

The Amazing Grace that is Our Name and the Heart of the Gospel

John 1:14,16; Ephesians 2:4-10

If I were to preach one and only one sermon for the rest of my life it would be about grace. It is the heart of the gospel and our name here.

Grace may be God's middle name. Or, God's secret name revealed in Jesus. Grace is the first and last word of our existence as children of God.

Am I going overboard? *Can* one go overboard about grace? If I should go overboard about anything, I would go overboard about grace. In writing his gospel, John himself goes overboard, saying that the word made flesh in Jesus is grace upon grace upon grace, grace without end.

And by happy providence it became our name.

I

Perhaps the first meaning of grace is gift. So let's look at the sheer giftedness of grace. The giftedness of grace is main theme of Paul's words to the Ephesians in today's text:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your doing, it is the gift of God.

And it begins in the kindness and mercy of God

But God who is rich in mercy, who loves us with all his love, even when we are dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.

Paul can't contain himself; he interrupts himself, almost shouts: "By grace you have been saved!"

Paul was gobsmacked by grace. As was Martin Luther, and John Wesley and every great reformer and renewer of the church through the centuries.

And did you catch it? What grace does is *make us alive!* Grace is what greens our faith and makes our garden grow. Grace is pardon and power; it is life and peace.

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth

Thine own dear presence to cheer (cheer!) and to guide

Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow

Blessings all mine and ten thousand beside.

Grace upon grace upon grace....

Annie Dillard says we catch grace "as a man fills his cup under a waterfall."

We are all grace-drenched children of God.

But like any gift, grace must be received. What is it that makes it hard for us to receive it?

Do we think that somewhere we need to deserve it? *Grace is the thing we needn't to deserve.* Do we think we've got to earn it? Paul is quick to answer with the sheer giftedness of grace: "Not by works, lest anyone should boast!"

For all the hundreds of times we've sung "Amazing Grace how sweet the sound that save a wretch like me", way down deep what we may really be singing is:

Amazing works, how sweet the sound that saved a "try-harder" like me.

How has the gospel of grace been turned into a "try-harder" religion?

III

Sometimes grace comes to us and we miss it because it has come in disguise. Poet and spiritual writer Kathleen Norris writes:

If grace is so wonderful, why do we have so much trouble recognizing and accepting it? Maybe it's because grace isn't gentle or made to order. It often come disguised as loss or failure, or unwelcome change.

Do her words ring true for any of you? They do for me. You've suffered some loss, or failure, there's been some most unwelcome change, but later you recognize the

grace in it, the gift that led to growth and new life. It's grace coming from a place you would never have expected.

C.S. Lewis says that "the signature of grace is surprise". It comes unexpected, unbidden; we never see it coming.

Grace has a way of catching us off-guard, surprising us and bringing something like happiness. Happiness is a form of grace. When I read Jane Kenyon's poem "Happiness", it was for me a poem about grace:

There's just no accounting for happiness,
or the way it turns up like a prodigal
who comes back to the dust at your feet
having squandered a fortune far away.

And how can you not forgive?

You make a feast in honor of what
was lost, and take from its place the finest
garment, which you saved for an occasion
you could not imagine, and you weep night and day
to know you weren't abandoned,
that happiness saved its most extreme form

for you alone.

No, happiness is the uncle you never
knew about, who flies a single-engine plane
onto the grassy landing strip, hitchhikes
into town, and inquires at every door
until he finds you asleep midafternoon
as you so often are during the unmerciful
hours of your despair....

God is that uncle, searching, finding, and coming with grace.

II

How has grace come to you? It came to me in the darkest hour of my young life. I was a young minister, just 19 years old, on my way to preach. A young girl suddenly jumped into the street in front of my car. I hit her, and that moment her life was ended. I was driven to her parents, and as I sobbed out my "I'm so sorry", they embraced me. Me, of all people. And with their words *they* tried to comfort *me*.

A little later, I read these words from theologian Paul Tillich:

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 we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life.... It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear.... 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 accepted*, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now, perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. *Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!*' If that happens to us, we experience grace.

Perhaps today you need to hear these three other words: *You Are Enough!* You don't need to be anyone else, do anything more, achieve anything more. You are enough! When you accept it, you experience grace.

IV

Grace is also power, the power of new life, new growth, like the sunlight whose energy brings life. After telling the Ephesians that grace has been freely gifted to them, Paul goes on to say:

For we are God's work of art (*poeima* in the Greek, God's poem) created in Christ Jesus for good works which God has prepared beforehand....

That's what you are, God's work of art, and each of us is given the opportunity to be God's beauty and compassion, truth and grace to others, the opportunity to give things God made only *you* to give.

The power of grace brings change, the change we most need. Anne Lamott writes:

I do not understand the mystery of grace—only that it meets us where we are and does not leave us where it found us.

When we accept it, we may have no idea of the change to come, change that brings life.

I was thinking of the parable of the two sons as I wrote this sermon, the son who traveled to a far country where he squandered the inheritance his father gave him. Broken and broke, he “came to himself”, then he came home and found himself in his father's embrace and given a homecoming feast. And the other son, the elder brother, who sulked and threw a fit and refused to go to his no-good younger brother's welcome home party? He had lived his whole life in his father's house and never recognized that that too was grace.

There are many sad things in the world. Among the saddest is this: to try to buy what can only be given, to try to earn what is yours already, to search the world over for the treasure that is in your own back yard, to live trying over and over to earn God's grace and never see that it is as free as the sun that shines and the rain that falls from the sky.

Can you hear the sound of the waterfall that is grace? Feel its waters overflowing your hands and cup? Hear the words: *Welcome home, You are accepted, You are enough, You are God's work of art?* Will you let the sound of the water and the words flow over you and through you and finally know that it's all grace, grace upon grace upon grace?