
For By Grace You Have Been Saved Through Faith

A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh

Lent 4 – Year B

There was nothing pretty about it. In the late 1990s, Warren County, Tennessee started a high school wrestling team. However, there were two major problems.

The first problem: The only knowledge any of us had about wrestling came from watching WWF's Monday Night Raw. Many of the students who showed up for the first day of practice quit when they realized there was no jumping off the top rope and you weren't allowed to attack your opponent with a folding chair... a trademark of WWF wrestling.

The second problem (and perhaps the main problem): My high school didn't hire a wrestling coach. Instead, they took a football coach (with a UNC degree) and thought that he would be smart enough to figure out the sport.

So, let me say it again: there was nothing pretty about it.

When the season began we hadn't a clue as to what we were doing. When we faced opponents stronger than us, we looked like wet noodles being rearranged on the wrestling mat.

On the occasion where we were physically stronger than our opponents, we flopped around like fish out of water, ultimately providing an opportunity for our opponents to pin us.

One day in practice our coach sat us down and said that it was hard to coach a team that spent most of their time on their backs trying not to get pinned. He went on to say we weren't easy to coach, we certainly weren't fun to watch, and the only thing that we could have possibly learned were how many gym lights there were in the state of Tennessee. (For those of you who haven't wrestled, gym lights are the only thing you can see when your back is on the wrestling mat.)

Our coach conceded that he had never wrestled a match in his life, but he believed there were two simple things that would make us better wrestlers. He said when you get taken down do two things immediately: 1. Keep your head up, and 2. Stand up.

If you get taken down and lay your head on the mat because of exhaustion or frustration and never attempt to get up, it is only a matter of time before you will be pinned.

Coach said that wrestling was a lot like life, when you get taken down (and we all will get taken down), keep your head up and stand up and you will find yourself back in the match.

Well, we all thought it was just another day at practice, where coach offered some technical criticism on wrestling that extended into a life lesson... a pontification of sorts. However, it was clear this was more than a lecture when he took out two sheets of paper, one that said "Head up," and the other that said, "Stand up."

He marched over to wrestling room door, and firmly taped them to the wall, so those words could be etched into our memory. Every time we entered or exited the wrestling room we were to tap on both of those signs, and if you forgot, you earned yourself ten flights of stairs in a closed stairwell equipped with a space heater.

We ran a lot of stairs those first few weeks, but those words started sinking in and the tide started changing. To the surprise

of many, we went from being wiped across the mat one year to district champions the next.

Now, my coach's methods had some psychological ramifications. Every time you entered or exited a room you were looking for a sign to touch.

Ironically, my church had a plaque next to the front door. It had been there for years, but I didn't notice it until that wrestling season. At the entrance of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church was a sign with a verse of scripture taken from today's epistle: "For by grace you have been saved through faith."

Now, as a high school wrestler, conditioned to read signs, those words started becoming an important part of my spiritual life. Like the words in the wrestling room, that verse of scripture started changing my relationship with God—"For by grace you have been saved through faith."

The verse contains two words important to every Christian—"grace" and "faith."

In today's gospel, Jesus gives Nicodemus a lesson in grace. "For God so loved the world he gave his only begotten son ... not to condemn but to save the world."

It is about grace. It is about God's unconditional love.

Like the sign in the wrestling room, grace reminds you to keep your head up.

Grace is love extended to each of us, whether we are worthy of it or not. "For by **grace** you have been saved through faith."

Then there is faith. Like the other sign in the wrestling room, faith is about "standing up."

In seminary, one of my classmates asked our Anglican Theology professor if he could sum up Anglicanism in one phrase. It didn't take the professor a second to utter the words—Lively Faith.

Anglicans are people of lively faith. Anglicans are people open to God in every aspect of our lives. That is at the heart of our theology and the subject of our Lenten Series.

We practice our faith by encountering God in the joys and sorrows, and in the trials and tribulations of this life. Faith is simply "standing up" to live life and engage God, perhaps even wrestling with God. That is, after all, where we get the name, Israel, which means "I wrestle with God."

"For by grace you have been saved through faith"

Let me conclude by reminding you that grace and faith are at the heart of today's gospel. Remember, that Nicodemus, the religious leader, visits Jesus at night. It is clear in that conversation (in John 3) that Nicodemus struggles to comprehend grace and faith.

But, we encounter Nicodemus again (in John 19). This time, Nicodemus appears in the middle of the day, standing at the foot of the cross to receive the body of the crucified Lord. It is one of the most powerful images of grace and faith at work in someone's life.

This Lenten season we journey with Nicodemus. May we follow him to the cross and hear those words anew: "For by grace you have been saved through faith."