

The Meaning of Grace
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To begin the new year, I want to preach a series of sermons on some of the distinguishing marks of Protestantism, that branch of the Christian tradition in which Presbyterians find our home. To be a Protestant is not to be against something. The word “Protestant” comes from two Latin roots which mean “to testify on behalf of something.” Protestantism testifies to at least these six core convictions that we will focus on in the weeks ahead. Today, we will examine the centrality of the grace of God in the life of faith. Next week, we will look at the authority of Scripture, then, the sovereignty of God, the priesthood of all believers, the life of the mind, and finally, the necessity of worship.

I have planned this series for several reasons. The first and most basic is that I have recently re-read an excellent book by a marvelous theologian named Robert MacAfee Brown entitled *The Spirit of Protestantism*. The second reason is that I believe that many who understand themselves to be Protestants, as distinct from, say, Catholic or Pentecostal, would be hard pressed to say what a Protestant actually is or what Protestants believe. By Valentine’s Day, I hope at least some who fall in that category here will

have grown in your understanding of the great tradition in which you stand.

The third reason is that there are so many people today who do not have clarity about their religious identity. They were either not raised in the church or were raised in the church but now feel as if they no longer fit in the tradition in which they were brought up. Many have moved away from belief and want to believe again. Many are on a genuine quest for a Christian message that engages the mind as well as the heart, for a system of religious meaning that has depth, breadth, and staying power and that will enable them to ground their lives and engage their society from a perspective of faith and hope.

I do not know where you are coming from today. But if you are a person who is seeking new religious meaning and a deeper understanding of what it means to follow Christ in the twenty-first century and to be a part of the great Christian tradition that is Protestantism, then I hope you will accompany me on the journey on which we embark today.

So, where do we begin? In good Protestant fashion, we begin, not with ourselves and our needs. We begin with God. “We start with a description of what God has done and what God is doing. How do we know what God has done and is doing? We see both of those things most clearly and most fully in Jesus Christ. When we start with Christ, we find that God is first and last

a gracious God and that Protestantism is first and last a religion of grace . . .

Grace is the most important word in the vocabulary of the Christian faith.”

(1)

Grace is an idea, of course, not unique to Christianity. Hinduism, in particular, has a long grace tradition, associated with various deities. But what is unique about the Christian understanding is that grace is more than a divine attribute. Grace is not only something we say about God and the nature of God. Grace is an event. Grace is not a what but a who. Grace is “the entrance of God into history” (2)

What does John say? “Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ... In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God... and the Word became flesh and lived among us...and of his fullness we have all received.” What was Christ full of? The grace of God, “grace upon grace.” “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only son, close to the father’s heart who makes God known.” (John 1:1ff.)

I’m trying here. I’m trying with my words. But grace really cannot be described with words. It can only be experienced. All we can only describe what we have experienced. (3) What did the world experience in Christ Jesus? The world experienced the undeserved, unearned, transforming favor of God.

Jesus Christ: full of the grace of God, which is not to say that God began to be gracious only when Christ was born, that prior to the incarnation, God was a different God, full of wrath, judgment, anger, and the need for retribution. To make that claim is to say that the God of the New Testament is different from the God of the Old Testament, and if you say that, you have stepped out of the Christian tradition altogether, because the Christian tradition, just as the Jewish tradition, has this as the central claim: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.” We do not worship two gods. We worship one God. The God who was the sovereign Lord of Abraham and Sarah and Miriam and Moses is no different from the God revealed in our savior Jesus Christ. The God who guided the maji to the manger is the same God who guided the children of Israel through the wilderness.

