

The Graciousness of God

Ephesians 1:3-14

July 12, 2009

There's a story told of a time when evangelist Billy Graham was caught speeding in a small southern town. He immediately admitted his guilt but was told by the police officer that he would still have to appear in court.

When he appeared in court the judge asked him if he was guilty or not guilty. Graham again pleaded guilty. The judge then said: "That will be ten dollars – a dollar for every mile you went over the speed limit."

It was only then that the judge looked up and recognized the famous minister before him. He then added, "You have violated the law. The fine must be paid – but I am going to pay it for you." He then took a ten dollar bill out of his own wallet and attached it to the ticket. Following the proceedings he took Graham out for a steak dinner. Graham used his experience later by noting: "And that is how God treats repentant sinners!"¹

Charles Spurgeon and Joseph Parker were two well-known preachers during the 19th century. At one time they served in London at the same time. Parker commented one day about the poor condition of the children who were admitted to an orphanage connected to Spurgeon's church. The way the story was told to Spurgeon however was that Parker had criticized the orphanage and its care of children.

The next Sunday Spurgeon let Parker have it from his pulpit. It was obvious that a war of words was developing. The local newspapers picked up on it and the situation between the two pulpit giants was the talk of the town.

People flocked to Parker's church the next Sunday expecting him to have a go at Spurgeon.

When Parker went to the pulpit he announced, "I understand that Dr. Spurgeon is not in his pulpit today. It is also my understanding that this is the Sunday they usually take up an offering for the orphanage. I suggest that we receive a love offering here today instead."

Those present were delighted. It's reported that the ushers had to empty the collection plates three times.

Later in the week Spurgeon went to see Parker in his study. Spurgeon said to Parker: "You know, Parker, you have practiced grace on me. You have given me not what I deserved, but what I needed."²

Fiorello LaGuardia was the mayor of New York City during some of the worst days of the Great Depression and all of World War II. He was adoringly called "the Little Flower" by the people of New York because he stood only five foot four and always wore a carnation in his lapel.

He was a colorful character. Sometimes he would ride the New York City fire trucks. Sometimes he would go with the police when they raided the speakeasies. He would take entire orphanages to a baseball game. Once he went on the radio during a newspaper strike and read the comics to the children.

One really cold night in January of 1935 he showed up at night court in the poorest ward of the city and dismissed the judge for the evening, taking over the bench himself. A tattered old woman was brought before him. She was charged with stealing a loaf of bread. Her daughter was sick and her grandchildren were

starving. But the shopkeeper, from whom she stole the bread, refused to drop the charges stating: "It's a real bad neighborhood, your Honor. She's got to be punished to teach other people around here a lesson."

LaGuardia sighed as if deep in thought. Finally, he turned to the woman and said, "I've got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions – ten dollars or ten days in jail."

But, even as he was pronouncing the sentence he was reaching into his pocket. He took out a ten dollar bill and tossed it into his famous sombrero saying: "Here is the ten dollar fine which I now remit; and furthermore I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant."

The following day the newspapers reported that \$47.50 was turned over to the bewildered woman who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren, fifty cents of it being contributed by the red-faced grocery store owner, while some seventy petty criminals, people with traffic violations, and New York City police officers, each of whom paid fifty cents and then gave the mayor a standing ovation.³

"Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see.

"'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved; how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed.

"Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come; 'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.

"The Lord has promised good to me, his word my hope secures; he will my shield and portion be, as long as life endures."

John Newton penned the words to this wonderful hymn. He was a minister in the Church of England at the time. But, prior to becoming a Christian minister he was a sailor who was kicked out of the British navy because he was, to put it mildly, one bad dude. He became a sea captain of a merchant ship like his father before him. The cargo of his ship was slaves. He was a cruel shipmaster who profited from the selling of human flesh. While slave trading was a real moneymaker for him, it was a wretched and miserable life for the slaves. They were brutalized in body and spirit.

One of the stories about what caused the change in Newton is that on one of those long voyages he discovered in a sea chest a book by Thomas O'Kempis. Newton's mother died when he was only six years old. She was a devout Christian and she used those six years to plant some seeds of faith. Following a terrible storm that struck fear in everyone on Newton's ship, including him, he began to think about his need for God. He wrote of this turning point, "I can see no reason why God singled me out for mercy, unless it was to show, by one astonishing instance, that with God nothing is impossible."

