



Room Full of Friends: Anne Lamott
 Rev. Dr. Glenda Hollingshead; July 6, 2025
 4th Sunday after Pentecost
 Ephesians 2:1-10; Romans 3:21-24

Continuing this morning with the summer sermon series, *A Room Full of Friends*, let us consider the life of American writer, public speaker, teacher, political activist, and Presbyterian: Anne Lamott. She was born in San Francisco in 1954 and is known and loved for her humor and openness, writing on such topics as her own alcoholism and depression as well as motherhood and her deep love for the God who somehow saved her from herself—and from the atheistic beliefs of her childhood home. Strangely enough, Lamott's father was raised by Presbyterian missionaries in Tokyo but for some unknown reason, he turned against Christianity. He particularly despised Presbyterians whom he referred to as "God's frozen people." Lamott's mother wasn't much different. Even though she attended the Christmas Episcopal midnight mass, she often remarked on how ridiculous it all was!

While Lamott did not inherit faith in God from her father, she did inherit his love for reading and books—not so strange when you consider he was a published author, too. On the topic of books, Lamott writes, "For some of us, books are as important as almost anything else on earth. What

a miracle it is that out of these small, flat, rigid squares of paper unfolds world after world after world, worlds that sing to you, comfort and quiet or excite you. Books help us understand who we are and how we are to behave. They show us what community and friendship mean; they show us how to live and die... Books, for me, are medicine.” Sadly, Lamott’s first book was a novel written in her 20’s about real life circumstances—her beloved father’s diagnosis and death from incurable brain cancer. Later books include *Traveling Mercies*, *Grace Eventually*, *Plan B*, *Stitches*, *Bird by Bird*, *Help*, *Thanks*, *Wow*, and numerous others.

Lamott’s parents and their circle of friends lived a wild lifestyle. Lots of parties. Lots of drinking and drugs. If they worshiped anything it was ideas, the written word, and, perhaps, nature. It wasn’t enough for Lamott—even though she tried to be satisfied with what seemed normal to everyone around her. Nevertheless, she had a sense that there was something bigger—Someone Bigger—a higher purpose. In small ways, God came seeking little Anne—through a friend whose family was Catholic, through a philosophy class in college when she had to read Kierkegaard’s interpretation of Abraham and his son, Isaac, through an Episcopal priest she contacted when she had nearly reached the end of her rope and was considering suicide. **For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.**

In college Lamott began to believe in God but she didn’t want anyone to know. In fact, all through her 20’s, she tried to find something else to believe in—something not as embarrassing or as awful as being a Christian. But nothing took. Then one day in 1985 she somehow stumbled into a little Presbyterian Church, of all places. St. Andrew Presbyterian Church. She was 31 and hung over—still wrestling with the demon of alcoholism. The choir was made up of 5 black women and 1 Amish-looking white man—but what a glorious sound they made together. The congregation consisted of 30 people or so, who radiated kindness and warmth—something that Lamott needed desperately. It was the songs that got to her first—those old spirituals. She loved hearing them, so she stayed, and the people didn’t hassle her. They didn’t try to get her to sign up for something or threaten to pay her a visit. If they had, she would have surely run in the opposite direction. The church folk just let her be there at a time when she didn’t really have much sense of belonging anywhere. She had little sense of being OK at all, since she was pretty hung over most mornings.

Lamott went to church for months and months without staying for the sermon because it was too bizarre to hear “Jesus” stuff. Then about a year later, she started to feel like Jesus was around her. She writes, “I would feel His presence. It would be like a little stray cat. You know, I would kind of nudge him with my feet and say, ‘No,’ because you can’t let him in, because once you let him in and give him milk, you have a little cat, and I didn’t want it. I lived on this tiny little houseboat at the time, and finally one day I just felt like: ‘Oh, whatever. You can come in.’ And from that day on, I have really felt a relationship or friendship with Jesus, a connection to Him. I got baptized, and I invited some friends from my literary community, and the reaction was kind of like, ‘How very touching — we are seeing Annie’s little blind spot. She was getting so bad before with the mental illness and with being an alcoholic and a person who uses a lot of drugs.’”

For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...

Some 40 years ago a very hung-over Anne Lamott stumbled into a small church and started what was to be a long journey towards sobriety and sanity. There were no instant miracles on that road, but many small mercies that for Lamott added up to a growing awareness of God's grace. She soon came to understand that, to her, religion was a "come as you are" party, with no need to pretend to be anything but your own true self. In her words, "I have a lot of faith. But I am also afraid a lot and have no real certainty about anything. I have learned that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns."

When asked what grace means to her, Lamott answered, "I've heard it said that man is born broken and the grace of God is glue, and I think that's pretty true, that it's divine glue. It's glue that surprises you. Classically, grace is unmerited assistance from God. I know that grace meets you wherever you are and doesn't leave you where it found you. I experience it as buoyancy, as a very strange sense of calm in the midst of tremendous anxiety and lostness. I often get my sense of humor back, or I just feel safe and in God's care."

Growing up among atheists, faith in God didn't seem possible for Anne Lamott. But in God's great mercy and grace, a little Presbyterian Church drew her in, gave her spiritual and physical sustenance, created a haven for her. It was a small church that looked homely and impoverished on the outside—a ramshackle building with a cross on top, sitting on a little piece of land amidst a few skinny pine trees—not much by the world's standards. Yet a church choir of 6 and a congregation of 30 were used by God to share the love of Jesus with a young woman who had lost her way. Because that's what God's grace does—it reaches into our brokenness, wraps us in love, and slowly turns our shattered pieces into a life made whole.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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