God’s gracious choosing of the Hebrew people and indeed, this broken world in Christ Jesus, has nothing to do with anyone’s ever deserving to be chosen. It has to do God’s very nature. God loves with a steadfast love and acts on our behalf because of who God is. The great Lutheran preacher and theologian, Joseph Sittler, clarifies this point about God and grace and the birth of Jesus this way, when he writes, “Jesus, the manger child, was the incarnation of grace, not the inventor or originator of grace.” (4)

What is grace? Words cannot say. We can only describe what we have experienced. And what we experience in Jesus Christ and continue to experience as his spirit is on the loose in the world is God's way of acting toward us, which is marked by mercy and forgiveness. When we can receive divine mercy and forgiveness through the power of God's Spirit, those two gifts are transformed into energy to love and live into the new creation God intends for us to be. Paul puts it this way: "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which He has loved us, though we could do nothing to help ourselves, were dead in our trespasses, God made us alive with Christ- by grace you have been saved- it's not your doing; it is the gift of God- not the result of works- so that no one may boast." (Ephesians 2:4ff.)

I read that in a major survey of what Americans believe, 56% of the respondents said that the words "God helps those who help themselves" come directly from the scripture. (5) They actual come from *Poor Richard's Almanac*, and Ben Franklin got them from *Aesop's Fables*.

The Biblical principle is the exact opposite of "God helps those who help themselves." The Bible says, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." The Bible says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Has anybody in this congregation ever tried to be a better person and failed? Sometimes we make resolutions about these kinds

of things this time of year. Have you ever made a promise to yourself to do it right this time and then not kept the promise? I don't know about this kind of thing personally, but I understand that there are people in this world who wrestle regularly with the demon of perfectionism. What a perfect way to drive yourself and everybody else around you crazy. Perfectionism is just another way of believing that if you work hard enough and try hard enough, and do good things often enough, you will earn your own salvation. You will earn four gold stars on the chart that is being kept up to date on the wall of heaven by the See-All-Things, Know-All Things Teacher in the Sky whom you must please, lest you be sent to the cloakroom to pound chalk dust out of blackboard erasers for all eternity.

Or worse.

I love the story of the good Presbyterian who died and found himself at the pearly gates. "Name, please," Saint Peter asked.

"Sam Smith."

"Hmm, I don't believe I find your name on the list."

"Well, I've been a Presbyterian all my life, baptized, confirmed. I chaired church committees, for heaven's sake. I believe in salvation through grace."

"Sorry, you're name is not on the list. You've got to go to hell."

Sam Smith arrived in hell and noticed two distinguished looking gentlemen sitting in the corner. Approaching one he said, “Excuse me, sir, but who might you be?”

“John Calvin,” the man answered.

“John Calvin, one of the co-founders of the Protestant Reformation? What are you doing in hell?”

“Ask him,” Calvin said, pointing to the guy sitting close by.

“Who are you?”

“Oh, I’m Martin Luther.”

“The other father of the Protestant Reformation? The great articulator of the doctrine of salvation by grace alone? What are you doing here?”

“Well, it turns out it was good works after all.” (6)

No one in the history of the Christian church ever struggled with the tension between grace and work with more intensity than Martin Luther. No matter how much he tried, he was tormented by the belief that he would never be good enough. He joined a religious order when he was a young man and became a monk, but that did nothing to alleviate his sense of inadequacy in the presence of God. In 1545, a year before his death, he wrote, “However irreproachable a life I live as a monk, I still felt myself in the presence of God to be a sinner. I could not believe that I ever pleased him.” But there

was a moment, as Luther read Paul's words in the letter to the Romans –“For in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith . . . for the righteous shall live by faith” when he got it. It was as if the tumblers of his mind and spirit finally fell into place. The door unlocked, and he walked into a state of grace. Never again did he feel as if he was condemned by God, but that in spite of his flawed human nature, God had made him pure and whole. “At last, I understood,” he wrote, “the justice of God as being that by which the just person lives as a gift from God . . . I felt myself to have entered through open gates into paradise itself.” (7) Grace. That is the word for Luther's shining moment of insight, or as happens to most of the rest of us, the gradual realization that one does not have to earn acceptance by God or salvation from God. In Jesus Christ, God does all the heavy lifting.

