

Graceful Living

Psalm 23, II Corinthians 8: 1-15

“We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches...” II Corinthians 8: 1a

The Reverend Joanna Adams
Morningside Presbyterian Church
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Philip Yancey begins his book, *What's so Amazing About Grace?*, with a conversation overheard by a friend riding a bus. The conversation took place was between a young woman who was reading Scott Peck's *The Road Less Traveled* and a man sitting across the aisle from her. The man asked the woman what she was reading. She said, “This is a book somebody gave me. I think it's going to change my life.”

“Oh, yeah?” the man asked. “What's it about?”

She said, “I'm not sure. Some sort of guide to life. I haven't gotten very far in it.” She began flipping the pages. “Here are the chapter titles: Discipline, Love, Grace...”

The man stopped her. “What's grace?” he asked.

“I don't know,” the woman answered. “I haven't gotten to Grace yet.” (1)

Grace is the place we begin in the Christian Church. While many words lose their luster from overuse, the word “grace” and its derivatives “graceful” and “gracious” are words that

perennially shine with meaning. (2) When I say a ballet dancer is graceful, you see what I mean. When I say a person is a gracious host, you get what I am trying to say.

What is grace? In his wonderful book *Wishful Thinking*, Fredrick Buechner writes that “grace is something you never get but only are given. There is no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth.” (3)

Grace is a gift. One of my favorite illustrations on this subject comes from another book by Scott Peck, who died recently. He tells of a man from another part of the country but who was driving through the southeastern United States late one night. He was hungry and decided to stop at an all night diner he saw along the highway. He pulled in, got out of his car, went inside, and sat at the counter. The waitress came over and asked him what he wanted. He said that he would like scrambled eggs and a cup of coffee. In a few minutes, the waitress placed a steaming cup of coffee down beside him and a plate filled with food. On the plate were scrambled eggs and a mound of some white stuff, the nature of which he knew nothing about. “What’s that?” he asked her.

“Oh that’s grits,” she said.

“I didn’t order grits,” he said.

She answered, “Honey, don’t nobody order grits. Grits just comes.”

And so it is with grace. Sometimes it shows up in the form of forgiveness, sometimes in the shape of a challenge that leads you to do something you never thought you could do.

Sometimes grace can be as mundane as a latte at Starbucks in the middle of a busy morning.

Sometimes grace appears in the sight of the late afternoon sun bathing the side of a white brick building in light. Remember the Presbyterian minister in Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It*? The narrator says of his preacher father: "My father was very sure about certain matters pertaining to the universe. To him all good things – trout as well as eternal salvation -- come by grace..."

Grace. It is the most important thing. It is the first thing we need to know about the nature of human life and the nature of the God who gave us life in the first place. In our daily lives and in the face of the greatest challenges of life, grace breaks through and reminds us that there are deeper lasting realities that will support us all the day long and will be with us after we have crossed to the other side.

The other day I took off the shelf the heaviest book that I own. It is called *The Exhaustive Concordance*. Now I know that people are not lining up at Borders to buy an exhaustive concordance, but preachers can't live without them. It's an alphabetical index of every word that appears in the Bible. The word grace appears many, many times in the Bible.

John the Evangelist describes Jesus as the Word made flesh, who lived among us, "and we have seen his glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth... from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." (John 1: 14, 16)

In Romans, Paul writes that there are no distinctions among human beings, that we all “have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, but we are now justified by God’s grace as a gift through the redemption that is ours in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 3:23-24) If you wanted to find one word to describe the nature of God and the way God relates to the world and all the people in it, that word would be grace.

“We want you to know, brothers and sisters about the grace of God,” Paul writes to the Corinthians. If I had been they, I would have sat up straight and started to prepare myself for a theological analysis of the divine nature- ontology, soteriology, sanctification, justification, those esoteric kind of things, but Paul is not interested in the abstract here. He brings God’s grace immediately down to earth. Astonishingly, he writes about the members of the struggling little churches in Macedonia and how much money they were putting in the offering plate! He wants the church members in Corinth to know about God’s grace, and in order to do so, he describes the generosity of the people of God in Macedonia. God’s self-giving is not passively received. It generates transformation. (4)

You will never see the usually dour apostle giddier with enthusiasm than he is here in this 8th chapter of II Corinthians. The churches in Macedonia, the first area outside of Asia Minor to have received the gospel, those churches had undergone some sort of severe ordeal, the nature of which we do not know. And yet, the combination of their extreme affliction and their grace-generated joy resulted in, of all things, an overflow of generosity. Call it the release of “spiritual adrenaline.” God’s grace, a deep need, and a joyful, hopeful outlook on life, regardless of circumstances: that’s a mixture that can change both the human heart and the world.

I remember visiting several Presbyterian churches in the early 1980's in the African nation of Ghana. At the time, that country was going through extreme affliction. We often visited in the homes of Presbyterian church members. Usually, we, the guests, would eat, and our hosts would not. At first I thought, "Isn't this a nice custom. I'm just not familiar with it." We would be served. We would have great conversation. We would laugh together. But our hosts were not actually eating with us. Later, I learned they did not eat, because there was not enough food to go around. When we would leave their homes, we would be given beautiful gifts for ourselves and gifts to take back to our congregation. Once I protested, "No thank you. Your hospitality has been more than enough."

