

Lent 4B: John 3:14-21
Church of the Good Shepherd
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The Scandal of Grace

As a preacher and writer, I love words. I love learning what they mean, where they come from, love assembling them, breaking them apart. I listen for their overtones, gauging their sound. I collect them as containers for ideas and drive them as vehicles for my thoughts. Or I plant them as signs pointing to things that you can't put into words. Something I've discovered, though, is that words tend to spoil over the years, like old meat. Their meaning rots away or they take on an off flavor. Consider the word "charity," for instance. When the King James translators pondered the highest form of love, they settled on the word "charity" to convey it. Nowadays we hear that love treated with contempt, "I don't want your *charity!*"

One word that has not suffered this fate is grace. In his book, *What's So Amazing about Grace?*, the writer Philip Yancey calls it "the last best word" because every English usage he can find retains some of the glory of the original. Whatever form it takes, the word reminds us that good things come not from our own efforts, rather as a gift from God.

Many people, Yancey notes, "say grace" before meals, acknowledging the food as a provision from God. We are "grateful" for someone's kindness, "gratified" by good news, "congratulated" when successful, and "gracious" in welcoming guests. Credit cards, rental car agencies, and mortgage companies extend to customers an undeserved "grace period." And when a waiter's service pleases us, we leave a "gratuity" and when something is free, it is given "gratis." In each of these uses we hear an echo of delight in something undeserved. By the same token, a composer of music may add "grace notes" to the score. Though not essential to the melody—they are "gratuitous"—these notes add a flourish whose presence would be missed. They flavor the music like spices do a meal.

We also learn about a word from its opposite. We speak of someone's "fall from grace," when they lose favor with their supporters. And we insult a person by pointing out their lack of grace: "You ingrate!" we say, or worse, "You're a disgrace!" And a truly despicable person has no "saving grace" about him. But my favorite use of the word occurs in the euphemistic phrase *persona non grata*, a "person without grace," used of a diplomat when they offend the government by some act of treachery.

It would seem from all these usages that we are rather fond of the word *grace*. Yet, for all its ubiquity, we are, it must be said, not all that comfortable with the idea itself. For grace, as pleasant as it sounds, is, when you get right down to it, not fair. Grace is by definition unjust. It's not fair to forgive someone who's done us wrong, not fair to pardon the criminal. It's not fair to expect a woman to forgive the terrible things her father did to her just because he apologizes many years later, and totally unfair to ask that a mother overlook the many offenses her teenage son committed. It's unnatural. Extending grace to someone, particularly someone we don't see as deserving grace, galls us. Something in us leaps up to say, that's not fair, that's not right. The natural thing, the normal thing to do when someone does us wrong is not to forgive them, but to

get back at them. As WH Auden noted, “I and the public know/What all school children learn/[that] Those to whom evil is done/ Do evil in return.”

The very taste of grace, of forgiveness, seems somehow wrong. Even when we have hurt someone, we want to earn our way back into the injured party’s good graces. We prefer to crawl on our knees, to wallow, to do penance. When the Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV sought the pardon of Pope Gregory VII in 1077, he stood barefoot in the snow for three days outside the papal quarters in Italy. And after the Pope pardoned him, Henry went away, likely with a smirk of self-satisfaction and a frostbite scar to show off his piety and penance, his forgiveness having been earned.

Grace is the total opposite of this, of earning forgiveness. It’s wholly undeserved. There’s nothing we can do to merit or qualify for it, except be in need of it. And that’s probably what makes grace so scandalous. In accepting grace, we have to admit we need it, that we are helpless, undeserving, incapable of making it on our own. In our meritocratic world, grace is received as an insult, an insult to our pride. Certainly there’s *something* we can do, that we can offer in exchange, to offset the indignity of receiving something we didn’t deserve.

St. Paul makes it clear, though, that when we’re talking about God’s grace, there’s nothing we can do to deserve it. He says in our first reading this morning from Ephesians: “God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.” And to make it crystal clear, he adds, “by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” Paul is blunt, and unconcerned about bruising our egos. Salvation, he says, is not of our own doing, because we had nothing to offer. It’s not by our resumé, or by our bank account, or by our being a good moral person, or having the right political beliefs that we were saved. No, he says we are saved by grace, by God’s unmerited, undeserved gift, and we did nothing to deserve it. Nothing. Nada. Nicht. We are as good as dead in our sins, he says, and the dead can’t do anything for themselves. There’s nothing we can do to qualify for it, except the fact that we need it. Ooh, that rankles many of us, the idea that we need something we can’t get ourselves.

