

When I served on the staff of the Second Presbyterian Church, there was an older minister, a therapist, who spearheaded a weekly service of anointing and communion. It occurred every Sunday at 10:30 in the chapel, and the one thing that I heard over and over again from members of the congregation who went to the service was, “Dr. Boyle is amazing. When he prays for you, even if you don’t tell him what you’re going through, he knows exactly what to pray for.”

Well, I thought that sounded utterly creepy. I didn’t want Dr. Boyle in my head tinkering with the wiring or taking an assessment. I was, to my mind, perfectly in tune with my own wholeness or lack of it.

When I was in seminary, I had a classmate who was utterly obsessed with the ancient Hebrews’ sense of communal life. And to be fair, to read the Old Testament is to see that the unfolding story of the life together of God’s people. But my classmate was utterly obsessed with communal life and sort of thought that our dorm hall should be this way with each other.

The rest of his hall mates did not share that particular view of community. We were perfectly happy to know that he was praying for us and even to pray for each other, but we really didn’t want to have a weekly hall meeting facilitated by our friendly neighborhood deacon wherein we revealed the deepest, darkest struggles that we faced, or confessed our misdeeds and sought forgiveness.

In other words, the rest of us felt we were perfectly in tune with our own wholeness or lack of it and didn’t want anyone tinkering under the hood.

There is a mystique of the *rugged individual* that is sort of imbued into the American experience.

There is this feeling that we are successful if we can prove we don't need anybody.

We are burdened with the impression that to be survivors (on the frontier or in the board room) we have to prove that we can do it ourselves. Individually. Alone.

That is the great myth with which we are burdened almost from childhood – that we must do it ourselves. Individually. Alone.

But there is power in naming the myths because when we name them we can ask whether they are true or not.

And the reality is that the myth - that we must do it all, individually, alone – is just that.

It tells us something about ourselves and the nature of our community, but it doesn't capture the fullness of what God dreams for us.

Indeed, the idea that we can be separate – separated – is actually at the heart of what is meant by the old theological word *sin*.

Too often we think of sins as misdeeds – the things that are done to us or that we do to each other that rip apart the fabric of our lives – but those are just the symptoms.

Sin is much more pernicious – it is much more insidious – it eats away at the wholeness that God wants for us.

Now I need to be really clear on one thing right this very second: I am not saying that when bad things happen its because people are sinners. I can't think of anything much more hideous than to call folks together for prayer and healing and in any way to suggest that suffering is a result of something someone has done.

Maybe somebody has done something really bad to you. Or maybe you know you've hurt someone and need healing yourself, but I want to be really clear that the reason I want to connect the ideas of *sin* and *separation* is because sometimes it is useful to know what you're up against. Sometimes it's helpful when things are hard to be able to name it.

Because by naming it, some of the power is taken away.

By naming it, you put down some of the burden.

And by naming it, if you want, some other folks can help you pick that burden up and carry it for a while.

And when some helps, that is where the other theological word slips in, *grace*.

I have a working definition of grace, some of you know it: it is the undeserved, unmerited, unconditional love of God. That's way that God loves us. God's love is complete.

And because God's love is complete, we can't wreck it. We can't diminish it. We can't outrun it. God's love is complete. It never fails.

Nor can we control it, even to reject it. God removes the possibility that our rejection of each other or God could make God love us less. That is why Paul Tillich could write, "We cannot transform our lives, unless we allow them to be transformed by that stroke of grace. It happens; or it does not happen. And certainly it does not happen if we try to force it upon ourselves, just as it shall not happen so long as we think, in our self-complacency, that we have no need of it. Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we

have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!"¹

When Jesus knew that he was going to leave his disciples, whom he loved, he took time to step away from the every day back and forth of what they did to talk directly to them about what it means to be loved by God – and to be held in a deep relationship with Jesus. He offered them peace.

And the truth is, he knew perfectly well when he was offering peace that he couldn't offer them security. He couldn't offer them a promise that suffering wouldn't break in. He couldn't offer them even the assurance that he himself would be around all the time, because he knew he wouldn't. One of the things that makes John's Gospel unique among the accounts of Jesus's life is that Jesus knows what is coming in John. He knows it's going to result in a cross. And he knows that he won't stop. He knows that God, whose love is complete, will never fail.

¹ <http://www.areopagus.co.uk/2012/05/you-are-accepted-paul-tillichs-famous.html>

And so he offers them what comfort he can.

He offers them peace.

At the heart of healing is the knowledge that God's peace transcends whatever else the temporal reality throws at us – because God's peace is the infinite peace.

In just a little while, those who wish may come forward to receive prayer from your pastors, and laying on of hands from your elders and deacons. It's not voodoo, it's us saying to one another, "I am with you. You are with me. God is with us together."

We are saying this and praying for one another because Jesus is God's answer to the rejection and separation of the world – this time of year most particularly, we remember God coming to us. We remember God taking flesh and blood and bearing with us. And in God's redeemed world, we are able to hear with one another. So Jesus knew what he was doing when he offered the disciples peace. That is why this ancient Celtic blessing is so near to my heart:

Deep peace of the running wave to you;

Deep peace of the quiet earth to you;

Deep peace of the flowing air to you;

Deep peace of the shining stars to you;

Deep peace of the infinite peace to you.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy ghost, Amen.