

I have a very clear family vacation memory from my childhood that I want to share with you. I'm not clear about exactly how old I was or precisely where we were - I think I was about 8 years old – and I know it was summer and we were camping. But the incident itself is very clear: we were canoeing on a lake – my parents and my 3 siblings and I; and somehow or other, my older brother and I had left the canoes with our life jackets on to swim to the shore; and then we took off our life jackets to swim at the beach. I was walking through the swimming area when, very suddenly it seemed to me, I walked right off a big drop-off. I could kind-of swim, or thought that I could - but I was surprised and scared, the water suddenly over my head – I was panicking - flailing around trying to tread water and gasping to get a breath– I can remember even now this very strange feeling of knowing this was very bad while still not quite knowing what was happening. My parents realized what was happening and started yelling- but they were a ways away – I swallowed some water...and then my older brother was there – he grabbed me...managed somehow to get me back to the shallow area – and my feet touched ground with my head above water. I have no idea if I was floundering one foot away from that shallow spot, or 10 feet away – but I know I was in trouble – and on my own I think I would have drowned...but my brother rescued me – just ask him sometime and he'll be glad to tell you that he did! He likes to remind me about him saving my life...and I usually say I wasn't really in trouble - that I would have been OK on my own. But I wasn't OK – I've thought of it often over the years and realized what a dangerous moment it was – and I'm very grateful my brother was there to save me – and I've told him so.

That memory is etched deeply in me, but I wasn't sure whether to share it with you – because that brief crisis had a good ending, but not all do – if you have lost someone, especially a child, whether by accident or illness, I can only imagine how excruciating that is; and not just a child, but any loved one you have lost in tragedy – not all such stories have happy endings – not before and not today. But I decided to tell you that story for this

reason: to see if together we might see that floundering experience of mine as a picture – an image - of the situation we are ALL in today; and to take it even a step further/wider – to see it as an image of the circumstance that all people are in – even our whole world.

In over your head – in trouble – in need of rescue – is that a way you see yourself? Perhaps this is a specific time when that is very much how you see yourself – a difficult time in some way – you need help; or instead maybe you are at a place of abundance right now and life seems more in control – self-sufficient – no help needed. But I mean it in a deeper spiritual sense – not about a particular time of need or plenty, but about the truth of your life – your being: that you are lost in such a way that you are in need of rescue; to have that view of yourself and the world. Is that clear to you? Or is there something in that description that you push back against? Is it demeaning somehow? Or clearly accurate?

You can ponder that – but I believe the truth of it, of life, is that is our condition: we're in over our heads. And the crucial thing to hear in that is not just the part that we are broken, but also that you, we, I can't fix it – not by myself or all of us together. And it's that 2<sup>nd</sup> part that has to really be looked at - because that's what some folks and something in us might not be so sure of – might push back against being told we're not able to fix it.

The part about things being broken most folks seem to agree on in some way - whatever the religion or no religion at all, there is a sense of things not being as they are meant to be or desired to be, both within and around us. But not all would agree that we can't fix it – that we can't rescue ourselves; or perhaps not all on my own, but together we could... Human progress through technology and knowledge – the evolution of human intellect and culture – self-help and group enlightenment: those are the things that can provide a pathway to healing the broken human condition. And I don't mean to diminish those things in themselves – but I believe it is the profound truth of God's word to us and the ongoing experience of human life, that we cannot rescue ourselves. All the power of human mind and heart can be harnessed for great good, and for great harm – left to our own means we can not pull ourselves up out of the brokenness we experience.

That's one way to express what Paul is saying in Ephesians 2 – Paul describes the broken condition of our lives and the world, but actually Paul takes it a step further: 'you were dead' Paul says – he's quite blunt about it. But what Paul describes as death is precisely the dis-ease so many feel about life - it is the reality Paul describes of life overwhelmed by what is deadly rather than life-giving. Paul paints the picture primarily in terms of sin that is done and the diminishment that brings to self and others, and God's anger at the deadly consequence that sin brings. But in using the image of death itself, Paul points to the deeper issue at hand – that the brokenness of life encompasses all that is deadly: sin done and wrongs received – life wasted and diminished – suffering encountered and injustice reigning. The spiritual power of death is the full reach of sin and brokenness - death in all its forms to control hearts and minds and define life itself – life as death. ...it's that stark description that gives the truth in which to see our circumstance – we're in over our heads and there's nothing we can do to save ourselves.

