

“Can We Ever Comprehend Grace?” CHC 11-8-15

Psalms 127:1-2; Hebrews 9:24-28

The poet George Herbert, reflecting upon a world marked by wars, violence, economic oppression, religious strife, lawsuits, and family breakdowns writes, “Ah, what a thing is a man or woman devoid of grace” (Yancey, ‘Grace Notes’, P.29). In Shakespeare’s ‘Richard the Third’ we read this line, “O momentary grace of mortal men, which we more hunt for than the grace of God”.

What do we make of this thing called grace? Depending on the context, grace can be defined as simple elegance or refinement of movement. It can be an extended period allowed for a payment, a grace period. We call a prayer before a meal ‘grace’. It is used as a form of address for a duke, duchess, or archbishop. We talk about receiving ‘little graces’ in life.

Theologically this word grace opens the draw bridge to a whole new world of meaning. Philip Yancey calls it the last best word. We have all heard the basic definition that grace is the free and unmerited favor of God. Specifically we link this definition of grace to the undeserved act of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross for our sins. Our text from Hebrews is highly descriptive of this once for all sacrificial act of Christ taking place in the heavenly holy of holies.

My suspicion, though, is that wonderful and accurate as this definition might be, there is a dissonance between it and our lived experience. How may we find that connection between what we know grace to be from a theological perspective to one that is formational and lived in our relationship with God? The challenge is for the gospel of grace to penetrate our emotions, the movement from head to heart.

One way is to search for analogies in our daily lives. What experiences of grace that fit the definition of unmerited favor can you identify in your life?

I filed through my past and found one that I will share with you. Believe it or not, I was a music education major at Colorado University. If you know anything about the degree requirements in this field, you know that there exist one and two hour courses which may take up as much time of study as many three hour courses.

One of those courses I was required to take was called ‘Listening’. It was a one hour course requiring hours in the music library listening to music from all periods. Classroom tests consisted of the professor dropping the needle on a record which we then had to identify as to period, piece, and composer.

The end of the semester came when grades were posted. It was the first semester of my senior year. I approached the prof’s door where grades were posted next to our student numbers. As I moved my eyes down the list and landed upon my number, there beside my number was a nicely crafted ‘F’. I needed to pass that class to graduate. I was told by the administration that, though they felt bad for me, I should have studied harder and would not be able to graduate. No sympathy.

This occurred during the third year of my active Christian life. After much consternation in prayer over a period of two months, finally arriving at a measure of acceptance and adjusting to circumstances, one of

my advisors, Dr. Hilligos, came up to me. I was standing alone in the hallway leading to the practice rooms. He said, "How would I like to graduate in the spring?" How, I asked? He told me that he went to the administration on my behalf and negotiated a deal. Here was the deal. They refused to waive the requirement. Instead, if I would take private trombone lessons the final semester and pass, I could graduate. It would be a two hour credit. Don't ask me why I was being asked to learn the trombone because I didn't ask. He said think about it. I said I just did and I will do it. I was elated, grateful to him and God, the whole works. I took those lessons, practiced hard, and received an 'A'. I graduated that year with my class. I haven't played the trombone since.

For me, that was an experience of grace, the free and unmerited favor of God in a way that I could understand it. And as a follower of Christ, active in dialogue and prayer with God through this circumstance of my life, I believed by faith that I had witnessed the unmerited free grace of God at work. It deepened my affection for God.

The Letter to the Hebrews emphasizes that the worship of this world is a pale copy of the real worship. The worship within the temporal confines of this world's worship is just that, temporary. Grace goes beyond. It is grounded in what God in Christ has done for us. "For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf" (Hebrews 9:24). The finality of this act moves us from a world centered upon an economy of law to an economy of grace. John expresses it this way in the first chapter through verses 16-17; "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ". John then adds, "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known". The nature and character of God is one of profound grace and love.

Another way to explore grace is to talk about its opposite, non-grace. I have mentioned before that while in Tacoma, Washington, I was involved in a ministry called 'Nightwatch Ministry'. Two of us would wear clergy collars and between the hours of 10 PM and 2 AM choose several high trafficked bars, straight and otherwise, and sit down with the people there and engage in conversation. The bartenders knew us and would pour us a coke after which we easily found our way into conversations with people. I was always amazed how many persons I conversed with had backgrounds in churches. One particular evening I recall reflecting with a person who had been churched but had fallen on hard times. Now finding fellowship in a bar the conversation turned to past spiritual experiences and the possibility of finding the way back to God and the church. Essentially the response was, "Church! Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They would just make me feel worse."