The grace of Christ is our bridge into the heart of the divine, but we are not the ones who make the crossing. It is God in Christ who comes all the way for us. And once we can accept our salvation, we are transformed and find ourselves wanting to live lives marked by integrity and honor. We are able to accept the imperfections of those around us, because we have remembered that we are all saved by grace. Grace is not a license to do what we please. We remember W.H. Auden's famous words, “Every crook will

agree: I like committing crimes. God likes forgiving them. Really the world is admirably arranged.” No, that approach fails to take into account the costliness of grace. Christ endured the cross to make grace real for us and to transform us into the new creation God intends us to be.

The early Protestant thinkers made a distinction between what they called common grace and what is called special grace. Common grace is that state of being into which all of us are born and by which we are blessed throughout our lives. Common grace is all around us: a cloudless day, a songbird on the branch of a tree outside your window, a safe landing after a bumpy ride on an airplane, a good laugh, an unexpected experience of delight in the midst of a busy day. All of this is common grace. It returns to us again and again and again. There is a story told about a ship that was in distress because the supply of fresh water for the crew members had been depleted and everyone on board was desperate and thirsty. Finally, they saw another ship on the horizon and signaled the distress signal to that other ship with a light. The other ship sent back the message, “Dip it up.” The captain of the ship thought, “How ridiculous. Why dip up salt water when we’re all dying of thirst?” He signaled distress again. The same answer came back. Finally, the bucket was lowered. When the thirsty crew pulled it up and

tasted the water, they discovered it was fresh water. They had thought they were lost on the high seas, but they actually were at the mouth of a river. No matter where you are, no matter what distress you find yourself in, there will be a sufficiency of grace to get you through. You will find that there will be enough. Grace upon grace: that is the promise that comes to us through the Christian faith. I know some of you find what I'm saying to be hard to swallow. You find it easier to believe in a God who's out to get you than a God who wants to give you something. You find it easier to conceive of a hard-edged universe than one that is governed by the principles of redemptive love and unconditional acceptance. I ask you today, for the sake of Jesus Christ, try to bring yourself to receive the grace of God.

There's a wonderful novel written by a man named Ron Hanson entitled *Atticus*. The title character is a businessman who is active in his parish and is successful in his life, but what has broken his heart has been his son, Scott, an artistically gifted but self-destructive young man. The father's unwillingness to give up on his son and his capacity to forgive are the two axles that move the story forward. Toward the end of the novel, Scott is in prison in Mexico. Atticus and Scott's girlfriend are at the prison waiting to see Scott. The girlfriend goes over to the Coke machine and buys two Coca Colas. She hands one to the desperate father. She says to him, "You know,

Atticus, when I was in college, I heard a story about a father who was pursuing a son who had run away. Indeed, he had gone so far, it was if he had gone to another world. The father called out, 'Please come back.'

The son looked across the great gulf that lay between them and shouted to his father, 'I can't go that far.'

The father said, 'Then just try to meet me half way.'

The boy replied, 'I can't even do that.'

Finally, the father shouted, 'Then, come as far as you can. I'll come the rest of the way and meet you wherever you are.'" (8)

We tell a similar story in the Christian tradition. We call it the Gospel. It is the hope of all who acknowledge the insufficiency of human goodness and gratefully receive the everlasting grace of almighty God. Amen.

Man is born broken. He lives by mending. The grace of God is glue.

Eugene O'Neill

Notes:

(1) Robert McAfee Brown, *The Spirit of Protestantism*, Oxford University Press, Reprinted by Viking Press, 1965, p. 53

- (2) Brian A. Gerrish, "Sovereign Grace," Interpretation, January 2003, p.45.
- (3) Brown, p.53.
- (4) Joseph Sittler, *Gravity and Grace*
- (5) Gerrish, p. 56.
- (6) K. C. Ptomey, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Nashville, TN, 2/16/97.
- (7) *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol.14, 1971, pp. 437-438.
- (8) Ron Hansen, *Atticus*, Harper Collins, 1996, p.244.