

I recently came across an article that describes an experiment that was carried out by a college professor and some of his graduate students. The professor asked a group of graduate students to cut into movie theater lines. The goal was to count how many people would typically say something to the line cutter.

In the laid-back Mountain West where they conducted the experiment, no matter the gender, size, or demeanor of the line cutter, nobody spoke up. These students cut in line and no one spoke up. Better to stay quiet, the researchers concluded, and avoid any potential conflicts. Although I know some of you here today and my guess is that a couple of you would say something for sure. I'm looking at you Jr. Rios.

Next, the students were asked to cut in front of—not a stranger—but a fellow student who was secretly placed in line. The student was instructed to become upset. “Hey, quit cutting in line!” the student would brusquely say to the cutter who would then go to the end of the line. Next, they waited a minute and a student cut in front of the person standing behind the student who had just chewed out the line cutter.

Would experimental subjects be informed and emboldened from the demonstration they had just witnessed and now speak their minds? The professor hypothesized that most people would remain silent to the line cutter. And they did. Not one person spoke harshly after watching someone else do the same.

For their third trial, a student cut in front of a student who was instructed to be diplomatic. The student was to smile and say, “Excuse me. Perhaps you’re unaware. We’ve been waiting in line for over fifteen minutes.” The cutter would then apologize and go to the end of the line.

Now for the big question. Would onlookers learn and use their new and smart sounding line-cutting script? The observers waited a minute, cut in front of the subject standing behind the positive role model and watched what took place. In fifty different lines, the results were startling. Over 80% of people who observed the effective interaction, spoke up.

In fact, they said the exact same words they heard modeled. The professor and the students proved that by using a positive role model, they taught strangers something that they immediately put into action. And they did it without them even knowing.

I share this story today because I think it has something to teach us about baptism. This morning we were blessed to baptize little Ryleigh Walden. Her parents presented her for baptism for two reasons. Her baptism is a commitment from them to raise this child up in the faith. Two friends of her parents stood up here with them as a sign that it is not just the parents that have this responsibility but that Ryleigh will be influenced by adults close around her.

You were also asked if you committed yourself to helping to nurture Ryleigh in the faith. This was your affirmation that she needs lots of mature adults in her life to teach her about the faith. So the first reason that she was presented for baptism was as a commitment from those of us around her.

The second reason she is presented for baptism as an infant is as a sign that she is loved by God before she has to do anything to earn that love and acceptance. Through Christ, Ryleigh has been loved and welcomed by God. Through her baptism, Ryleigh is a child of God. She does not have to do anything to earn this love. It is already provided for her.

And that is grace. Grace is God's love for us and that there is nothing that we have to do to earn God's love. Now, we are invited to acknowledge that love upon us. We are invited to acknowledge God's love through Christ for us.

We are invited to follow the one who has shown us what true love is all about. But nothing that we do impacts God's love for us. God loves us and there is nothing we have to do to earn that love. It is freely given to us.

But what difference does it make for any of us to be baptized? What difference does it make about whether or not some minister poured water over our head as a child, as a young person or as an adult? What difference does it make whether or not we were dunked into a pool or river as a young person or as an adult?

I want to invite us back into the story that I shared earlier. The story of the students who cut in line at the movie theatre for an experiment in sociology. Remember how the behavior of the people around them was impacted by the way the person reacted to the person who was the cutter? If there was no response or a belligerent response, the people kept quiet.

But when there was a polite and firm response to the cutting, the people nearby observed this and took up that same behavior for themselves. They also took the initiative to be bold and to tell someone to not cut.

Baptism is our reminder that God's grace is real. And it is real. God's grace is very real. This week I had an experience which I did not handle well in my opinion. I let my emotions get the best of me and I was very disappointed in myself. I was reminded of Tony Cook's children's message a few weeks ago about the toothpaste. He told the kids that words are like toothpaste. Just like you can't put toothpaste back into a toothpaste container you can't take back words once they have been said.

And I was mad at myself for allowing my emotions to overcome my better judgment. That night I did not sleep very well and I got up early to walk my dog in the early morning darkness. I prayed for God to use my mistake and make something good come out of it. I usually walk early but on this particular morning I walked earlier than I normally do.

I was heading out into my neighborhood when I heard a male voice from the trees. It was my new neighbor whom I had not really spoken a whole lot to in the time since he had moved in. A conversation began and we learned a little more about each other. And then the conversation turned deeper and we began to share some of where we were in our Christian walk.

He shared some about his journey and then I shared about the mistake I had made in judgment the day before. He offered some reassuring words and then shared that he would be lifting me up in prayer during his morning devotion while I walked.

That to me is what God's grace is all about. A word from an unexpected source to lift me up in prayer and to reassure me that God is still present even when I do stupid things. God's love of me does not depend on my perfection.

So in our opening example, the way we live our life makes an impact upon the people around us. Do we live our lives as people who are tormented by our own mistakes? Do we live our lives as people who are angry at others all of the time? Do we live our lives as people who think that we are the ones in charge?

Do we live our lives as people who have a chip on our shoulder? Do we live our lives as people who think others are always out to get us?

Or do we live our lives with the belief that God's grace is all around us and we are called to open ourselves up to find the grace that is already all around us.

How we live our life impacts how people learn about the faith around us. Do they learn that God cannot be trusted because we are overcome with guilt? Do they learn that God is to be feared because we live our lives as bitter and angry people?

Or do we live our lives as people who believe that we have been blessed by God? Do we live our lives as people who trust and follow God?

In that early morning for my devotion I read into the end of Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians. The letter we read this morning. As I read into the rest of this letter I heard Paul saying that Christ came not in great power but in great weakness. God through Christ relinquished great power to come to earth to become poor in spirit so that we can become rich in spirit. And so through Paul's words I heard an invitation to share my own weakness that reared its head in my life this week.

Baptism and faith in Christ does not mean that we have it together. It means that we are sinners and that we know it. But baptism is a visible reminder of an inward reality that God loves us more than anything and that God loves us before we could do anything to earn it.

God's love does not disappear just because we make mistakes like I did this week. The love and grace from God is very real and never goes away.

So we are invited to be people who lead our daily lives believing we are surrounded by God's grace.

And if we live in the midst of believing in God's grace then others will see that grace through us. AMEN.

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-Patterson, Kerry: "Whose Line Is It" Crucial Skills, Vol 12, Issue 35

-Text: 2nd Corinthians 8:1-10

-Given: August 31, 2014 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)