

I received an e-mail from Greg on June 16th. It was a bit of surprise since I had not had contact with Greg since the mid 1990's. I knew Greg, his brother and parents throughout the 1980's and early 1990's, for nine years as their pastor and another five or six years after that. I had the pleasure of presiding at Greg's wedding as he married Madeline some 25 years ago. In the late 1990's Marjorie and I moved from Chicago area and we lost touch with them. Greg's Dad had passed while we were still in Chicago and now, some two decades later, his mother was on hospice care. Greg reached out to me with a request to preside at his mother's funeral when the time came. He noted it was an unusual request since they were in Chicago and I was now in Omaha but he thought he would ask. The church his mother attended when I was pastor on the west side of Chicago had since closed. Following that she attended a small church a block from her house but had never become a member. The last three years she was in a Senior Care Center with no real church connection. Greg, who contacted me, lived in the western suburbs and had joined the Catholic Church a number of years ago. So on June 16th with Mom in Hospice care Greg thought “Maybe Pastor Scott would come back.”

A few things went through my mind as I pondered the request. First, I was honored that I was remembered with warm regard by Greg and his family. Second, Mary was a wonderful woman. She carried a heavy load at times with two boys and a husband that could be a hand full. She worked as a nurse and truly had a heart that cared for people. Mary was always willing to help at church, in the kitchen, working behind the scenes for funeral luncheons, church potlucks and other special events. She also made sure that her husband and boys with in church each and every week, if they liked it or not! It would be an honor to send off this saint to her eternal home in heaven. Third, it is summer time and my schedule has flexibility. It would be fun to get away to Chicago a few days with Marjorie, see some old friends and preside at Mary's funeral. Finally, Greg is someone I always remember each year when I put together the Easter worship service because of something he said at the first Easter service that I conducted out of seminary some 36 years ago. Therefore, I said “Yes, contact me and I would be honored preside at your mother's funeral service.”

When we gather for a funeral service we can be filled with sorrow as we think of our loss and yet as Christians we are comforted as we affirm that our loved one is now in God's eternal presence and care. Eternal life is central to our gospel lesson this week.

In our gospel lesson we do not know what motivates the man that ran up to Jesus, knelt before, and asked, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” This is a question we all would have been eager to hear Jesus answer if we were in Galilee at that time.

¹⁸ Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” ²⁰ He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” ²¹ *Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said,* “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” ²² When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Three things come to mind as I hear Jesus reply to:

“What must I do to inherit eternal life.”

Jesus connects the quality of living now with eternal life as He notes that living by the commandments of God is significant. The commandments are found in the Ten Commandments and laws given to Moses that we find in the first five books of the Bible, the Torah.

At another time in his teaching Jesus shares that all the law or commandments are found in our lives as “We love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength” and as “We love our neighbor as we love ourselves.” Jesus seems to be saying that as we capture the eternal qualities of life on earth that we are laying the foundation for experiencing eternal life in heaven. I don’t think this is about rule following like “don’t commit adultery” but as I take that commandment as a guideline and Marjorie remains the apple of my eye each and every day of our marriage I experience a quality of love that is a forerunner to love eternal.

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus also seems to share that even if we follow all the commandments that we can have stumbling blocks in our lives that blinds us from the eternal qualities of life now and therefore find us unprepared to embrace life eternal. For the man that ran up and knelt before Jesus his stumbling block are the possessions in his life. Somehow his possessions blinded him from seeing and experiencing the sacred in his life even though he followed the Commandments since his youth. That gives each of us pause when we reflect upon our possessions and life eternal.

Do our possessions serve as stumbling blocks as we follow Jesus or have we figured out how to use the possessions at our disposal as stepping stones for goodness in building God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven? These words from Jesus invite us to search our lives to detect any thing or quality in our lives that might serve as a block between us and life eternal.

