and make disciples of Jesus Christ.

One very important way that God moves us to the point of acceptance of God’s grace is through the loving acts of other Christians. This is called agape love. It is the highest kind of love—a love of self-giving.

Throughout this Emmaus weekend, *you* are experiencing the love of people who have spent many hours in preparation for your walk, and the love of those who are serving you throughout the weekend; you are experiencing the love of those who are praying for you the entire time you are here; and you are experiencing the love of those who have prepared gifts to express God’s love for you. These sacrifices of love are made so that you will understand more clearly how much God loves you.

In addition, Emmaus communities from across the nation and from all over the world have sent letters and other communications so that you will know about this agape love.

I’d like to show you some of the expressions of this love. (Show prayer list and others).

De Colores!

**Scripture References**

Genesis 1:31

Luke 15:16

Luke 15:18-19

Luke 15:20

Romans 5:8-9

**Book References**

The Ragamuffin Gospel, Brennan Manning