And if we think Paul’s is a minority opinion, we hear a similar point made in our reading from John: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Notice that God doesn’t ask our permission first before sending Jesus to die for us. He just sends Jesus because He loves the world and recognizes that we have condemned ourselves. We are condemned already, he says, on account of our sins. And so God sends Jesus. Jesus is God’s great rescue mission. But of course that implies that we need rescuing.

That’s a hard thing for many of us to hear, as I said. We’re not all that bad, we protest. At least not compared to others, to murderers like Charles Manson or Hamas and dictators like Mao ze Dong and Saddam Hussein who tortured and brutally executed thousands of their own citizens. We’re not as bad as them!

Isn’t it curious that when we think of “evil,” we almost never think of anything within us. Evil is always depicted by us as an impersonal source outside us – like tornadoes, floods, earthquakes,

and sickness. “The Devil made me do it.” It’s the culture, the government, the vast underground conspiracy. Fact is, it’s just plain easier to locate evil in large, systemic, political, natural, and cosmic forces. Keep sin large, global, and universal. Talk about the evil done to us by wicked institutions and unjust systems of economic distribution. That way we won’t have to look at our own moral failings. Surely part of the popularity of conspiracy thinking is that it locates the threat of evil out there somewhere. The Jesus of the New Testament, though, tells us that we don’t need to look that far to discover the source for most of the bad that afflicts us.

A few years ago, as part of a class I taught here on mission, we watched a documentary entitled *The Changing Face of Worship*, which showcased dozens of growing, innovative, “postmodern” churches. Sunday at many of these churches struck me as almost unbearably upbeat, energetic, and positive, just what I expect from the well-furnished “seeker-sensitive church.” But one young pastor on the West Coast, the leader of a burgeoning, mostly young adult congregation, when asked to explain why so many flocked to his services said, “Too few young adults have had anyone look them in the face, and say directly to them, with a sense of concern and compassion, ‘You really suck.’” I might have put the matter more elegantly, but I agree with him theologically. People are not as dumb as much of mainline, liberal Protestantism – or for that matter, evangelical, biblical conservatism – takes them to be. If young adults stopped and thought about their life for a moment, they’d have to admit they know that they are not all right, that they have failed, they’ve hurt others, they’ve sinned, they ‘suck.’

As the writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn observed, “the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either -- but right through every human heart -- and through all human hearts.” Or to make the matter more concrete, when the journalist G. K. Chesterton was asked by a British newspaper to contribute an essay on the subject, “What Is Wrong with the World?”, Chesterton wrote his reply in the form of a letter. It read, “Dear Sirs, I am. Sincerely Yours, G.K. Chesterton.”

We all love darkness rather than light, John says. And so we imagine a promiscuously permissive, user-friendly Jesus, because it’s a lot harder to accept forgiveness for something we’ve done wrong (grace) than it is to tell ourselves that we didn’t do anything wrong in the first place. But anyone who thinks that Jesus was into self-affirmation and open-minded, heart-happy acceptance has then got to figure out why we responded to him by nailing him on a cross. He got there, not for welcoming everyone to eat with him, but for calling us “white washed tombs,” hypocrites and even worse. A sure sign of a compromised church – a church that has retired from the battle with evil, with the forces that work against God’s good will – is one that has stopped dealing with sin or even discussing it. When that happens, the church has forgotten who it is, why it exists. But it has also deprived itself of one of its most attractive features—honesty about sin and our need for grace.

A colleague of mine asked a recovering alcoholic who had once been a part of his congregation, “Sam, why have you stopped coming to church?” He replied, “Preacher, after you have been to AA, taken the cure, had to stare your demons in the face, had to stand up naked in front of 20 other drunks and tell every bad thing you have done or thought, and had to ask God and them to forgive you for being you, well, church just seems like such a trivial waste of time.”

Church is about more than sin, to be sure. It is about grace. As John declares, “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” The message of Christianity precisely this, that God sent Jesus to us that we might have eternal life, life so abundant that it spills over from this life into the next. But in order to recognize that gift, in order to be willing to accept such a scandalous grace, we must accept our need for it. And fortunately there are moments in our lives when, despite ourselves, our need for it breaks through our defenses and we are able to experience grace.

As the theologian Paul Tillich observes, “Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: “You are accepted.” You are forgiven. You are loved. You are saved.

When that happens, we experience grace. After such an experience, we may not be better than before and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed. In that moment, forgiveness conquers sin, and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement. And nothing is required for this experience, no great effort on our part, no great sacrifice, nothing...nothing but acceptance, the acceptance of God’s forgiveness. Such is the scandal and the joy of grace. Thanks be to God!