

June 9, 2024
“Extended Grace, Extended Family”
2 Corinthians 4:13-18 / Mark 3:31-35
Pastor Tim

The word grace, as you know, has a variety of different meanings and uses:

Grace is simply courteous goodwill.

Grace is the elegance or refinement of movement – as used to describe a dancer, say, who is graceFUL.

Grace is what's considered a polite manner of behaving – as in having social graces.

Grace is that extended period of time allowed to make payment beyond an official due date – as in grace period.

Grace is a simple prayer of gratitude offered before or after a meal.

Grace is a Divinely given blessing, traditionally understood in Christian tradition as the free and unmerited, UNDESERVED, favor of God.

John Wesley, Methodism's founder, developed his own three-part theological framework for grace to include what he called PREVENIENT or PREVENTING grace, JUSTIFYING grace and SANCTIFYING grace:

- PREVENIENT grace is that which goes before all of us, present in all of Creation, in us, that claims us as God's beloved, those made in God's image, and that inspires us toward Divine love.
- JUSTIFYING grace is that which embraces us in Divine love, when WE claim OUR identities as God's beloved.
- SANCTIFYING grace is that which moves us ever closer to Divine love, toward perfection, wholeness, fullness in love.

As some of you know, Wesley used the metaphor of a house to describe this framework: PREVENIENT grace being the porch on a house; JUSTIFYING grace being the door through which we enter the house; and SANCTIFYING grace being all the rooms of the house – in

which we find ourselves at home in the “expansive dwelling of God’s presence.” In the fullness of God’s love, expressed when we love our neighbors as ourselves. **PAUSE**

I find that metaphor, and that framework, helpful in many respects – understanding grace as a process. But as a lifelong United Methodist, I take serious issue with the underlying premise in Wesleyan and Christian tradition that grace, that Divine grace, is inherently, necessarily, UNDESERVED. That we do not DESERVE to be held and embraced and perfected in Divine love and blessing.

Such understanding, as we know, is rooted in the theological construct of “original sin,” the notion carelessly extrapolated from the Biblical – and fictional – story of Creation that we have all “fallen from God’s grace” and so are all “hopeless sinners” BUT for the grace of God.

I don’t believe we can EVER fall from God’s grace. We may fall from each other’s, but not God’s.

Now that’s not to say that we don’t all fall. That we don’t all stumble. That we don’t all sin – again, sin properly understood as that which gets in the way of, or keeps us from, or turns us away from, love – love of God, love of neighbor, love of self.

It’s not to say that we aren’t all in need of forgiveness at times in our lives.

And it’s not to say that we can EARN God’s grace. As we are reminded in the Biblical letter to the Ephesians, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”

Grace goes before us as a gift, but we are only “saved” by it if we receive it. And open it. Accept it. Offer it. Again and again and again.

Here I turn to Barbara Brown Taylor’s definition of salvation, not as salvation from intractable, inevitable sin, but as “the divine spaciousness that comes to human beings in all the tight places where their lives are at risk, regardless of how they got there or whether they know God’s name. Sometimes it comes as an extended human hand and sometimes

as a bolt from the blue, but either way it opens a door in what looked for all the world like a wall. This is the way of life, and God alone knows how it works.”

Salvation is the way of life. Grace is the way of life. Love is the WAY of life. That is what Jesus taught and lived and embodied.

As God's beloved, made in God's image, all of us, ALL of us, I believe we DO deserve grace. Because we DO deserve love. It's what we're made of, and it's what we're made for.

God's grace is constant, a truth that William Sloane Coffin managed to hold onto after the tragic drowning death of his own son, Alex – a truth he shared at Alex's funeral: “So I shall – so let us all – seek consolation in that love which never dies, and find peace in the dazzling grace that always is.” Always is. Without condition.

Think of grace as the holy entrée to our experience and practice of love. It brings us back to ourselves, off the porch and through the door to claim our place again and again and again in the household of God.

As Thomas Merton put it, “Grace is not a strange, magic substance which is subtly filtered into our souls to act as a kind of spiritual penicillin. Grace is unity, oneness with ourselves, oneness with God.”

Which brings me to our first reading this morning, from Paul's letter to the Corinthian church.

In it, Paul talks about being raised with Jesus. Raised to resurrection and new life even beyond hatred and violence. Even beyond even death. That is the Easter message ongoing.

And Paul writes that everything he is doing to spread the gospel of love is for the sake of these Corinthian church members and beyond: “... so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.”

Extended grace. Increased thanksgiving and gratitude. That is the work of the Church, that is the calling on all of us who aspire to follow Jesus in the way of love and life: to

extend grace to more and more and more – with an eye, as Paul suggests, toward the eternal. Toward life that continues even beyond our own lives.

Extended grace.

The French philosopher, mystic and political activist, Simone Weil, once wrote of grace that it “fills empty spaces, but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it, and it is grace itself which makes this void.”

Grace, extended, fills empty spaces. It fills empty spaces with “courteous goodwill.” It fills empty spaces with love – none other than the love, we believe, originates with God our Creator.