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

The third thought that comes to mind as we hear the response by Jesus is grace. Commandments are good as they serve as guideposts for experiencing eternal qualities in our day to day living. Yet, stumbling blocks are present for all of us to one degree or another. They are concerns or interests that distract us from all the goodness God intends for us. Yet, the grace and forgiveness from God revealed to us through the life, teaching, suffering, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus overcomes all it all. Grace, which is a gift from God, is the final answer to the man’s question, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” As you and I become followers of Jesus we experience the eternal qualities of life here and now and we will inherit eternal life.

Mary, Greg’s mother, knew the grace of Christ in her life. She held on much longer than anyone anticipated. It was a long bed-ridden summer for Mary as she came in and out of consciousness. She passed late on Thursday night, September 27th. Greg called me Friday morning with the news. He said they were thinking of a visitation Sunday evening with the funeral service on Monday morning, followed by a graveside committal. A prayer service at 7 p.m. Sunday night would be nice, if possible, also.

I looked at my schedule. Worship Sunday morning. I would have to make some adjustments to my Sunday afternoon and Monday schedule and then get back for Tuesday morning activities. Not quite the summer get away with Marjorie that I had had in my mind’s eye but it could work so I told Greg I would look forward to seeing him and his family Sunday evening.

I pulled in the funeral home parking lot at 7:03 p.m. Just three minutes late after leaving Omaha at noon. Not too bad. I went in and briefly met with the family before a prayer service that included some sharing by those who were gathered. Following the prayer service I was able to visit with Greg, his wife, then his brother Kevin and his wife. I also spend some time Mary’s four grand children. I listened to their memories of Mary. Greg narrated the video for me that was a composite of pictures from his mother’s life that was going through a loop in the back of the funeral parlor. I felt prepared for the funeral service in the morning and I was ready for bed after a long day.

On Monday morning before the service I had the joy of meeting and visiting with some folk from that first church I served so many years ago. Seeing them and hearing updates on their families almost made it worth the trip in and of itself.

The service, a celebration of life for Mary, went well. Then we joined in a tradition that I had not been a part of since my days serving the church Mary and her family attended back in the 1980's. The funeral hearse led a procession of cars with our headlights on, emergency lights blinking, and funeral flags on car tops through heavy traffic from the western suburbs to the west side of Chicago. We approached the cemetery but did not drive in. I was fourth in the procession following the hearse and two family cars. As we drove past the cemetery I wondered where we were going. About four miles past the cemetery the destination dawned upon me as we drove into the old neighborhood. The hearse lead the procession in front of the house Mary lived in for over fifty years. The hearse stopped in front of the house for about thirty seconds. I remembered that was a Chicago tradition for some funeral homes that I had forgotten. It is a nice tradition and I am sure very moving to the Mary's boys.

Once we arrived at the cemetery we had a beautiful send off for Mary that included the reading of the 23rd Psalm and everyone joining in the Lord's Prayer. Everyone placed a flower on the top of the casket as it was about to be lowered into the ground. At that point I made my final proclamation.

Greg was standing next to me and I looked at him and then I said to the forty people gathered, "When Greg contacted me to ask if I would come from Nebraska to preside at his mother's funeral service I had many reasons to say 'yes' and one of those reasons was what Greg did on Easter morning my first year out of seminary when I was pastor at the church his family attended." I looked at Greg and his eyes were wide open with anticipation wondering what it was I was about to say. I went on to share that near the end of that Easter service some 36 years ago Greg, then 21 years old, raised his hand to inform me that we had not sung the hymn "Up From the Grave He Arose."

As a rookie pastor I immediately figured out that singing that hymn was a long standing tradition at that church so I asked congregation to stand so we might sing Hymn #322. Every year since, as I put together an Easter worship service, I always think of Greg and the hymn "Up From the Grave He Arose."

Then I shared my concluding comments at the graveside service, "This is the perfect hymn to have in mind as we lower Mary's casket into the ground. Because it reminds us that as a resurrection people, as followers of Jesus Christ, that this is not the final action because we shall all be raised to life, eternal life, when Jesus returns in final victory!

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Yes, let the commandments serve as guideposts and just as important let our stumbling blocks remind us that the ultimate answer is not found in "*what I must do*" but the answer is found in what Jesus has already done for each of us. Eternal life is a gift of grace from God. Amen.