**Emmaus Talk on Prevenient Grace**

**New-Ark Area Emmaus Community**

**Given by Pastor Ed Eberhart for Women’s Walk #45**

**March 18, 2011**

Ladies, please join me in the Prayer to the Holy Spirit, found on page 48 of your worship booklets.

* *Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of the 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.  Oh 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.*

Please be seated.

In beginning this talk, I’d like to share a couple of stories.

* **I heard a story once about a boy named Johnny who had his first date with a girl in his school named Sally. When he arrived to pick her up, he had a dozen roses in one hand and with the other hand rang the door bell. When she opened the door and saw him with the roses, she was so excited that she began to kiss him all over his face. He dropped the roses and left running from the house. Sally shouted out, “What’s wrong, Johnny, did I scare you?” He yelled back, “No, I’m just going to the store to get more roses!” ☺**
* **The Sunday before Christmas, a pastor told his congregation that the church needed some extra money. He asked the people to consider donating a little more than usual into the offering plate. He said that whoever gave the most would be able to pick out three hymns. After the offering plates were passed, the pastor glanced down and noticed that someone had placed a $1,000 bill in offering. He was so excited that he immediately shared his joy with his congregation and said he'd like to personally thank the person who placed the money in the plate. A very quiet, elderly, saintly looking lady all the way in the back shyly raised her hand. The pastor asked her to come to the front. Slowly she made her way to the pastor. He told her how wonderful it was that she gave so much and in thanks asked her to pick out three hymns. Her eyes brightened as she looked over the congregation, pointed to the three most handsome men in the building and said, “I'll take him and him and him.” ☺**

Ladies, this morning you need to know that God is pursuing you. He created you for the single purpose of having a relationship with you. He lived for you, he died for you, and he rose from the dead for you. He loves you with an everlasting love. And that more than anything else, he wants a relationship with you. Like Johnny pursued Sally, God is pursuing you. And like that elderly woman in church making her choices, God has made his, saying, “I’ll take her and her and her!”

My name is Ed Eberhart, and the title of this talk is PREVENIENT GRACE. (Pause)

If you’ll indulge me, I’d like to share one more, brief story.

* **A woman invited some people to dinner. At the table, she turned to their six-year-old daughter and said, “Honey, would you like to say grace?” The little girl got kind of shy and said, “No, I wouldn't know what to say.” The mother insisted, saying, “Just say what you hear mommy say.” So the little girl consented, bowed her head, and prayer, “Dear Lord, why on earth did I invite all these people to over dinner?” ☺**

I’d like to talk about GRACE this morning. Not table grace but God’s grace. We hear about it. We read about it. We sing about it.

**“Amazing grace, how sweet the sounds that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found. Was blind but now I see…”**

**“America, America, God shed his grace on thee...”**

The word “grace” in your Bibles comes from the Greek word “charis,” meaning “gift.” Grace is a gift, given by God to humankind. From what you and I probably know about gifts, they are something given freely to us, usually rooted in love, rather than something we deserve or have earned. We earn wages but receive gifts. God’s grace is a gift.

Now grace is a small word with very large meaning. In fact, as you’ll be hearing this weekend, God’s grace operates in many different ways in our lives. While all grace is God’s grace, there are many different facets, angles, or dimensions, of grace.

**\*Prevenient grace is God’s grace in our lives from the moment of our conception (typically in our mother’s womb) to the point of our conversion/salvation experience.** (Repeat)

The word “prevenient” in Latin means “that which comes before.” Prevenient grace, then, comes before or precedes our conversion. It is the grace of God that seeks us out, operating in our lives from the moment of our conception to the moment when we say “yes” to God’s offer of salvation.

* Jesus told us that he came to **“seek and save the lost”** (Luke 19:10).

In prevenient grace, we are “courted” or “pursued” by God.

So, if you’re already a Christian, then God’s prevenient grace was active in your life prior to your decision to accept Christ as your personal Lord and Savior. And if you’re not yet a Christian, then prevenient grace is now active in drawing you toward God. In fact, we might say that it is by God’s prevenient grace that you are here this weekend. It’s all part of God “wooing you,” or “drawing you,” or “pursuing you.” **Long before you ever considered giving your life to Christ, Jesus gave his life for you!**

* As Paul reminds us in Romans that **“…While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us”** (Romans 5:8b). (Repeat)

More than a century ago, Francis Thompson penned a now-famous poem entitled *The Hound of Heaven.* The author sets the poem in the context of a life spent running from God.  The poem pictures God like an old bloodhound sniffing our scent, always in the distance, occasionally letting out a howl to remind us that he is on our trail.

