

“In the End Is Our Beginning”  
2 Corinthians 13:11-13  
5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

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Westminster, Greenville  
Ben Dorr

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Perhaps a couple of you recognized that my sermon title for this morning is not original. I borrowed it from the poet T.S. Eliot.

Eliot’s poem, “East Coker,” begins with the sentence:  
“In my beginning is my end.”

And the poem ends with the sentence:  
“In my end is my beginning.”<sup>1</sup>

Now...even though I took the title of the sermon from T.S. Eliot, the writer I’d like you to consider today is the Apostle Paul.

I chose this particular text for today because I wanted to remind everyone of the role that the Apostle Paul plays in our worship here at Westminster almost every Sunday.

Do you recall the last verse of our text?

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.”

When do you hear those words from me on a Sunday morning?  
During the benediction, that’s right.

And so my thought was that this ending of Paul’s letter,  
which also serves as an ending to worship many Sundays—  
this ending also serves as our beginning.

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<sup>1</sup> [T.S. Eliot poem \(philoctetes.org\)](http://philoctetes.org)

We begin the week with grace and love and communion when we leave this room.

In our end is our beginning.  
A beautiful way to begin every week.

Of course, when Paul wrote this letter, I'm not sure that BEAUTIFUL was only the word that was on his mind. I think FRUSTRATION was also on his mind.

Paul was writing to a church that was broken.

If you sneak a peek before this morning's text—just one chapter earlier, chapter 12, verse 20—Paul writes:

*“For I fear that when I come, I may find you not as I wish...I fear that there may perhaps be quarreling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder.”*

In other words, this is a broken group.  
It's a DISTRACTED group.  
They've lost sight of what's important.

They're spending time and energy on gossip,  
on jealousy,  
on holding a grudge...

So Paul writes to them.  
He's trying to remind them of what's truly important.  
He's trying to MOVE THEM away from the small and the petty...and help them see the big picture.

What's the big picture?

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,  
the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit  
be with all of you.”

This benediction is, for the Apostle Paul, THE BIG PICTURE.

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Have you ever had times in your life where you felt like you lost sight of the big picture?

I recall an article that the late writer Frank Deford wrote for Sports Illustrated many years ago. It was about the infamous basketball coach, Bobby Knight.

The article was published in 1981, when Bobby Knight was only 40 years old. Knight already had one national championship under his belt, and that very year he would win the 2<sup>nd</sup>. He was a coach who was brilliant with basketball, but as most of you know, he had a terrible temper.

Perhaps the most infamous example was throwing a chair across a basketball court during a game when he disagreed with a referee's call.

In his article on Knight, Deford captured this complex mixture of a man by describing how Knight was in danger of squandering his gifts. That he kept missing the big picture by doing dumb or questionable things.

Do you know what Frank Deford titled his article?  
“The Rabbit Hunter.”  
Why?

Because Knight liked to hunt, yes, but that wasn't the real reason.

It was because Knight chased rabbits...he couldn't stay focused on the big picture, on what was most important. He was always in danger of losing his focus, of trying to kill every last rabbit.<sup>2</sup>

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Now I don't mention that article because I think any of you are like Bobby Knight. But I do wonder—have any of you had the experience of losing sight of the big picture?

Of forgetting what's truly important in your day to day, and you find yourself spending your energy on insignificant rabbits?

Maybe this is why WE need to hear Paul's last words to the Corinthians as our FIRST words each week. In this age of distraction, when every like on social media creates a dopamine hit, and so many parents feel pulled in so many different directions, we need to keep the BIG PICTURE in front of us.

### **“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ...”**

A few years ago, the columnist David Brooks wrote a book that is, in part, a spiritual autobiography.

In the chapters that describe his spiritual journey, he writes:

“I was struggling with the concept of surrender and grace. I didn't like Martin Luther's idea that you can't be saved by works...I wanted to stake out a middle ground, which I called 'participatory grace.' You'd do some good things for your fellow human, and God would sort of meet you halfway.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “The Rabbit Hunter,” by Frank Deford, originally published January 26, 1981 in Sports Illustrated. It can be found at <https://www.si.com/college-basketball/2015/01/14/rabbit-hunter-frank-deford-bobby-kight-si-60>.

