

## The Road Less Traveled – April 7, 2017

Theology lessons can happen in strange places. We tend to think of them unfolding in church or Bible study, but most of the time God tends to touch us when we least expect it. One of my most memorable lessons occurred a few years ago floating in the Gulf of Mexico.

We had traveled to the beach for Spring Break as the guests of some wonderful friends. Most of the week was cool, at least too cool to really enjoy the beach. But the last day of our trip the sun was up early, and by noon it was clear that it would be perfect beach weather. By mid-afternoon we were on the beach. The kids were swimming and building sand castles, and I had one of my favorite toys: my 12-foot inflatable kayak.

I received it as a Father's Day gift several years ago. I've used it on rivers and lakes, but by far my favorite place to use it is at the beach. Its light weight and maneuverability makes it the perfect vessel for riding the surf.

That's what we were doing on that last day of Spring Break at the beach. I had taken both my younger son and my daughter out once, and we were on the second round of surf-riding. My daughter and I headed out for the last time and battled the breakers to get out to the fun spot, about 75 yards from the beach where the waves are just starting to form. We found that if you catch them just as they are starting to break at the top, the kayak literally goes airborne as it crests the wave. My daughter and I both thought this was great fun, and so we stayed out there, going a little farther out with each wave we found.

Eventually there were no more waves, and I realized how far we were from the beach. So we turned around and started making our way back in. The first good wave that we caught promised to take us a good distance back toward the beach, and it would have had the breaking wave not caught the rudder of the kayak just right. Before we knew it, the kayak had flipped and sent my daughter and I into the cold Gulf water.

As soon as my head broke the surface of the water, I looked frantically around for Emma. I quickly spotted her bright orange life jacket under the kayak. I lifted the side of the boat and pulled her to me. She was fine, though she was startled to have found herself under the capsized boat. In a matter of seconds, the kayak was out of reach, so I told her that we would let it go, and it would make its own way to the beach. I reached down as far as I could with my toes, but found no bottom. So I told Emma that we would simply ride the waves in together. I stressed to her that the situation was a good reminder of why we wear life jackets when we use the kayak and assured her that as long as she had a life jacket, she would always stay afloat.

That's when I got my theology lesson. Because the whole time I was talking to her, reassuring her, she was holding on to my arms, which were wrapped around her. She was holding my arms as if to make sure that I did not let go. Intellectually she believed me that the life jacket was there and would keep her safe. But what she really craved was the assurance of my presence, of my arms around her.

In some ways, that life jacket for Emma is/was like grace for those of us who call ourselves Christians. We know that it is there. We know that it is all around us. We know that we are the recipients of it. But what we really want, what we really crave, is the assurance of God's presence. The promise that God is with us, that God is for us, and that God will never let go.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, spent a lot of time writing and preaching about prevenient grace, the grace that God extends to us even before we come to know Christ. For Wesley, it was an important theological statement about a God who loves us long before we even know enough to love God back. But it is interesting to note that, for Wesley, the Christian journey didn't start when a person was graced by God, but rather when the believer says yes to Christ and begins to live as one who is embraced by God.

To put it another way, God's grace promises to keep us afloat. But ultimately it's our faith that promises to bring us home.

See you Sunday.