The wife of the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ghana insisted that we take the gifts, saying, "If we do not practice being generous when we have little, how will we remember to be generous when we have more?" Her words revealed to me that I was indeed dealing with customs with which I was not familiar. I did not live in a culture; we do not live in a culture, where it really is more blessed to give than to receive. We live in a culture that is obsessed with the self: how much we can get, how much we can accumulate, what status symbols we can put together. I wondered if God had bestowed more divine grace upon Ghanaian Christians than American Christians, but then I decided that we are simply in more spiritual trouble than many Christians in the Third-World. We have become impoverished by our relative affluence and are often unable to receive the grace that God so freely offers. We deny ourselves the liberating joy that comes from knowing that God can be trusted and that there will always be enough.

Last Sunday night, we had a dinner in our fellowship hall in celebration of the 26th anniversary of the Clifton Night Shelter. That evening, Bill Bolling from the Atlanta Community Food Bank said something I have heard him say many times before. “There is plenty of food. There is plenty of housing. There are two causes of hunger and homelessness. The first is fear, and the second is greed. People are afraid that they will not have enough. Others are greedy because they worry that they can never get enough.”

The irony of Paul’s writing what he did to the Corinthians was that they had plenty. They were the rich ones. The Macedonian Christians could hardly afford to pay the light bill. I think of the story of a church in England. The roof needed repairing. The congregation gathered. A wealthy member of the church stood up and said that he would donate five pounds to the roof repair. As he sat back down, a piece of ceiling fell and hit him on the head. He staggered back up and said, “Alright, alright, I’ll make it 50 pounds.”

When another member heard that, he shouted out, “Hit him again, Lord! Hit him again!”

It is tempting, this time of year, for pastors to get into our “hit them again” mode. We want you to know about the grace of God, but we also want you to know about the need. I want you to know that on Thursday, the parking lot on the west side of our church caved in. I want you to know that there are thirty-one leaks in the roof of the sanctuary and around this building. I want you to know that we have the strongest church staff in Atlanta, but I am the only member of this staff that works full time. There are many program needs, and our staff members work at sacrificial wage levels. There is an enormous calling for us to respond more deeply in the area of mission and outreach in Atlanta and throughout the world. I want

you to know that we have financial needs of the highest order, but the more important thing for you to know is that divine grace is inexhaustible and will never, ever run out. The more important thing to know is that because God is so good and so gracious, you have the opportunity to live in a more free and joyful way. You need to give, not only because the church needs the resources of your energy and time and financial resources, but because you need, before you die, to know what it is like to experience “graceful living, the fullness of life that God offers. . . The Navajo people have an expression that I like, ‘walking in beauty,’ that describes the way of living I’m talking about. Wouldn’t it be wonderful to replace the fear of not having enough or the desire that you always have to have more with a sense that God’s grace is entirely sufficient for your needs and that your own choices can allow that grace to create wholeness in your own life?” (5)

There is a great story in the 36th chapter of Exodus describing the construction of the tabernacle. The priests explain to the people the extent of the project, the extent of the need, and ask them to please bring supplies and resources. They bring gold, and silver, and jewelry and all kinds of things. The offering far exceeds the priests’ expectations. Every day people show up with more gifts. The passage ends, “And so, the people had to be restrained from giving, for what they had brought already was more than enough to do all the work.”

I saw a similar spirit with us here at Morningside after Katrina. I will never forget the day I walked into the Session room and saw supplies: clothing, medical supplies, disposable diapers stacked up to the ceiling. I know that the spirit of generosity is alive and well here, and I am hoping that the day will come that you will be begging me, just as the people in Macedonia begged Paul, literally **begged** him for the privilege of sharing in the ministry of the saints.

Grace is the first and most important thing. I close with one more story, this one about a monk, who in his travel, once found a precious stone. “One day he met a traveler in need and when the monk opened his bag to share his provisions with the stranger, the stranger saw the precious jewel shining in the monk’s bag and said to the monk, ‘Please give that to me.’ The monk gave the jewel to the traveler, and he departed overjoyed with the unexpected gift worth enough to provide him with wealth and security the rest of his life. A few days later, however, he came back in search of the monk. He found him and gave him back the precious stone. He said, ‘Here is your jewel back. In exchange, would you please give me something more precious than this stone, as valuable as it is? I would like for you to give me that which enabled you to give it to me.’” (6)

“We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God. . .” With God’s grace, everything that is lasting and good and true begins. Someone wise has said, “The final work of grace is to make us gracious.” Lord, may it be so.

(1) Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* Zondervan Publishing House, 1997, p. 29.

(2) Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, Harper & Row, 1973, .33-34.

(3) Ibid.

(4) *Interpretation*, January, 2003.

(5) Laura Dunham, *Graceful Living*, 2001, p. iii.

(6) K. C. Ptomey, “The Church is Not a Charity,” Westminster Presbyterian Church, Nashville, Tennessee, May 17, 1998.

