

October 13, 2019

The Good News of Grace

Luke 5:17-26

Today is thanksgiving. What are you thankful for? I'm thankful for the country in which we live and the freedom we enjoy. I'm thankful for my family. I'm thankful for this church community. I'm thankful for my friends.

Most of all I'm thankful for God – Father, Son, and Spirit – and for God's amazing grace. I'm thankful that God created and sustains this incredible world. I'm thankful for the love of God, shown to us through Jesus, who came that we might be forgiven, have life, have hope. I'm thankful for the personal presence of God through His Holy Spirit. My life and identity are fundamentally and profoundly shaped by the reality of God's presence and power.

I'm thankful for God's grace. Grace is unmerited, unearned favour. The ultimate expression of grace is God's amazing love for us. *"When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for the ungodly ... God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners."* (Romans 5:6-8). I'm thankful for that reality in my life.

1. The grace of good friends

The story in Luke 5:17-26 is pretty straightforward. A paralyzed man is desperate to get well. Let's call him Hassan, so it's easier to tell the story. Hassan's friends are so anxious to get him to Jesus, they tear a roof apart.

Think about the gift of friendship in this passage. Hassan has friends who really love him. With his lack of ability, he can do nothing for them. But they do move mountains (well rooves) for him.

"It's the friends you can call up at four a.m. that matter," observed, Marlene Dietrich (1901-1992), a great actress from the early days of film. She's right. A lot of us have acquaintances ... people we know a little bit. What a privilege to have true friends, who will break their backs for you. *("Keep smiling, keep shining, knowing you can always count on me, for sure ... that's what friends are for: for good times, for bad times, I'll be on your side forever more, that's what friends are for ..."* – Burt Bacharach, Dionne Warwick).

Hassan's friends do what they need to do to get him to Jesus. Do you have friends like that?

We are a community – a church – of people who have received God's grace. If we are honest, we all have received God's grace – His unearned, undeserved love.

What is "church"? For most of my (pre-Christian) early years, churches were just buildings. Church is not a building. It's not "religious" activities. It's not even "religious" people. It's a community of people who have experienced God's grace, who know the love of Jesus, and who seek to extend the same grace and love to each other. Who seek to love the world, in the name of Jesus.

I began attending church in my teens. At first, church was a place with fun youth activities. More than that, it became a place where I made friends, spiritual friends. People who encouraged me in my life and in my faith. Who allowed me to ask questions. Who challenged me to keep growing, spiritually, relationally, and practically. Who gave me opportunities to lead – to succeed and fail. Who helped me in practical, everyday ways. Who showed me grace in action.

What makes a church different than a service club, or a group of friends? We gather in the name of Jesus. Jesus is the one who unites us, because of His love. Because of His grace.

Where else can you gather with others and know God is present among you? That's certainly unique. Where else can you gather with people who encourage you in your life and in your faith and welcome you with grace? (I HOPE that describes the church) We live in a graceless world. To genuinely express and experience grace, that would be unique, too.

2. The grace of Jesus

What does Jesus do when this man lands at his feet?

Hassan, the paralyzed man, has done nothing to earn Jesus' respect. His friends have done all the heavy lifting. It's their faith – not Hassan's faith – that Jesus notices: *"Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the man, "Friend, your sins are forgiven" (5:20).*

He then goes on to say, *"Stand up, pick up your mat, and go home!" (5:24).*

Jesus deals with two deep needs in Hassan's life.

Jesus does deal with the obvious physical problem Hassan is facing. He also deals with a spiritual problem, too. We have no idea what Hassan is feeling guilty about or what demons he's wrestling with (how much "sin" can a paralyzed man get into anyway?). It doesn't really matter. Sin is a matter of bad things we do/do not do or say. Sin is also like a disease that just permeates our being and makes us feel rotten and guilty. Jesus knows that even if he physically heals Hassan, to really begin afresh, he needs spiritual healing as well.

Note that this is all about Jesus' amazing grace. Hassan doesn't do anything to deserve Jesus' physical or spiritual healing. He hasn't even confessed any faith in Jesus yet. Jesus expresses God's love to Hassan – to quote Romans 5 again – when he is still

utterly helpless ... while he is still a sinner. That is the radical, unexpected, revolutionary grace of God – He loves us in spite of who we are.

