

Last weekend, I went on a retreat for a few days. One thing I appreciate about retreats is that they don't seem to accomplish much, at least not by our usual standards. I didn't return with a finished project or a long list of tasks completed. Instead, I walked, I prayed, and I was quiet—hard as that might be to imagine.

I've found that something does happen on retreat if we let it. We start to notice things that have always been there. We see the birds and, at least for a while, forget about our phones. We feel the breeze in the trees, notice the silence, and even pay attention to our own breathing. We become aware of things that are always present but often get lost in the busyness of daily life.

One afternoon, I simply took off my shoes and stood barefoot in the grass.

As I stood there, I realized something. The earth just accepted my weight. It didn't care if I'd had a productive day. It didn't ask if I'd prayed, written anything in my journal, or accomplished enough. It simply held me. The earth has done this every day of my life, and I rarely pause to notice, or to give thanks.

I think the spiritual life is similar. Maybe faith isn't about inviting God in, but about noticing that God has always been here. I've been reflecting on this a lot lately. Looking back, I realize I've been talking about it in my sermons too these past few weeks. Clearly, God wants me to notice.

On Monday morning, after I came home, I read a sentence by Richard Rohr that I haven't been able to let go of.

*"God does not love us because we are good. God loves us because God is good."*

That sentence has stayed with me all week. I think it challenges how we understand faith.

Many of us grew up thinking that God's love depended on us doing everything right. If we were faithful, generous, or prayerful enough, then God would be pleased. We know better in our minds, but I think many of us still hold onto that old belief deep down.

So, we've had it backwards a lot of the time. What if God's love never depended on us being good? What if it has always depended on God's choice to love us, no matter what?

The beautiful passage from the Song of Solomon begins with a voice saying, *"Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away."*

Come away. Come away.

Come away with me...Before there's any achievement or proof of worth, there is simply delight. The beloved is called just because they are loved.

Christian mystics have cherished this book because in it they hear God's voice speaking to every soul. Before we do anything to deserve love, before we figure out faith, learn to pray, or become who we think we should be, God calls us "Beloved."

Love begins with God. It always has.

Then we hear Paul's words from Romans, which seems out of place here next to that beautiful poetry. But I have to admit that I love this passage. And that may sound strange because it is one of the most painfully honest passages in all of Scripture.

*"I do not do the good I want..."*

Who among us has not known that experience or felt that way?

We know what kindness is, but we still lose our patience. We know we should forgive, but we hold onto grudges. We know the life we want, but we often fall back into habits that keep us from becoming who we hope to be.

For years, I thought of this passage as Paul just admitting his failures and frustrations. But now, I hear something different. I hear someone who has stopped pretending and is honest about himself, not to judge or feel sorry for himself, but because healing starts with the truth.

Over the years, I've learned that there is a big difference between perfection and honesty. Perfection keeps us pretending to be something we imagine will make us whole. Honesty opens the door for us to grace and possibility.

I notice something important about Paul. He hasn't lost his desire for what is good. He still sees goodness and longs for it. Deep down, he keeps reaching for love, even when other parts of his life pull him elsewhere.

That longing is God's grace already at work.

The Eastern Church calls this journey of faith *theosis*. Theosis is our lifelong journey of growing into the likeness of Christ. It reminds us that God is not trying to make us into someone we were never meant to be. God is drawing us toward the person we were created to become from the very beginning.

Jesus' words in today's Gospel are so simple and yet so compelling.

*"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."*

He simply says, "Come."

You know, I don't think Jesus is surprised by our humanity. He has experienced how divided and petty we can be. And he knows how weary we become trying to prove ourselves worthy, worthy of love, worthy of forgiveness, worthy even of our own lives.

Instead of giving us more to carry, he offers us rest. It's not that there's nothing left to do, but healing starts when we stop thinking we have to earn the love that heals us. We're simply free to live in that love.

Freedom. That word has been on our lips a lot this week, we celebrate the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. There have been fireworks, parades, family gatherings, and familiar songs. One of those songs has been in my mind all week.

*"This land is your land. This land is my land."*

Lately, I've started to hear Woody Guthrie's familiar lyric in a new way. The land has held all of us long before we divided it into mine and yours. Maybe this song reminds us that we belong to the earth – have belonged to it long before we ever tried to claim it.

Before we drew borders, built fences, or wrote deeds, the earth was simply a gift. None of us made it. None of us earned it. We were just born into it.

God's love is like that too. It's not something we achieve, but something we wake up to.

Which brings me back to standing barefoot in the grass.

As I stood there this week, it occurred to me that the earth was doing exactly what it has always done. It was holding me.

We have a name for that. Gravity.

It's invisible and steady. We hardly ever think about it because it's always there. We don't create it or deserve it. We just live within it.

Maybe grace is simply God's gravity—always present, always pulling us toward love, always drawing us closer to the One who made us.

Paul felt that pull even as he struggled against old ways of living. The beloved heard it in the voice calling, "Arise, my love." And Jesus calls, "Come".

So, sometime this week, step outside for a few minutes. Take off your shoes. Stand in the grass.

You don't need to try to have a "spiritual experience." Just notice. Notice the earth beneath your feet. Notice that it is holding you without asking whether you've earned the privilege.

And then remember this. God does not love you because you are good. God loves you because God is good.

And thank God for that!

Amen.