



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

Rediscovering Grace

Mark 1.9–13

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GRACE, AN ANALOGY

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Grace is one of those hard to define concepts. We feel like we might know what it is but when pressed to explain it, it's difficult to put words to it. We say grace before meals, we sing of Amazing Grace. We can show grace to one another. We know people who have a sort of natural personal grace—they seem to know how to navigate life smoothly and make everyone else feel good along the way. We know grace periods—you know, when you get stuck in traffic with the rental car and you show up 54 minutes after the time when the car was supposed to be returned, and are so relieved to hear the agent say, "It's okay, we have a one-hour grace period." (Not that I have any experience with that 😊)

But grace, like many of the deepest things in life, it can be hard to define. Words like mercy, forgiveness, redemption, freedom, understanding, compassion, and love come to mind, but don't quite nail it.

Since it is difficult to define, I want to try this. Picture this in your mind's eye, I'm sure you've seen it, and had the joy of experiencing it. You're in a busy, public place. Let's say the grocery store or an airport. And there is a 6 or 9 or 12 month old baby trying to catch the eye of anyone around her. It doesn't matter whether the person looks friendly or grumpy, worried or sad, whether they are young or old, handsome or homely. She wants to make eye contact. She wants to connect for the sheer joy and pleasure of connecting. And when she does connect, when she meets that person's eye, her eyes light up and it is pure joy.

This is Grace—this is how God looks upon us. God sees the divine spark placed in each one of us and takes delight. God loves to look at us. God loves it when we look back. Whatever we have done. Wherever we are at, God takes delight. That is Grace.

2 GRACE, REDISCOVERED

Some say that Grace is the opposite of karma, which is all about getting what you deserve. Grace is getting what you don't deserve, and sometimes *not* getting what you do deserve. Traditional Christian Definition of Grace: the free and unmerited favor of God. Okay.

Sadly, some strands of Christianity teach that "what we deserve is death with no hope of resurrection." Thinking back to the old standard, "Amazing Grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me." I'm not sure how I feel about that. To think that God created us fallible humans, bound to be wretched failures deserving of death doesn't seem quite like Grace. But it's what many of us have been taught. So how can we rediscover Grace?

THIS MORNING I WANT TO SHARE THREE PILLARS OF GOD'S GRACE.

1. Grace as the expression of God's true nature and character. God is full of grace, it is just who God is.
2. God's Grace is relational. God looks upon us and wants us to look back, no matter what state we are in!
3. Grace is not earned, it is given.

#1 GRACE IS GOD'S TRUE NATURE

For Christians, Jesus is the ultimate example of God's true nature in flesh and bone. Jesus preached radical grace: forgiveness of those who do us wrong, love of enemies, and redefining who was welcome at God's great banquet table. In Christ, we see that God does not just love us from afar, we see that God is willing to deal with the messiness of humanity.

God is willing to bend to our condition and fit the divine will into human life. We see that God is for us! Here's another way to think about it. No matter how you think about creation—how the earth was formed and humanity came to

be—whether you think it was a Genesis of six days or billions of years, whether God had a white beard and was sitting on the throne or that God is the great cosmic force that kick-started the world into being. If you believe that there is a God behind all of this, presumably this God could have chosen not to create the universe, or humanity. But God did. And presumably God did because God wanted to be in relationship with us. God loves to look at us and loves it when we look back.¹

Which brings us to the second pillar.

#2 GRACE IS RELATIONAL. GOD WANTS US TO LOOK BACK

Our understanding of Jesus is an example of how God wants to be in relationship with us, but it isn't the only example. The Bible is full of stories of people who are trying their best not to look at God. But time and again we see God looking to catch their eye, hoping they will look back. Saul persecuted the first Christians but was drawn in and the scales fell from his eyes. Jacob tried to run, only to be wrestled back in by a loving God who saw something special in him. The prophets called entire peoples back to God. No matter how far astray they or we go, God meets our eye with the nonjudgmental joy of a child.

This is radical because it's not how we typically think of relationships. Usually there is give and take, tit for tat. But with God it is different. It is amazing. Which can make it hard to understand. Theologian Marcus Borg said that *God's [radical grace and] acceptance of us is unconditional, not dependent on something we believe or do. But, he goes on, radical grace has most often been too radical for most Christians. We most often put conditions on God's grace. God accepts if...And*

¹Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace; a Vocabulary of Grace*

4 *whenever an “if” clause is added, grace becomes conditional and ceases to be grace.*

Which brings us to our final point.

#3 GRACE IS NOT EARNED, IT IS FREELY GIVEN

Mark 1.9–13

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for 40 days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

I’ve been saving the scripture until now. A voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Why? Why would God be well pleased? What had Jesus done to earn this love and pleasure of God? Nothing. This is before Jesus went into the wilderness and resisted temptation, before he lifted a finger in ministry. Before he was willing to bear the cross. Jesus didn’t have to earn God’s love. And neither do we. God already loves us.

If you are new here, we tend to be a doing people. We are passionate about embodying Jesus in service. We are lovers of peace and want to get to the work of peacemaking to create a world in harmony with God’s desires. We *practice* openness. We do, do, do. We love and live by that scripture from James that faith without works is dead. Doing is our identity. And it is a gateway into the divine. But...We must be careful that doing does not become our reason for being, or scarier yet, our justification for being. God wants us to draw near, God wants to catch our eye.

Now, I mentioned earlier that God's love is like a baby trying to catch our attention. Let's flip the script on that for a moment. We had a parent child dedication a little earlier in worship and boy did we feel the love in this room. But I ask you: did you sense that Jo and Will loved Ngaire because she had done something to earn it? That she had exhibited some skill that made her worthy of love? Or consider this: Was the love that *we* felt for Ngaire and Hana, Will and Jo because they earned it? No, it was because they are. That is how God loves us.

So how would our lives change if we set aside any notion of earning God's Grace by being better people than we are? What if our good faith and good acts grew from the place where we are loved rather than the threat of not being loved? What if we redefined, or maybe just rediscovered, grace? What if we live knowing

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When we live with the understanding and reassurance of God's Grace, the world is a beautiful place.