3. The not-so-gracious people

There is another group of people in this story, the Pharisees. The Pharisees were a Jewish sect. Their “cause” is the coming of the Kingdom of God – the exact same purpose for which Jesus has come. They have a noble ambition: that their nation, Israel, become a God-fearing land. They wanted everyone to take the teachings of Moses seriously. Very seriously.

They insisted people be diligent in observing religious practices like tithing, keeping the Sabbath, and “ritual purity” (not eating “unclean” foods or associating with “unclean” people). If people were religious enough, God would drive the Romans out. So they were on a passionate mission to “religious-ize” people. *“Do you want to please God? Then do (a), (b), (c) ...”*

Jesus is drawing huge crowds. Clearly He is a charismatic personality. So the Pharisees come to check out Jesus. They hope He will further their cause. If a dynamic, popular teacher were to teach about the importance of keeping the law, of having all the right doctrine, of following all the rules, of doing all the right religious things – WOW.

What the Pharisees wanted Jesus to say to Hassan was, *“Sinner, you need to obey the law ...”* *“Sinner, you need to pay this amount of money to buy these sacrifices at the Temple ...”* *“Sinner, don’t do this, don’t do that, don’t ever do that-other-thing, don’t even think about you-know-what ...”* *“Sinner, keep away from those people, never talk to that person, don’t touch so-and-so”* Rules, regulations, duties ...

What did Jesus say? *“Friend, your sins are forgiven ...”*

- Problem 1: Jesus called Hassan “friend.” Jesus has an unfortunate habit of calling sinners “friends” ... and those he ought to call “friends” (the Pharisees) he challenges as if they are sinners.
- Problem 2: only God can forgive sins. According to the Pharisees, God forgives you when you **do religious things** ... bringing sacrifices and attending festivals at the Temple. You pay – in cash and kind – for forgiveness. Jesus ignores that. He claims the authority of God to be able to forgive sin. Then He declares Hassan’s sins forgiven by **God’s grace**. Hassan doesn’t have to pay any price to be forgiven.

Every religion – including the Pharisees’ – has one basic characteristic. **You** have to try to reach God. **You** have to try to find God. **You** have to try to please God. Religions are like a treadmill where **you** have to obey certain rules, follow certain systems, believe certain laws and formulas ... It’s up to **you**. **You** can be “religious” by paying the price of obedience. Ultimately, it’s all up to **you**. No grace.

Jesus turns this completely on its head. This is what makes Jesus so unique.

Jesus says, "*Guess what, **God** reaches down to you. **God** forgives you. **God's** grace saves you*" **God** finds us; we don't find God. **God** has forgiven us; we cannot be good enough for God. Jesus' faith is all about, "***God** comes to you, as you are, where you are. **God** loves you. **God** forgives you. You accept **God's** gift of grace by faith.*" Grace.

That's the message of the good old hymn "Amazing Grace" – *I once was lost but now am found (by God) ... 'Tis (God's) grace that brought me safe thus far, and (God's) grace will lead me home.*"

Sometimes we feel: "*Being a Christian is really about 'being good' and if I'm not 'good' enough; I feel I haven't made the grade, I can't be a good Christian – or maybe I'm not a Christian at all. I still blow it. I feel guilty. I don't belong. I can't be close to God.*" It's all about me. No grace.

Jesus reaches out to us, as he reaches out to Hassan, and in His grace, simply says, "*Friend, your sins are forgiven.*" Chances are, He will go on to say, "*What are the other needs in your life? I can deal with those, too ...*" It's all about God. Grace.

4. People of grace

We are people who experience God's grace and love. God's amazing grace is His gift of love to us. We do not earn it. We do not deserve it. He simply blesses us with it.

In our ongoing struggles, pain, and brokenness, we share God's grace, faithfulness, love, and forgiveness with one another and with our world. We need one another. We can't do it alone. The friends of *Friends* get it: "*I'll be there for you (When the rain starts to pour); I'll be there for you (Like I've been there before); I'll be there for you ('Cause you're there for me too)* ... We need to be people of grace.

The world desperately needs us to be people of grace. When we are that kind of alternative community – a community of grace – we truly have something to be thankful for. And we have something to share. When we are that kind of alternative community, we change our world, one friend at a time. We are God's gift of Good News to one another. And we are God's gift of Good News to our world.

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