<sup>3</sup> David Brooks, *The Second Mountain*, New York: Random House, 2019.

As an aside, I think that's the way a lot of like to think about God's grace.

We imagine we don't need A LOT of it.

Just a bit.

At the most, God will only need to meet us half-way.

Brooks was writing a different book at the time, and he sent his thoughts about grace to one of his research assistants.

And she wasn't having any of that "half-way" business!

"...this denies grace's power," she wrote back, "and subverts its very definition. Grace must reach out to the broken and undeserving. It must reach out to those recognizing plainly, vulnerably, their own need and emptiness."<sup>4</sup>

I'd go even farther than that.

Grace, by definition, reaches us even when WE DO NOT recognize our utter and absolute need for it. We often describe grace as an unmerited gift—a gift that has been given to us that we could not earn, that we could never give ourselves.

How many of you have ever received such a gift?

But in Paul's world, grace is more than a gift we receive, with hands and hearts wide open...

Grace is that which opens us.

Grace seeks us out when we are closed, defensive, determined to go our own way.

Grace grabs us and claims us and finds us,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

even when we had no idea we needed to be found.

The preacher Tony Campolo tells the story of the time he was asked to speak at a small, Pentecostal college. Before the chapel service, several faculty members took Campolo into a side room to pray with him.

Campolo assumed that they would pray that God's Spirit would fill him and make him an effective speaker that day, which they did...but then one faculty member prayed for someone else.

Some guy named Charlie Stoltzfus.

The professor said Charlie was about to leave his wife and three children, and he said, "Don't let that man leave them! Don't let that family be destroyed! You know who I'm talking about, Lord...you know who I'm talking about...Charlie Stoltzfus. He lives down the road about a mile on the right-hand side in a silver house trailer!"

At that, Campolo thought to himself:

*Give me a break. Is he really telling God where Charlie lives?*  
**[He's supposed to be praying for me!]**

After the service, Campolo got in his car and drove home. On the way, he picked up a hitchhiker. He got in the car, and Campolo greeted him:

"Hi, my name's Tony Campolo. What's your name?"  
 "My name's Charlie Stoltzfus."

Campolo turned around and started heading the other direction.

"Hey, where are you taking me?" Charlie said.  
 "Home!"

“Why?”

“Because you just left your wife and three children, right?”

Charlie said, “Right, right!”

When Campolo pulled up to Charlie’s silver house trailer, Charlie said, “How did you know I lived here?”

Campolo said, “God told me!”

And from that day forward, Charlie’s life was never the same.<sup>5</sup>

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Now I know—that’s a story about a Pentecostal.

And we’re Presbyterian.

Do Presbyterians really believe in that kind of grace?

Not the kind of grace that meets us half-way, but the kind of grace that meddles with our plans, grace that overwhelms us, and turns us the other way?

The kind of grace that seeks us out and breaks us down and RIPS APART every barrier that you and I have placed between our frightened souls and God’s unfathomable love?

Can Presbyterians experience that kind of grace?

How about you give me an “Amen” in response to that question.

Speaking of the unfathomable love of God, that’s the second part of Paul’s benediction, right?

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<sup>5</sup> Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000.

**“...the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God...”**

But what exactly are we talking about, when we talk about the love of God?

Let me get at it like this.

Have any of you ever seen the bumper sticker that reads: “God loves all people, no exceptions?”

How many of you believe that?  
Good. I do too.

I also believe that the Bible tells us this is true, but what’s fascinating about that bumper sticker—God loves all people—is that it’s NOT where the biblical story begins.

The story that the Bible tells about God’s love is not a story that begins with the universal love of God, although it does end up there...it’s a story that begins with the PARTICULAR love of God.