John Wesley had written a pamphlet in 1774 condemning slave trade as an abomination in the sight of God. Newton read the pamphlet and was convicted of the moral wrongness of slavery. He was haunted by the memory of wretched human stench on board his slave ship. The lavishness of God's grace was indeed amazing

as far as Newton was concerned when he looked over the life he lived and the healed man he'd become. The only way he could explain the change that had taken place in his life was to point to God's amazing grace.⁴

Some of the words which make up our religious language suffer from overuse. That is, they have been used so much or so inappropriately they've largely lost their meaning – their power. Not so grace. The concept still thrills us – still moves us to marvel. The thought of a good God actively seeking us – sinful, weak, sorrowful, lonely, miserable people that we are – that's a concept we want to understand and accept and experience and believe.

Frederick Buechner offers in his book Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC: "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 is 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."

And then Buechner closes his mini-theology lecture with: "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."⁵

Another way it's been explained is: "When a person works an eight-hour day and receives a fair day's pay for his time, that is a wage. When a person competes with an opponent and receives a trophy for his performance, that is a prize. When a person receives appropriate recognition for his long service or high achievements, that is an award. But when a person is not capable of earning a wage, can win no prize, and deserves no award – yet receives such a gift anyway – that is a good picture of God's unmerited favor. This is what we mean when we talk about the grace of God."⁶

The letter to the Ephesians was written by Paul while he was in prison. In the original Greek the portion read for us this morning was one very long, single sentence – a 220-word run-on sentence written by a man who had formerly persecuted those in the early church but who was now so excited about his new found understanding of God and Jesus that he couldn't even stop long enough to throw in a comma or two! It's believed that the reason it was written that way was because Paul was so filled with emotion about the wonderfulness of God's activity on our behalf that the examples of God's graciousness just kept tumbling out of him. The passage takes on this almost lyrical song of praise. It's a litany of those things which reveal God's gracious nature to us – each phrase chosen to capture a storehouse of evidence of God's gracious work in our lives. One commentator wrote about the passage: "Paul's mind goes on and on, not because he is thinking in logical stages, but because gift after gift and wonder after wonder from God pass before his eyes and enter into his mind."⁷

Grace is amazing because it goes against every grain of common sense we hold dear. Common sense reminds us that we are too weak, too harassed, too human to change for the better. Grace births within us the power to send us on our way to being better persons despite all we know wrong with ourselves.

The graciousness of God is amazing! That's what so excited Paul – that's what kept him going despite all the hardships he had to endure. Prison was nothing in comparison to the hope of heaven – in comparison to being chosen by God – in comparison to being a member of God's family through adoption – in comparison to unmerited forgiveness.

A wealthy elder in a church often quoted the phrase: "You can't out give God." His remark is similar to one made by another generous giver who, when asked if he was not in danger of "beggaring" himself through multiple gifts, replied: "Not at all. I shovel out and God shovels in, and God uses a bigger shovel than I do. And God started the shoveling first."

There's a favorite illustration of mine concerning this truth about God's grace. Actually, I've read several different versions of it over the years. The version I've most recently seen is supposedly a true story of a priest in the Philippines. This priest was a much loved man who carried though a burden of a secret sin he had committed many years before. He had repented but still he had no peace, no sense of God's forgiveness.

In his parish was a woman who deeply loved God and who claimed to have visions during which she spoke with Christ and he with her. The priest was however, skeptical. To test her he said, "The next time you speak with Christ, I want you to ask him what sin your priest committed while he was in seminary." The woman agreed to do so.

A few days later the priest asked, "Well, did Christ visit you in your dreams?"

The woman replied, "Yes, he did."

"And did you ask him what sin I committed in seminary?"

"Yes."

"Well, what did he say?"

The woman looked the priest in the eye and said, "He said, 'I don't remember.'"

Grace – amazing grace – God's grace – grace greater than all our sin. My sense is that all of us are in need of it's healing quality - in need of the new life believing in God's grace in our lives can birth – in need of knowing that we too are adopted into God's family. God wants to bestow – wants to put inside every one of us a sense of worthiness – a sense of peace – a sense of hope – a sense of joy. God wants to do this for everyone of us even when we don't feel worthy enough – even though we don't deserve it. God's grace will heal us from our anger – will forgive us of our sins – will release us from the stranglehold of guilt.

All we have to do is accept the gift offered. God's grace is a free gift – that's what makes it so amazing.

1. Progress Magazine, December 14, 1992.
2. Moody Monthly, Dec., 1983, p. 81.
3. Brennan Manning, The Ragamuffin Gospel (Multnomah, 1990), pp. 91-92.
4. Rev. Bob Bohl, "Amazing Grace," search.protestanthour.com/1997.
5. Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 33 & 34.
6. G. W. Knight, Clip-Art Features for Church Newsletters, p. 53.
7. William Barclay, The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville: Westminster John Know Press, 2002), p. 88.