

“GRACE IS NOT A BLUE-EYED BLOND”
Genesis 21:8-21; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39
A Sermon by John Thomason
Woodbury UMC
June 25, 2017

Preachers often create sermon titles to pique the curiosity of their hearers. I suppose my sermon title this morning falls into that category. I wish I could take credit for a title that is so cute and clever, but I didn't coin this phrase; someone else did, and there is a story behind it.

While I was a seminary student in the early 1970's, I purchased and read a book by Lofton Hudson that was actually entitled, *Grace Is Not a Blue-Eyed Blond*. Being a young single male at the time, I was disappointed to learn that! I would have welcomed a blue-eyed blond into my life, and Grace seemed like such a lovely name. However, Lofton Hudson was a Christian writer, not a romance novelist, and he wasn't just titillating his readers with a catchy title; he was making a serious point.

The word “grace” is a big word in the Christian vocabulary, ranking right up there with faith, hope, and love. No doctrine was dearer to John Wesley – and none has meant more to “the people called Methodists” – than the doctrine of God's grace. But over the years, the word “grace” has become so watered down by common usage that it has no more substance than a bowl of mush. We speak glibly of people who are “gracious” – which simply means that they are kind and nice. Even in church circles, the concept of grace has often been misunderstood and misappropriated, in ways I'm about to spell out.

At the time I encountered Lofton Hudson's book, I was certain that I comprehended what grace is, and I believed that God's grace was the operative force in my spiritual life. But Hudson's title hooked me, and the contents of his book led me to question whether I had really grasped the meaning of grace. Now, more than forty years later, I have long since parted ways with the book, but that title has bubbled back into my consciousness. All three of today's lectionary readings tell us something about what grace is not; and, by extension, they tell us something about what grace really is.

Our Old Testament lesson reminds us that grace is not exclusive. Earlier in the book of Genesis, we learn that Sarah is an old woman, childless, and fretful that her husband Abraham has no male heir. She does the gracious thing and offers her handmaiden Hagar to Abraham so that Hagar can bear her husband a son. Ishmael is born, but soon God's grace comes to Abraham and Sarah in an unexpected way. Sarah conceives and gives birth to a legitimate male heir, Isaac.

In today's text, the family is celebrating Isaac's weaning, and Sarah turns from being gracious to being greedy. She doesn't want Ishmael to share in the inheritance of her son Isaac. So she admonishes Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael from their extended family. Abraham reluctantly agrees to this cruel plan; Hagar and Ishmael are sent packing; and the mother and son nearly die of thirst out in the desert.

What makes this story even more troubling is that God appears to be an accomplice to Sarah's scheming. God actually encourages Abraham to let these tragic events unfold, which

means cutting Hagar and Ishmael loose – at first glance, not a very gracious thing to do. But as the story continues, God’s grace proves to be at work after all. God hears the cries of the boy Ishmael out in the wilderness and sustains his life. Like Sarah, God wants to insure that the covenant with Israel will be passed along through Isaac, but God also has big plans for Ishmael and his descendants. God will make them a great nation as well.

Why do you suppose a bittersweet story like this is preserved and passed along in the Hebrew Scriptures? Because it demonstrates what God’s grace is not – it is not the exclusive property of Abraham’s descendants, the people of Israel. Yes, they are God’s “chosen people,” but God chooses and uses other people for other purposes. And so this story also demonstrates what God’s grace is: it is inclusive and universal. God’s grace is extended not just to the “in crowd,” but to outcasts and outsiders.

Friends, even today grace is sometimes used as a weapon to harm and exclude others. It’s used to wall people out rather than welcome them in. A lot of Christians presume to know who has grace and who doesn’t, and to treat those who are supposedly outside the circle of grace with condescension and contempt.

You may know that rabbis in the Jewish tradition often created legends that expanded upon the stories contained in the Hebrew Scriptures. Well, the rabbis used to tell a story based on the Exodus. At the time God freed the Israelite slaves from Egypt, the Almighty was very busy and decided to appoint a committee of angels to take care of the Red Sea. And so, the angels, looking over the banister of heaven, saw the Israelites arriving at the sea and used the power of God to part the waters. The Israelites went through on dry land. And then, here came the Egyptians with their horses and chariots. The angels waited, and when the Egyptians got out into the middle of the seabed, they released the water and the Egyptians went tumbling and drowning. The angels were laughing and cheering, clapping and singing, and God came by and said, “What’s all the celebration?” They said, “We got ‘em, we got ‘em, we got ‘em.” And God looked over the banister of heaven and said, “You’re no longer in my service.” The angels replied, “But we got ‘em.” And God said, “Don’t you know? The Egyptians are also my children.”

A professor of preaching once accompanied the president of his seminary to receive the first installment of a major gift to their school. On the way over, the professor and the president were marveling at the growth in the life of this donor who had made so much money. During his younger years he had been a selfish man, but now he was concerned about his church and the education of ministers, and so he was making this gift. When they arrived and sat before his desk in his office, he said, “Before I sign this, let’s have a word of prayer.” And this remarkable layperson led the religious professionals in prayer. Then he took his pen and paused just before signing and said, “Now, you understand all of this is to go for the education of ministers.” They replied, “Oh, yes sir, yes sir.” He started to write and then said, “Now, none of this is to go to women and blacks.” And without hesitation, the president of the school stood and said, “We cannot accept your money.”