It’s a story that says God chose a very specific person—Abraham—and through his descendants, God chose a people—the Jews—through whom God shows God’s light and reveals God’s grace.

And then God chose a very particular Jew from Nazareth, Jesus, whom God named as God’s Son, and through whom God acted in a unique way, a way that REVEALS once and for all what the love of God is really like.

As Tom Long puts it:

“This was the news that knocked Paul into the dust of the Damascus Road. Paul knew the biblical story, and he knew that ‘God loves all people’ is not where the story starts. What knocked him to the



ground was the astounding, almost unbelievable...discovery that, in Christ, the love of God for all [people] is where it all ends.”<sup>6</sup>

So...what does all this have to do with the BIG PICTURE?

Precisely this:

Because the Bible begins NOT with God’s universal love, but with the particular love of God....so should we.

We all want—no, we need—to be loved with the same kind of PARTICULARITY that God showed to Abraham.

Do you see the difference between universal love and particular love?

If one of you comes up to me after worship and says, “Ben, you won’t believe the week I’ve just had, it’s been awful...”

what do you need to hear next?

Do you need to hear, “Oh, don’t worry. God loves all people!”  
Of course not.

At that particular moment, what a person wants to hear is something like:

“I’m so sorry...what happened? Tell me about it.”

In other words, tell me the particulars of what happened to YOU.

When we hear about the love of God in our benediction each Sunday, we hear about a love that is not only inconceivable in its inclusiveness, but that loves us in all our UNIQUENESS...our warts as well as our worries as well as your wonderfulness...God knows it all, and God still desires you, treasures you, delights in you.

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas G. Long, “The Love of God,” found in *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost, 2017.

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So...the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ seeks us out and destroys our defenses.

The love of God gets particular with us.  
And the Holy Spirit calls us to communion—  
to fellowship with one another.

Do you know when I've seen the communion of the Holy Spirit around here?

Not just when we have all those baptisms, or welcome many new members.

I see it in the times when you or I have missed the mark.

When we fail at something.  
Make a mistake at something.  
And others around here respond not with judgment, but with grace and love.

One of the rabbits that I think churches chase these days is the rabbit of perfection. Not that we shouldn't always strive to get better at practicing our pillars of hospitality and generosity and justice and imagination and joy...but we must remember that the goal is not perfection.

It's FAITHFULNESS.

Father Kilian McDonnell once wrote about the danger of perfection.

He said:

“I have had it with perfection.  
 As certain as rain will make you wet,  
 perfection will do you in.

It droppeth not as dew upon the summer grass  
 to give liberty and green joy.

Perfection straineth out the quality of mercy...

I’ve handed in my notice,  
 given back my keys,  
 signed my severance check, I quit.

Hints I could have taken:  
 Even the perfect chiseled form  
 of Michelangelo’s radiant David squints,  
 the Venus de Milo has no arms,  
 the Liberty Bell is cracked.”<sup>7</sup>

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And so are we, right?  
 All of us are in some way cracked, broken.

That’s why we need the fellowship of the Holy Spirit to bind us  
 together.

So that we can be sure that in THIS church, we will have one place  
 where we don’t have to be perfect. No matter what your family taught  
 you, no matter what your workplace demands of you, we need our  
 church to be a place where we can make mistakes with one another, and

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<sup>7</sup> As quoted in Krista Tippett’s book, *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry Into the Mystery and Art of Living*, New York: Penguin Books, 2016.

we can receive forgiveness from each other, and we can be reconciled to one another, and therefore reconciled with God...

THAT is the big picture, right?

So...let's get particular right now.

What do you have to do tomorrow?

What's on your list?

Are you looking forward to tomorrow?

Are you worried about tomorrow?

Do you have so much on your mind these days, that when tomorrow rolls around, you don't even know where to begin?

Let me submit that you do know where to begin.

When the sun comes up tomorrow morning, let me suggest that you begin with the BIG PICTURE Paul gave us long ago:

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,  
the love of God,  
and the communion of the Holy Spirit  
be with all of you...

Amen.