Another time I invited a family going through hard times to come back to a church that I was serving. They unequivocally said no. We will come to church after we get our lives together. For many people the church reminds them of a place of ungrace. They think of morality, not grace. Mark Twain talked of people who were 'good in the worst sense of the word'. Is that how the world looks at those of us in the church? (Yancey, "What's So Amazing About Grace?" p.31).

Grace, or 'charis', in Greek, literally means gladness or joy. In stewardship we give out of that deeper sense of knowing and experiencing God's grace and the gladness and joy inspired by that grace. Paul tells us that "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2Corinthians 9:7). The grace of God is never controlling or manipulative. It invites a free response motivated by that inner experience of God's free unmerited grace. It is that grace we are emotionally connected to working within our hearts. We never can force or earn grace. We can only receive it.

Pastor Gordon MacDonald, is a man who had morally fallen from grace as a husband and pastor. He found redemption through the grace of his church. He writes this; "The world can do almost anything as well as or better than the church. You need not be a Christian to build houses, feed the hungry, or heal the sick. There is only one thing the world cannot do. It cannot offer grace" (Yancey, p.15).

We are all looking for grace. Because of our fallen human condition, we desperately need and require grace. Those people I met each night in those bars were hungry and looking for it. But it wasn't going to come through a package of cigarettes and a bottle. Nor will it come through the moralistic preaching and teaching of the church. Most ethicists would agree with philosopher Immanuel Kant. He argued that a person should only be forgiven if he or she deserves it. Divine grace is a demonstration that God's ways are not our ways. Such grace can only come from God who offers it through Christ as a gift.

I am not so sure that we can ever appreciate grace until we come face to face with the hopelessness of the human condition before God. Stuart Briscoe describes grace in contrast to justice and mercy; "Justice is getting what we deserve from God and mercy is not getting what we deserve. But grace is getting what we do not deserve" ('Engage', Denver Seminary, Fall, 2015, p.14).

Grace begins with a hole in the heart that God can only fill. Grace, like water, flows to the lowest part. We have, as followers of Christ, only humility and contrition to offer the world, not a formula for success (Yancey, p.177).

Augustine spent most of his life seeking pleasure, feeding self-interest, and pursuing ego-satisfaction through philosophical and academic pursuit. But there was that hole in his heart none of these things were filling. He was a deeply frustrated person. One day reading scripture, Romans 13:11-14, he centered on verse 14; "Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires". God's grace flooded his life.

Some of you are familiar with his response: "Late have I loved you...And behold, you were within me and I was outside, and there I sought for you, and in my deformity I rushed headlong into the well-formed things that you have made. You were with me, and I was not with you..." (Confessions, Augustine).

Dostoevsky, the Russian novelist, was spared from a death sentence by Tsar Nicholas, but was sent to Siberia. As he boarded the train to Siberia a woman handed him a New Testament, the only book allowed in prison. After ten years he emerged from prison a strong Christian. During this time he lived in close quarters with murderers, thieves, and other members of this broken, struggling part of humanity. Many of these people became the source of his characters in his novels, such as 'Crime and

Punishment'. His previous liberal view of the innate goodness of humanity could not account for the pure evil he witnessed in his cell mates. His own theological experience of grace had to adjust to this new reality. Over time it is said that he was able to glimpse the image of God in his cell mates. He came to the place where he believed that only through being loved is a human being capable of love (Yancey, p.147).

That is the power of grace. It is love in action, drawing us into the transformative, renewing power of God's salvation in Christ. As Hebrews 9:26 frames it, "...he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself". Christ is the source of all grace.

The Christian faith is about a relationship with a God who transforms us into humble, compassionate human beings through the self-giving love of Christ. It is not about doing what we need to do to believe or earn our salvation. It is about seeing what is already true, that God sees us as we are and loves us. We simply receive that love, enter into a relationship with that face of redemptive love in Christ, and live intentionally into that grace.

Grace is really just a word until someone comes along and gives it meaning. Our Psalm reflects this attitude of response to God's grace at work throughout all of life: "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain....It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives sleep to his beloved".

May we become carriers of Christ's grace through all that we are and do.