

Sermon: The Hidden Hand | Guest Preacher Sharlene McGowan | March 14, 2021 | The Fourth Sunday of Lent

In Amor Towles's novel *The Rules of Civility*, the young female protagonist, Katey, employed in a secretarial pool in 1938 New York, gets swept up in her flirtations with upward social mobility and jazz-age elegance. She eventually befriends a few of New York's wealthy socialites and moves beyond her modest social station into the glamorous world of the elite whose sole purpose, it seems, is to frequent the nightclubs and spend summers by the seaside. She becomes infatuated with a well-dressed bachelor who has an immaculate and well-appointed apartment but, as it happens, she eventually observes his home is *too* immaculate and *too* well-appointed. The spoiler alert here is that the bachelor was in a relationship with an older woman who was the *hidden hand* behind the apartment's luxurious magnificence.

When I first read this novel years ago, I became fascinated by the concept of the *hidden hand* metaphor. As time went on, I adopted this concept more deeply and came to the conclusion that I, also, have a hidden hand guiding and appointing my life. As we proceed further this morning, consider the work of the hidden hand in your own life. Chances are you, too, have ample evidence of the hidden hand's work in directing your steps.

Without the hidden hand, my life would have been a mess many times over: I have no doubt that the work of the hidden hand was behind jobs I applied for and didn't receive because there were better opportunities ahead. The hidden hand has guided relationships that I may have wished to progress but, for some reason, fizzled out only to be replaced by more sincere relationships. When I made terrible decisions somehow the decisions were made right by the hidden hand. The hidden hand has provided chance encounters which have meant everything and allowed my life to turn in a new direction as a result. The hidden hand has given me people who love me and I have loved them in return. When I was ill, I had restored health through the work of the hidden hand. The hidden hand puts me to sleep at night and wakes me in the morning. The hidden hand sustains me and supports me and fills my days with meaning and purpose. The hidden hand knows me better than I know myself: As Psalm 139 says, it goes before me and after me. It is with me in the depths of darkness and also in the wings of dawn, it calms my anxious thoughts, and leads me towards life everlasting. I did not do anything to earn the hidden hand's guidance and yet it never fails me. It is ever-present, ever-loving, ever-guiding, and ever-giving.

The hidden hand, I know for sure, is God's grace.

In our scripture at Ephesians, chapter two, Paul, while in jail, speaks about the lost condition of humankind, the loving kindness of God, and how the free gift of God's grace makes our salvation possible. Paul wants to move us to put our faith in God's merciful hands rather than in temporal governments or the fads of the day. God's plan is to save us through the free gift of Jesus Christ and we have an opportunity to rise up from spiritual sleep in the same way that Christ rose from the dead. Through this, we will receive the grace of God in our work in serving others; in other words, we are not saved *by* our good works but rather we are saved so that we can *do* good works. We do not receive the grace of God as a result of anything we have done; therefore, no one should boast about having received God's grace as if it is to say that they themselves should be credited.

One scholar notes that, in Ephesians, Paul presents God's grace through salvation to us in three ways: the *past* in verses one through three where Paul says we were spiritually dead, the *present* in verses four through six and eight and nine where Paul states that we are alive through Christ, and the *future* in verses seven and ten: the incomparable riches of God's grace through Jesus Christ creates us to do *future* good works.

It makes perfect sense when we complement the scripture from Ephesians with John's Gospel from chapter three: You may have found the first lines about Moses lifting the serpent in the wilderness to be curious; it is in reference to the Hebrew scripture at Numbers chapter twenty-one. In Numbers, Moses tells us about the impatience of those in the exodus who complained about the harshness of the wilderness. God tells Moses to place a serpent on a pole so that people might lift up their eyes at the pole and therefore choose to be saved through God's mercy. While the people in the wilderness tested God's patience, God, in turn, tested their faith and endurance but gave them a symbol which represented a way out and a way towards righteousness. Similarly, the scripture at John, chapter three, finds God telling us to lift up our eyes at the Son who was lifted up for all mankind. Just as God told the people in the wilderness to gaze upon the pole of Moses, God tells us to gaze upon Christ on the cross if we are to be saved through our faith and God's grace. John's gospel makes clear that the crucifixion was not an act of humiliation but rather exaltation, a lifting up. If we accept Christ as our Saviour, we are in relation with God Almighty and will now and forever be recipients of his grace, of the hidden hand at work in our lives.

Even in this past year which has been so difficult for most of us, the hidden hand is still at work in our lives. It sustains us, it teaches us new and creative ways of daily existence, and it gives us hope that we will be restored to and reunited with family and community. Still, I know many people are struggling and it is easy to become saddened and feel our isolation magnified. I have learned something which may help you as it helps me. I would like to share this with you so that you, too, may learn how to express a new way of calling for God's guidance, grace, and presence in your life:

Some time ago I learned about the power of journaling and, specifically, journaling through prayer and scriptural study. One of my journaling activities is called *Conversations with God* and I focus on one aspect of what I may be struggling with to read through the Bible to learn how God is directing me in that area: for example, I personally navigate fear daily and so my *Conversations with God* journal specifies my daily fears and then makes a note of the approximately one hundred and fifty times God tells us to not be afraid in his Word, the Bible. It is an exercise which provides a sure footing for navigating difficult times and it brings me closer to the hidden hand, God's grace, at work in my life. I share the *Conversations with God* journal idea with you so that it may do the same for you.

Even in our darkest moments of loneliness and fear, God is with us. His hidden hand, his grace, helps lift our heads towards faith and trust and towards the empty cross of Easter. As we navigate our own wilderness and our collective Lenten journeys, we can be sure that we benefit by God's grace now and will continue to do so forevermore through his Son, our Saviour. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Amen.