So then what? – Paul makes this dramatic shift: Paul says 'in the circumstance of death – God reaches out in love with life – alive in/through/with Christ – it is grace, a gift! –and you are saved' ...Now I want to pause for a moment and think about my brother rescuing me – and I'm not trying to be too literal here equating Jesus to an older brother saving us! – but what I want us to realize is this: do you think as I was drowning that my brother needed to stop and ponder – 'hmmm – shall I help Gordon?...In some sense he got himself in trouble – he should've been more careful – helping him would be a lot of work for me– perhaps he needs to deal with this himself – it would be better for him...' That's not what my brother did at all – God bless him – partly because he's a good brother – but mostly because he loved me – and it was in his nature of love and relationship to want to help me – it's not only what he did, it's who he is.

Paul says 'out of the great love with which God loved us...' God reaches out – and this is while we were held in death – this is before we were Christians or there even were Christians; before you were born or baptized; before anything about anyone except the

common hold of death and need for life...in the face of death, God acts in love – and that is grace. There is something essential here about grace – grace is not a choice from God – it is the very nature of God. Grace is who God is within God’s self and how God is in relationship to creation & humanity & the world. Does God ponder in some eternal moment, as the world flounders in death: ‘...hmm – should I help these folks or not?...Seems they got themselves into trouble...I’m pretty upset and maybe they deserve what they get’...? It seems some folks have that idea about God. It’s what gets to the whole issue of if salvation is about punishment or not. When we focus on that, we are asking the wrong question – if the question was God ‘is keeping score and how will God decide to even the score?’ – then the answer will be about retribution and substitution, about punishment and reward; it will be about our desperate scramble to reach out to and appease God. But if the question is how does a God of love and life respond to a reality of sin, evil, brokenness death – then the answer is grace – because love and life and grace is who God is.

I have to say it is peculiar to me how upset people seem to get about a focus on God’s grace – especially in Reformed circles – grace was kind of our main thing in the Reformation after all. But there seems to be some sense that if you move away from a framework of punishment and reward, that somehow you characterize God as soft, or casual, or wimpy. It’s so strange – who ever thought love was soft or weak? Who ever experienced real love as casual or without cost? Who can know love and not know its immense courage and power? Love is about life and death, and life in the face of death and beyond. But even more than that – the reason we have to talk about grace is because God tells us to; I think God knows we might not really trust grace – we might futilely continue to try to find some way to rescue ourselves; but the truth God gives in Christ is not only that grace is the very nature of God, but also that grace is the only thing that works – there is no other way.

It is only God reaching out in love that can bring the power of life to a death-held world - God in Christ comes to grab hold - the hold of grace/life on our lives. God the source of life for all creation is the only source for the new creation – just as the world is created in love, God recreates in that same love – that is grace – it’s who God is, and it’s the only way for God to reach out in life to a world of death.

I’ve believed and felt that truth in my life for a long time now – it’s a blessing that I pray for all of us and all people to know. But it’s a truth that made me realize this week in a new way - or perhaps for the first time that I’ve seen it this way - that grace is our true nature as human beings as well. We are made in the image of God – and despite all we do to be at odds with God and with each other, despite the power of death in and through us and put upon us....the truth of our life can still be seen: we are in every moment dependent on the gracious gifts of God for life, and we find true life in ourselves in every moment that we share those gracious gifts with others. Which simply means grace is for us both the gift of life and our true way of life. In Ephesians, these amazing words: ‘We are created to do good works’, Paul says; God has made us to express the gift of life in our lives – it is “how God has made us to be” – good works to others is “our way of life.”

Our world is floundering – peoples’ lives are in trouble... ‘hmmm- I’ve been given life by God – those other folks seem still to be in the midst of death...hmmm...let’s ponder how we should respond...do people deserve help? Is it convenient for us to respond? Is that drowning person enough like me? Is it cost-effective for me to help?...’ – those are not the questions of grace; for us to live in God’s grace is to ask: ‘how can I be who God has made me to be?’ - sharing God’s gracious gift of love/life with others. And as we live out the answer, we find it fits us/it is who we are truly created to be – living by grace we are truly alive. Who knew grace was such a practical thing? We know we’re in over our heads – what we and our world need to be grabbed hold of by is this truth: in this reality of life and death, death and life, only God’s grace works – ‘it is not your own doing – it is the gift of God’...and all creation says: AMEN.