

Prevenient Grace

Acts 16:13-14; 17:4; I Corinthians 9:22; June 15, 2008
I Thessalonians 2:13; John 6:44

One of Jesus' stories about grace is the story about the wedding banquet a dad tried to throw for his daughter and how a bunch of people he didn't know being invited as a result of so many of his friends, relatives and neighbors declining the invitation to attend because of a variety of excuses. Its significance is noted by it being included in three different Gospels. But perhaps one of the best versions is the one reported in a *Boston Globe* account back in 1990. Philip Yancey included it in his book What's So Amazing About Grace?

A woman and her fiancé agreed to hold their wedding reception in the downtown Boston Hyatt. They went to the Hyatt one day to make their final decisions regarding the menu for their meal and to make other final arrangements. They chose the china and silver they wanted to use as well as the flower arrangements. Since they both had fairly expensive tastes their estimated final bill amounted to thirteen thousand dollars. They wrote a check for half that amount since that was the amount required as a down payment. Then they went home to wade through wedding announcement books.

Well, when the day came for the announcements to be sent the future groom announced that he thought they should take a little more time. It was an angry and hurt fiancée that went to the Hyatt the next morning to cancel the banquet. The Events Manager couldn't have been more supportive as she offered: 'The same thing happened to me, Honey.' She then went on to share her own story of a broken engagement.

When she was done with her story though, she broke the bad news to the disappointed bride. "The contract is binding. You're only entitled to thirteen hundred dollars back. You have two options: to forfeit the rest of the down payment, or go ahead with the banquet. I'm sorry. Really, I am."

The jilted bride began to think about her options and the crazy idea popped into her head to go ahead with a banquet. Oh, it wouldn't be a wedding reception like she had planned, but her plans were to throw quite a party.

Up until ten years before she had lived in a homeless shelter. She had obviously turned her life around to the point that she had a really good paying job and had accumulated quite a sizeable savings. So, she decided that her party was going to be for those who were where she had been – the down-and-outs of Boston. It was June of 1990 when the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Boston served as the host to one of the most unbelievable parties ever.

"In honor of the groom" the menu was changed to include boneless chicken. Invitations were sent to rescue missions and homeless shelters. It was a warm summer night when people who were used to eating half-gnawed pizza off of cardboard dined on chicken cordon bleu. *Hors d'oeuvres* were served by tuxedo clad waiters to seniors that had to use crutches and walkers to hold themselves up. "Bag ladies, vagrants, and addicts took one night off from the hard life on the sidewalks outside and instead sipped champagne, ate chocolate wedding cake, and danced to big-band melodies late into the night."¹

Grace – God's grace – is **that** amazing! It's hard to fathom. John Wesley's exploration of its meaning for himself and attempts at explaining his understanding of it has probably done more for the whole of Christianity than anything else he ever pondered. Wesley believed that God provides us with three kinds of grace:

prevenient or preparing, justifying or accepting, and sanctifying or sustaining. Together they are an outline of Wesley's beliefs about the way of salvation. Today we are considering the one we are probably most familiar with but don't know it by its theological name. Most of us when we use the word grace are referencing that which God offers us but which we don't deserve or haven't done anything to earn – that is: prevenient grace. While most of us aren't familiar with the word, it's the grace we most have in mind when we use the word grace. While we don't use the word very often, we celebrate its reality every time we share in the baptism of a child.

One of my favorite pastoral calls is visiting new parents who are thinking or planning on having their baby baptized. I begin the conversation by asking them to share with me and with one another why they want to have their child baptized – what baptism means to them – what they believe happens when a child is baptized. I try to assure them that I am not looking for a correct answer – I just want them to share what their perspective on it is.

And they share: about how they believe baptism means that their child will become a child of God in a new way – that they want to raise the child in the life of the church and want her or him to be part of the body of Christ – that they want their baby to go to heaven – that they want to recognize that their child is part of the church family – that they are committing themselves to being involved in the church - that they really don't have any idea other than it's their understanding of what is supposed to happen or that they want to please their parents.

Then I talk a bit about the wide range of understandings about baptism – including the ones they mentioned – that some folks understand it to be a washing away of original sin - that there are some denominations that believe it's a washing away of sin – that there are some denominations that teach that it is something that symbolizes a being born again and should be done after a person comes to Christ and not as an infant.

I then share with them that there was a time in my life when I didn't believe in infant baptism – a time when I wasn't sure of the validity of my own baptism. As I've shared before I was profoundly influenced at the time by a parachurch group that held that belief.

Then I tell them about the time when I was in a seminary class and someone asked the professor why we United Methodists practice infant baptism. And then I admit to them that it was so long ago that I'm not sure who really said it, but the way I remember it is that the professor said something like: “We believe baptism to be a sign of God's activity, not ours. That is, we believe that baptism is a reminder to the church gathered, the family and friends, that God is saying to us and through us the babies that we baptize that he is going to be working in the lives of children forever, every day, attempting to bring them to the place where they say yes for themselves. Confirmation is the ceremony where we recognize our decision. Baptism is God's statement to us – God's yes to us.” Baptism is a reminder of the grace that comes before – before our yes.

