

Scripture: Psalm 23; John 10:11-18

Sermon Title: "Guided Home"

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Have you ever felt like you were outside the love and grace of God? Have you ever had a period in your life or maybe even just a passing moment, when you felt that there was no way that God could love you or that there was no way that God's grace could be extended to you?

While in the beginning of my seminary training, I was going through one such period. And, while it was strange to still feel called to enter ministry while simultaneously feeling like I was somehow not good enough to receive God's love and grace through Jesus Christ, there I was, in a moment that felt like I was outside the love and grace of God – like I was the sheep that was outside the fold and flock of Christ with little hope of entering. And this idea of "not being good enough" was a powerful and sometimes debilitating notion that left me drained, worn out, fearful, and not knowing where to turn.

But Praise God that I had some wonderful friends around me in seminary. Friends with whom I could express my feelings – friends who listened, who cared deeply for the ways in which these thoughts and feelings were impacting my heart and soul. Friends who surrounded me with their love and grace sharing what I later came to see as glimpses of God's love and grace. And little did I know at time, that these friends were guiding me back home into the love and grace of God.

One particular evening, I was sitting with one of my friends and I was talking about my fear of what does it mean if God's love is not extended to me? What does it mean if God's grace is not offered to me? What does it mean if I am not accepted into the flock of Christ? Again, keep in mind, that these questions were being motivated by the sense of "not being good enough". And his response was just what I needed. He started asking me about one of our mutual friends– if I felt that God loved them – if I believed

God's grace was freely given to them even though they and I had much in common. And of course I felt that God's love was for them – that God's grace was extended to them because that's who God is – a God who's love knows no bounds. And the ironic part was that, what I saw as “not good enough” in myself I saw as “covered by God's grace” in them. And my friend that night ended our conversation with a pondering to which the exact words escape me but the essence was this: “you know, you are quick to see God's grace extended to others, but you can't seem to see God's grace extended to you”.

“But you can't seem to see God's grace extended to you.” I needed that gentle reminder. A reminder that God's grace is a free, undeserved gift of love through Jesus Christ and that we simply need to accept it. It's there, it's already been extended by God, all we need to do is to welcome it into our hearts. And when I was able to drop the feeling of “not being good enough” life blossomed anew, because when it comes to God's grace it's not about the fitness of the recipient but the generosity of the giver. It's not about being good enough, it's about God's goodness. And with this realization, the world also seemed brighter. And I found that I was back home, in the sheepfold of our Good Shepherd – I was back at home in the love and grace of God that is so beautifully depicted in the poetic images of Psalm 23.

And I pray that, if you have ever felt like you were outside the love and grace of God, that you were guided back home to it. And if you still struggle, unsure of whether God's grace and love are really there for you too, I pray that something this day or a moment that is yet to come, will touched your heart to know that it is indeed for you too, no matter what. I pray that we all can welcome and know the grace and love that is there always, because with the Good Shepherd, we are never alone. I pray that we can welcome a grace that refreshes, like still waters and a love that leads into righteous paths. I pray that we can welcome a grace that is greater than fear and a love that comforts. I pray that we can open our hearts more and more fully to a grace that prepares, anoints our heads, and fills us from within and a love that is never ending and

is with us all the days of our lives. Because, the acceptance of God's love and grace, this feels like home to me. And may our Good Shepherd draw us in, more and more each day.

And not just us, but may our Good Shepherd draw all people into his love and grace that is off limits to no one – draw us and all people in to the flock that has no limit on size for our Good Shepherd can welcome and care for us all. You know, each and every person we encounter in our lives, whether we know them well or see them for the first time, and those whom we will never meet face-to-face, God's love and grace are for them too. The home founded on the love and grace revealed in Jesus is one that is big enough for all. And the thing is, as we go about our daily lives, we may never know who feels right at home in that love and grace and who may have never experienced it. And so, what are we to do? Show it! Live a life of love and grace so that others may experience a glimpse of it through your life. Today, I am particularly grateful for how we are joining together in very real and tangible ways to share glimpses of God's love and grace with the world. Collecting money that will go to the food pantry – a tangible sign of God's love and grace for all who need a little help to be physically filled and nourished.

Joining our resources together with UCC churches around the country and across the denomination through One Great Hour of Sharing to help rebuild and support lives all around the world and through it, we not only let them know that we are there but that God is there. Every act of love shares God's love and every moment of grace reflects the grace of God. Never underestimate the power of such acts – the power to remind each person touched by such deeds that, “yes, God's love and grace are for you too, and they are with you always, even in the midst of trials and difficulties of life...no matter what!”

O, how I give thanks for the friends who guided me home to the love and grace of Jesus Christ as they patiently sat with me and gently guided me. O, how I give thanks for the tangible acts of God's love shared with others both near and far that extend God's grace. And O, how I give thanks for the reminder soon to be celebrated as we inch closer and closer to Easter of the powerful and breathtaking love that God has for us. A

love that, Jesus reminded his disciples, is so strong that he will lay down his life for his sheep and will take it up again. May our continuing journey through Lent, and in fact, our entire journey through life be one grounded in the powerful, awe-inspiring, and freely given love and grace of God as we receive it and as we share it with the world – one word, one action at a time. Amen.