You see, God wants a relationship with you. When we think of relationships, we commonly think of the marriage relationship.

* **I’m reminded of a certain man and wife who were constantly arguing. One day, out of anger, the man finally blurted out to his wife, “I just don’t understand how God could have made you so beautiful and yet so stupid!” His wife replied, “Actually, it’s quite simple. He made me beautiful so that you’d be attracted to me, and he made me stupid so I’d be attracted to you!” ☺**

You ladies might have a difficult time believing this, but I’ve never been particularly good at relationships—especially with the opposite gender. I was kind of like Johnny, never very good at initiating relationships. You know, I was always the shy boy, the quiet kid… I never really got the nerve to approach women. So, thankfully for me, God brought into my life a woman who pursued me! She let it be known that she was interested in me, and she wooed me with kindness and gifts, and then, in my timing, I “relented” ☺ and entered into a relationship with her. Heather and I have now been happily married nearly nine years and have two beautiful children, Anna and Ben.

I think in relationships that most of us like it when the other person initiates the relationship. Perhaps that is especially true of women, but I think it’s true of everyone. When you were dating, wasn’t it much easier to tell your partner, “I love you,” after they first told you that they loved you? Didn’t it become much easier to reach over and hold his hand after he had first reached across the couch and held yours? In any relationship, isn’t it easier to express your interest in someone after they’ve expressed theirs in you?

You need to know that when it comes to our relationship with God, he acted first. Before you ever gave a thought about God, he was thinking about you! Before you ever did a thing for God, he died for you. That is prevenient grace, and to me, it makes a world of difference. It should give us confidence that God really does love us when we realize that it is God who initiates the relationship with us! While many people spend their lifetime “looking for God,” all the while he has been looking for them!

Sisters, it’s important that you understand that you were created for a relationship with God. That’s why God created us! In the very first pages of the Bible we see that Adam and Eve were created to be in relationship with one another and with God. And while sin messed up that relationship, God made it possible for us to once again be in that relationship. You see, He wants it more than you do.

Created in God’s very own image, we are unique to all his creation and loved in a special way by God. In creation, God created the heavens, the earth, the sun, the moon, the animals, everything, and he said that it was “good.” Then, on the sixth day he created humankind and said that it was “very good.” From the beginning, we were “wired,” if you will, for a relationship with our Creator.

We know that there is a lot of bad news in the world today. We can see sin all around us and the devastating consequences of sin our lives and in the world.

* The good news is that Jesus said, **“…In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world”** (John 16:33b).

Our sin has separated us from God. But that bad news is preceded, you see, by the good news that God desires a relationship with us and because of that He’s not going to give up easily!

Adam and Eve made some pretty bad choices that resulted in loss of a relationship with God and disorder, but God provided for their needs. We make bade choices, as well, yet God provides for us. His grace is greater than our sin.

* Paul writes in Romans 5, **“…Where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord”** (20b-21, NIV). (Repeat)

You see, the bad news of our sinfulness is preceded by the good news of God’s grace. That’s how badly God wanted a relationship with you.

* Romans 6:23, **“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** (Repeat)

I don’t know how badly you might desire a relationship with God, but I do know this: God desires a relationship with you much more than you do with him!

* Through the prophet Jeremiah, God said, **“…I have loved you, my people, with an everlasting love. With unfailing love I have drawn you to myself”** (31:3, NLT). (Repeat)

Our relationship with God is rooted in his deep, covenantal love for us. This is the strongest relationship in the Bible. Your relationship with God is the product of God’s agape love, unconditional, eternal, and sacrificial. It’s not based on your love for him, but rather his love for you.

You see, the Bible is a story of God calling people to him.