This man had grown in the quality of generosity, but he was still far behind in something else – his sense of the inclusiveness of God’s grace. Today, when you and I see the circle of grace being drawn too narrowly, excluding the outsiders and outcasts of our time, we are compelled to stand up and speak out.

Today's Epistle lesson reminds us of something else that grace is not – grace is not permissive. Paul's central message to the Romans is that we don't earn our salvation by doing good works; salvation comes to us by faith through the grace of God. You and I don't have to be perfect people to merit God's acceptance; our imperfections are freely forgiven. But Paul's view of salvation raised serious concerns, especially among those with a Jewish background. If God so freely forgives sin, isn't God encouraging us just to keep sinning? You know, give us an inch, and we'll take a mile. Presumably, more sin on our part would just prompt more grace on God's part. And the end result is that we are still stuck in our old harmful ways of thinking and behaving.

In the language of helping professionals, this is called “enabling.” I once knew a young man who got into the habit of writing bad checks. When he saw something he liked – a widescreen TV, a stylish new suit, or the latest Smartphone – he would simply fill out a check with no money in the bank to cover it. He did this over and over again; and each time he did it, his parents would bail him out. They would pay off the debt to their son's creditors and let him go scot free. These parents were sincere Christians; they wanted to be forgiving; they wanted to do the gracious thing. But their version of grace simply enabled their son to continue in his errant ways.

These parents are not alone. For many today, grace has a lot of permissiveness in it. Grace is equated with being tolerant. Grace is when we say, “Anything goes,” when we don't interfere in other people's business. Grace is looking the other way; grace is cutting a little slack; grace is excusing behavior that is inexcusable.

But notice: the apostle Paul will have none of this. He asks rhetorically, “Should we continue to live in sin so that God's grace will increase?” Then he answers his own question: “Certainly not! We have died to sin – how then can we go on living in it?” (Romans 6:1b-2). For Paul, God's grace does not enable us to maintain harmful behaviors; God's grace enables us to change those behaviors. Life in grace is not a life of unrestricted freedom; it is a life of responsibility and accountability.

And so, the young man who wrote bad checks finally broke his habit when his parents stopped rescuing him, when they loved him enough to say “No” and let him suffer the consequences of his behavior. He spent nine months in jail, got out, started working and earning real money, and made reparations to his parents and to the merchants whom he had cheated. The apostle Paul could have written the script for that story. Paul reminds us that grace is not permissive; it comes with expectations. Yes, God's grace accepts us as we are; but then God's grace empowers us to become more fully the persons we are created to be.

And then finally, today's Gospel lesson demonstrates that grace is not inexpensive. Here in the 10th chapter of Matthew, Jesus, the Prince of Peace, speaks the most ironic words ever to come from his lips: he warns that he comes not to “bring peace to the earth . . . but a sword” (Matthew 10:34). He spells out what this means in excruciating detail. His followers will face opposition and persecution, even from within their own families. So he encourages them to keep the faith and to confess their faith openly. He counsels them not to be afraid because God cares for them and affirms their everlasting worth. But Jesus doesn't minimize the high price of

discipleship. He says, “Whoever does not take up his cross and follow in my steps is not fit to be my disciple” (v. 38).

Friends, when you and I think of life in God’s grace, we typically picture a life full of favor and blessing, a life that is largely immune from hardship and suffering. In reality, you and I do experience difficulties not of our own choosing; but God gives us the grace to endure them and overcome them, to bear any cross that is thrust upon us. But here, Jesus is saying that we are called to “take up” a cross, to voluntarily choose to live outside our comfort zones, to serve him and serve others in ways that are demanding and costly.

And so, the leader of a church youth group said one evening, “I want us all to go on a trip.” And the teenagers said, “Hey, yeah, let’s go skiing this winter in Aspen.” “No,” the leader said, “I had in mind a work trip.” “Work?!” They reacted as if he had said typhoid fever. Work?! The leader continued: “Over in Eastern Kentucky, in Corbin County, people are very, very poor. Why don’t we go up there for eight or ten days and do some work? Repair roofs, sagging porches, broken steps; put screens on windows that never had any screens.”

These kids were spoiled; none of them worked for pay; their parents gave them everything. But the upshot was that nine young people wound up going on this work trip, along with two adults who knew what they were doing. They spent ten days in Corbin County, Kentucky. They slept in their bedrolls on the floors of churches. They ate in the kitchens of folks who gave them collard greens and field peas. They saw some worthless men lying around cursing their wives and drinking beer. They heard children crying in houses where there were twice as many children as there should have been. These privileged youth got a baptism into reality. They fixed porches, screens, and steps. They took baths in a dishpan or a creek. They used outhouses for toilets, these spoiled kids. When they got back home, they were lying around the church parking lot waiting for their parents to pick them up, and one of the kids said, “This is the best tired I’ve ever been.”

Friends, these young people had learned that “grace is not a blue-eyed blond” – which is to say, grace is not exclusive, not permissive, and not inexpensive. When you live a grace-filled life, you embrace all kinds of people; you use your freedom responsibly; and you serve others in ways that are demanding, and, yes, exhausting. But all of this does have its rewards. When you live a life in grace, you’ll be the best tired you’ve ever been.