Prevenient grace is that which comes before – it's that which God offers before we acknowledge God in our lives – it's that which prepares us to make the decision to go the distance with God.

In Dr. Raymond Osborne's talk on Prevenient Grace at a 2005 Emmaus Walk he noted: “Prevenient Grace is the courtship period of our relationship to God. It is a time when God is reaching out to us, maybe getting our attention and helping us see that a relationship between God and ourselves is a very natural relationship. God kind of woos us into this relationship of grace, and this wooing can be done through other people, the church, or circumstances. God offers us a firsthand experience with himself. This relationship is more, far more than a

relationship with another Christian, or group, or event. God offers us a fresh, alive, get down and get personal type of relationship. God begins to woo us from the moment of conception into this dynamic loving relationship.

“Prevenient Grace is also a kind of grace that prevents us from moving so far from God that we cannot respond to his offer of love. The prodigal son story teaches us that we are never so far away from God that (God) cannot see us. We are never so far away from God that (God) will not welcome us home with outstretched arms and then throw us a party when we come home.”²

Prevenient Grace is that which comes before we realize we need it. Mom and/or dad taking us to church or praying with us is a form of prevenient grace – God’s working in us before we say yes. Some reference the activity of the conscience – a convicting of sin – thoughts that suggest to us that we need to change our ways. It’s preliminary grace – preventive grace. “In prevenient grace we see God loving, caring, and working in (our lives, leading us) to repentance, sometimes tenderly, sometimes strongly, more or less as (we are) able to hear.”³

Wesley himself wrote in his sermon on “Working Out Our Own Salvation,” “Salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) *preventing grace*; including the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning (God’s) will, and the first slight transient conviction of having sinned against (God).”⁴

In another Walk to Emmaus spiritual retreat sermon, Karl Sokol noted: “God calls us. God puts us in situations where, if we but open our eyes, we can see God right before us. God uses other people to invite us into relationship, to be Jesus for us. God draws us in close, with the fruits of God’s love.”⁵

Basically, prevenient grace can be best summed up with a phrase Rudy Rasmus, pastor of St. John’s United Methodist Church in Houston, Texas, started his first sermon with this past week at Annual Conference. He invited us to turn to a person beside us and say: “I love you and there’s nothing you can do about it.” God’s prevenient grace is God saying to us in as many ways as we can possibly hear it: “I love you and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

One of my favorite authors, preachers, and theologians, Frederick Buechner, says about grace in his book Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC: “After centuries of handling and mishandling, most religious words have become so shopworn nobody’s much interested any more. Not so with *grace*, for some reason. Mysteriously, even derivatives like *gracious* and *graceful* still have some of the bloom left.

“Grace is something you can never get but only be given. There’s 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.

“A good sleep is grace and so are good dreams. Most tears are grace. The smell of rain is grace. Somebody loving you is grace. Loving somebody is grace. Have you ever *tried* to love somebody?

“A crucial eccentricity of the Christian faith is the assertion that people are saved by grace. There’s nothing *you* have to do. There’s nothing you *have* to do. There’s nothing you have to *do*.

“The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you *are* because the party wouldn’t have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will

happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you.

"There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it.

"Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too."⁶

Prevenient grace is what God offers to bring us to faith. It is God's unconditional love which attempts to awaken in us the desire, the will, to respond to God. It is undeserved but offered to us all anyway. It is experienced when we suddenly become aware of the beauty in nature – when we are cared for by our parents or our children – when we are present in worship – when we read the scriptures or say our prayers or have a thought that causes us to wonder about God, our relationship with God, or be assured that God is or reconsider doing something or saying something because our conscience gets pricked. It is God's prevenient grace that warms our hearts and causes us even right now perhaps to consider the invitation to Christian discipleship this morning. If you've never received it, God's grace – God's offer of forgiveness – how about doing so this morning? If you have at another point in your life but sense you've been living life in neutral, how about recommitting yourself this morning to accepting God's offer again and recommitting yourself to a closer walk with God?

Let us pray.

1. Philip Yancey, What's So Amazing About Grace? (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977), pp. 48-49.
2. Dr. Raymond Osborne, Prevenient Grace – An Emmaus Walk Sermon (Weekly Blog of Dr. Raymond Osborne), February 4, 2005.
3. Robert L. Brush, "Prevenient Grace."
4. John Wesley, Works of Wesley (Ohio: Schmuel Publishers, 1978), Vol. 6, p. 509.
5. Karl Sokol, "The Amazing Prevenient Grace," Preachykeen.
6. Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 33-34.