Empty spaces marked, perhaps, by pain and suffering. Spaces marked by self-criticism and self-loathing. Spaces marked by fear and hatred. Spaces marked by frustration and anger. Spaces marked by doubt and discouragement. Spaces marked by despair and cynicism.

And empty spaces marked, even, again, by what I believe is the damaging Christian belief that WE DO NOT deserve grace and love – from God. Or from each other. Or from ourselves. That we are somehow fundamentally UNworthy of such grace and love.

Don't believe it! Don't believe it! Don't believe it!

Prevenient grace. Extended grace.

Our gospel reading this morning doesn't mention grace, but it's in there.

Jesus is coming off some fresh accusations that he is possessed by demons because he's been casting out demons. Helping to release and heal people who have been held captive within themselves, held captive from knowing and embracing their beloved selves. That's what we call mental illness.

Jesus is surrounded, as he often was, by a crowd, when someone calls out to him that his family is asking for him. Looking for him.

He replies with the provocative rhetorical question, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at the crowd gathered around him, he declares that "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother!"

Awkward, likely, for his family to hear. But offered as a Divine invitation to extend family. To extend narrow, provincial notions of whom we consider members of our family.

"Whoever does the will of God" is my family, Jesus says. And lest we get caught up in unhelpful thinking that the "will of God" is some uniquely specific Divine puzzle we need to solve, consider that God's will is simply to love as we are loved. To love each other, and ourselves, as we are loved by God. To extend grace and thereby open up the possibility of love – Divine love – to do its work in each other, and in ourselves.

That's not always easy to do, of course, but it's not complicated to understand.

Whoever does the will of God – that is, whoever extends grace and thereby love, is our family.

When someone extends grace to you, often when you least expect it, whether you deserve it or not, or feel like you deserve it or not, consider that they are essentially claiming you as family. They are seeking your good. They are raising you up.

And the same goes whenever you extend grace to another, to your neighbor, even to your "enemy," Jesus insists, often when THEY least expect it, whether THEY deserve it or not, or THEY feel like they deserve it or not, or YOU feel like they deserve it or not.

You are claiming them as family because you are making space for love, God's love, to do its work in them, to take root in them. You are seeking their good, raising them up, to bring them back to themselves as God's beloved, made in God's image.

And to pick them up off the porch, invite them through the WIDE-OPEN door and back home. Back into the palatial, eternal household of God.

That said, I want to just acknowledge here that I do believe there may be times, relationships, where we might repeatedly extend grace to another, or have grace

extended to us – but it does not, for whatever reason, open up to love. We or they are not willing or able, as recipients of grace, to open up to love. Grace is repeatedly rejected.

That's where I find wisdom in Wesley's framework, that the extension of grace – by God and be each other – requires a response from the recipient. Within the complexity of human relationship and life itself, grace sometimes hits a wall – and perhaps becomes undeserved – when it repeatedly does not open up to love. If we repeatedly offer grace and it's repeatedly rejected, or we are repeatedly offered grace and repeatedly reject it, something has to give.

At a certain point, self-love and self-care requires the giver of grace to move on. And leave the recipient to the care of God's unending grace.

Still, I hear in these texts the powerful possibility that AS grace is extended, so is family. And as family is extended, so is grace. And we are raised up, with Jesus, in the process. Around and around we go whenever we accept or extend the Divine gift of grace.

Some of you know that Will works at the VA Hospital in Wilmington. During our retreat yesterday, he shared that some of the veterans no longer have family – and so he makes a point of treating them like family. Through his work, extending grace to make them FEEL like family. It's a beautiful thing!

Will sees that as his calling, as his ministry. And that, indeed, is the calling on all of us.

In that spirit, let me close with another beautiful blessing from fellow United Methodist, and artist and poet, Jan Richardson – written for Pentecost Day in the context of family-extending diversity and miraculous understanding across difference, but no less applicable as we continue through the season of Pentecost, the Spirit ever-moving:

*Here's one thing
you must understand
about this blessing:
it is not
for you alone.*

*It is stubborn
about this.
Do not even try
to lay hold of it*

*if you are by yourself,
thinking you can carry it
on your own.*

*To bear this blessing,
you must first take yourself
to a place where everyone
does not look like you
or think like you,
a place where they do not
believe precisely as you believe,
where their thoughts
and ideas and gestures
are not exact echoes
of your own.*

*Bring your sorrow.
Bring your grief.
Bring your fear.
Bring your weariness,
your pain,
your disgust at how broken
the world is,
how fractured,
how fragmented
by its fighting,
its wars,
its hungers,
its penchant for power,
its ceaseless repetition
of the history it refuses
to rise above.*

*I will not tell you
this blessing will fix all that.*

*But in the place
where you have gathered,
wait.*

Watch.

Listen.

*Lay aside your inability
to be surprised,
your resistance to what you
do not understand.*

*See then whether this blessing
turns to flame on your tongue,
sets you to speaking
what you cannot fathom*

*or opens your ear
to a language
beyond your imagining
that comes as a knowing
in your bones,
a clarity
in your heart
that tells you*

*this is the reason
we were made:
for this ache
that finally opens us,
for this struggle,
this grace
that scorches us
toward one another
and into
the blazing day.*

May it be so.