

Sermon – July 11, 2021

“I’ll Take Grace”

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Scripture: Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29

I’m notoriously clumsy. When I was a child, I could do many sporty things. I played softball and ran and could do any sport in gym class. While I was able to move in all the ways I needed to play first base, I was also injury prone. When I came in from recess injured for the billionth time that schoolyear, my fifth-grade teacher said to me, “Jess, we’re going to have to put you in a bubble.” My best friend said that of me not that long ago, in fact. Even now, when I’m in better shape than I’ve been in decades, you still wouldn’t catch anyone calling me graceful. It’s one of the reasons I so admire Audrey Hepburn, not just because she was gracious in her life, especially toward children and animals, but because she was graceful.

This idea of “grace” is one that’s always intrigued me. Whenever I heard people talk about God’s grace as a kid, I was always puzzled. Since it was often said that I was not graceful, I worried that perhaps my lack of grace was some sign that God didn’t like me as much as God liked my graceful friends who were involved in dance and other activities that were defined by that simple elegance of movement so absent in me. If God’s grace was given so freely, where was mine? Did I never get any? Had it been lost along the way? Worse, did God remove it because I had done something wrong?

Of course, I didn’t know at the time that grace has many different meanings. This is as true in life as it is in Christian belief. In the dictionary,

grace, as a noun, is defined a few ways: the first, is the one defined by ballet dancers, the “simple elegance or refinement of movement.” This, of course, is not how we think of it in the church. But the second meaning of “grace” in the dictionary gets a little closer: “courteous goodwill.” To show grace then, is to act courteously as in, someone has social graces. Or someone shows goodwill in how they act toward another, which, really, amounts to a politeness in manner. But grace for people of Christian faith is something more than mere good manners.

Grace in the New Testament, especially its uses in the Letter to the church at Ephesus, refers to the freely given, undeserved favor of God. It is God’s posture toward what God has created. Grace is in the giving of blessings without regard for whether we have earned them or not. The letter to the church at Ephesus is very interested in this idea of grace. This letter, attributed to Paul, is oriented toward the idea of prevenient grace. Grace not just freely given, not just unearned, but given in anticipation. A gift given to us before we’re even aware of God’s presence and operation in our lives. This idea of grace is a new understanding in the “New Testament,” but we can see the handprint of God’s grace back through the Hebrew Scriptures. We have story after story of God’s unlimited grace extended to humankind. We can see it in the story of Moses, who repeatedly tried to deny God’s call. We can see it in the way God saves the Israelites over and over again. We can see it constantly throughout the story of King David—boy did that guy need some grace! It’s hard to find a person more undeserving—abuses of power in his dealings with Bathsheba, stealing, lying, killing—and yet God incarnate would come to us through the Davidic lineage. The story of Esther’s intervention with the king for the life of

Mordecai was full of grace. Herod's promise to Salome in our gospel passage today echoes the promise made to Esther, but sadly lacks the merciful intent and the bestowing of grace on John the Baptizer. We know that Jesus was given grace as his birth and as a result, we're told, he "grows in grace" (Luke 2:52) to speak and act graciously, offering that grace to others with whom he comes into contact.

In the letter to the church at Ephesus, we're told that God's grace is bestowed freely and *lavishly*, that is, God gives grace beyond our wildest dreams. God gives grace abundantly. The letter talks about God choosing us before the foundation of the world, which, for some interpreters throughout the history of Christian thought has meant only the few are chosen. But, it turns out, God's election is not a matter of scope. We see in verse 10 that God's plan is to "gather up all things in him, things in heaven and on earth." There's no limits on that "all," there's no qualifier there. That's because, as the saying I remember so well from my years of living in the very Southern state of Arkansas goes, "y'all means all." Not just the people we like. Not just the people who believe as we do. Not just people in our immediate vicinity. All.

God's freely bestowed grace is given through Christ according to the good pleasure of God's will. And what do we know of God's will? What can we, as mere human beings know of the will of the great and powerful, infinite God? Well, we know God through Christ, do we not? And what we know about God through Christ is that God is good. God's will is good. And God acts with goodwill toward God's creation—which underscores this idea that no one and nothing are beyond the reaches of God's grace. Psalm 24 reminds us that the world is the Lord's and all that is in it and all who live in

it. God, who founded all things, the seas, the skies, the mountains, God who created all that is and was and ever will be, that same God also created us.

This letter to the Ephesian church was likely a circular letter, which means that it is one that went out to many churches in the first century Roman empire. So it's meant to have broad appeal and meaning, a wide-reach in order to share this idea of God's grace with all believers in this region at this time, and, if important enough to share with the early church broadly, is also important to the twenty first century church 2000 years later. It also means that this grace from God is not an individualistic idea—it's bigger than that. The fact that this grace comes through, in and with Christ further implies that age-old notion that we have unity *in* Christ. Christ's prayer in John 17:21 is just that, "that all of them may be one." In, through, and with Christ all are shown God's grace and all are one.

But all this beautiful talk of grace and unity and God's reach presents us with a little problem. Bad things happen in the world God has created, do they not? People, lavishly given the grace of God, united in Christ, still do bad things. If God is so good and so freely bestows grace, why are there still evils in the world? Why do bad things happen? Well, if I had a definitive answer to that question, I think I'd be published in all the theological journals. The truth is that none of us truly knows, but I do think it has something to do with the fact that we are an imperfect world. I believe bad things happen because we live in a world that is becoming, not a world that has already arrived at its destination as the Kingdom of God. We make the road by walking it, as they say, and we cannot rush that process. We can't make the end of the road until we reach it. And we're not there yet.

In the process of arriving there, we have work to do. We are called to love one another, to love our neighbor, to care for those who have been less fortunate in life than we have been, the poor, the sick, the abandoned, the unloved. And in the course of all the good we do, we are reminded again and again through scriptures like this who we are and whose we are – and we get to share that with others. We get to, as a community, share the sheer joy of living as God’s people.

The church at Ephesus and beyond heard the message in this letter. They heard not just that we were given grace, but that we are God’s beloved – think about that. The creator of all things in the universe and beyond loves us, chose us, made us. God could have made anything, and yet God chose us to create, to love, to teach, to call us beloved. Again and again, across the ages, God chooses to keep creating and co-create with us. Us. That’s no small thing. That’s no minor issue, that huge. That’s huge.

And so it doesn’t matter how clumsy I am. My lack of gracefulness doesn’t make me less deserving of God’s grace. Audrey’s gracefulness didn’t make her more deserving. It doesn’t matter what you did or who you were or are. It doesn’t matter if people think you’re too clumsy, or stupid, too young, too old, too gay, too liberal—it doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks of you: God loves you and it is God who lavishly bestows grace. It doesn’t matter how worthy you are in the eyes of the world because you have always been beloved by God. Others may be more fortunate by earthly, human measures, but *you* can rest in the blessed knowledge that you are God’s beloved. And that God’s grace is yours to live into.

One thing you will also learn about me is my fondness for poetry, especially the work of the poet most grounded-in-grace, Mary Oliver. In one

memorable line from a poem called, “Sand Dabs, Five,” Oliver writes this about grace: “You can have the other words—chance, luck, coincidence, serendipity. I’ll take grace. I don’t know what it is exactly, but I’ll take it.”

What Oliver is saying here is that the miracles in our life are not chance events, they are purposeful. They are a result of grace. So friends, if you are feeling less than. If you are feeling other. If you are feeling unlucky or a victim of chance. If you are feeling like nothing you do is good enough. If you feel like no one in the world is on your side, rest in the assurance of God’s love and grace. Because if you have nothing else, you have that. And that is a miraculous gift. Amen.