* In the Old Testament, as Adam hid because of the newfound nakedness caused by his sin, God called out to Adam in the garden, saying, “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9b).
* He called Abraham into this special relationship.
* He spoke to Moses in the burning bush, calling him to deliver his people from bondage. Moses didn’t go looking for God; God went looking for Moses.
* God spoke to the shepherd boy David, calling him to shepherd his people.
* He called out to Samuel in the stillness of the night.
* He used the prophets to call his people back into a special relationship with him. Every time God’s people would fall away from their relationship with God, the prophets would deliver God’s message of forgiveness and a call for restoration.
* Like Jesus sought out Zacchaeus, “Zacchaeus, come down from that sycamore tree!” and into a new, changed life, God is seeking you out this weekend...
* Like the father in Luke 15, scanning the horizon, hoping and praying for the day his prodigal son would return home and forgetting the mess he had made of his life, God is looking forward to the day when you return home to him. You see, the story of the Prodigal Son tells us a lot more about the father than it does the son…
* Like Jesus called the disciples to lay aside the things of this world and follow him, Jesus invites you to follow him today…
* Like Jesus sought Mary Magdalene and invited her to become a part of his inner circle, a woman from whom he had expelled seven demons, Jesus is calling you with all your “demons,” and life struggles, problems, etc.

And the list goes on and on. Story after story of God seeking us. That is a picture of grace. God’s grace. Prevenient grace. God loves you just the way you are.

From the great hymn of our faith: **Just As I Am, without one plea, But that thy blood was shed for me…Just as I am, Thou wilt receive, wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve…**

Let’s close our time by considering just how it is that we experience prevenient grace. God works in a variety of ways to get our attention and let us know how much he loves us, doesn’t he? Often times, he will uses life circumstances, good or bad, to draw us into a relationship with him. Perhaps this Walk to Emmaus will be used as an instrument of God’s prevenient grace to bring you into a relationship with him.

**My own Walk to Emmaus, in this very building over fourteen years ago, was used by God to confirm my own call to the ministry. At the time, I was a 22 year-old senior in college finishing my pre-law degree headed to law school. But God had other plans, and that is why I am here today.**

At times, God will use joyous occasions such as births or marriages to draw us closer to him, and at other times, God will use tragedies, struggles, and trials in life to bring us to a greater awareness of his presence, love, and desire for a relationship with us. As a pastor, I have seen many examples of God taking tragic events in people’s lives and using those events to draw people closer to him.

* We’re told in Romans 8:28, **“…We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”** (Repeat)

Additionally, God often uses his people as instruments of grace. You and I both know that the care, love, and sacrifices of others draw us closer to God. This weekend, your sponsor has been used by God to see that you are here, enjoying this Walk to Emmaus. Parents, spouses, pastors, teachers, friends, people from all walks of life are chosen by God uniquely for you…to draw you closer to him. You and I can probably look back on our lives and come up with a list of people who have been used by God to bring us into a relationship with Christ.

And lest we not forget the most powerful influence in all the world, the Holy Spirit of God, awakening us, wooing us, courting us, perhaps convicting us of our sin and the need to receive Jesus in our lives. It is God’s Spirit who ultimately breaks through into someone’s life making a transformative difference and making us into new people. And so, we pray, “Come, Holy Spirit…”

* Revelation 3:20, **“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.”** (Repeat)

You see, that is an image of prevenient grace. God knocking; but we must answer the door.

One final thought about God’s prevenient grace. My guess is that many of you ladies are already Christian women. You have received God’s grace and your life has been changed by the power of the gospel. If that’s the case, consider how God might want to use you, perhaps this weekend, perhaps when you return home, as an instrument of grace to others.

**Ernest Hemingway loved to write about the country of Spain. In his short story, The Capital of the World, Hemingway tells of a father and son who had stopped talking to one another. Things got so bad that the son left home. After several years, the father wanted to mend the relationship and so he looked everywhere for his son. When he came to the capital city of Madrid, he decided to go to the newspaper office and take out a big ad in the newspaper that said this: “Paco, please meet me at 12 noon tomorrow in front of the newspaper office -- all is forgiven. I love you, Father.” The next day at 12 noon, there were 800 men named Paco standing in front of the building!**

There a lot of Pacos in the world, perhaps even a few in this room. Looking for love. Looking for forgiveness. Looking for a relationship.

**You need to know that our father is like Paco’s father.** He’s forgiving. He’s loving. And he’s looking for a relationship.

He misses you a lot more than you miss him, saying: **“I’ll take her and her and her…”**

De Colores!