



**ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN**

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

Grace upon Grace

Proverbs 15.30, John 1.14–18

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Message from March 18, 2018

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Last week, after worship and most people had exited the sanctuary, just a few folks were lingering. I began to walk back up the aisle to gather my things, and I heard some little footsteps coming up behind me. I could tell that they belonged to about a three-year-old, and they picked up the pace the closer they got to the front. And then I look ahead at the top of the aisle, and there was a lovely woman, kneeling on the floor, with her arms held-out, her eye's riveted on the approaching child, a big smile on her face. And then...Amy Tindall whizzed right past me, totally focused on the beautiful smile that awaited her. She fell into the welcoming arms of her grandma. And both dissolved in laughter right there on the floor, delighting in the reunion.

And for them, and for me, as an on-looker, it was a moment of grace...a gift of God. So great is the love. Clearly neither Lana nor Amy had eyes for anyone else, but were totally absorbed in their connection with the other.

There's a saying, of much wisdom, that I learned several years ago, that has stayed with me—it can be found in scripture—in Proverbs 15:30: *Bright eyes gladden the heart, and good news refreshes the body.* I believe that for both granddaughter and grandmother, their hearts were gladdened as they saw each other with bright eyes. And who of us doesn't feel loved, when we are greeted with bright eyes.

A few weeks ago, when we began this series of sermons on rediscovering grace, Pastor Greg told a story about another child. I'd like to return to that story, because Less is not More when it comes to grace. I don't think we can ever hear too much, experience too much, share too much...grace. Just like the cowbell, we can always use a little more grace.

Here's the story: at the departure gate in an airport, a young couple was waiting with their baby. He was people-gazing,

2 and as soon as he focused on a human face, regardless of whether that person was smiling or frowning, youthful or elderly, in the moment or distracted, the baby responded with total delight. It was so enchanting, that the crowd became awestruck. And we were reminded that the amazing thing, was the notion, that this is how God looks at us, focusing on our faces, in order to be delighted, to see the person, the beloved, that God herself has made and called good, along with the rest of creation. *Bright eyes gladden the heart and good news refreshes the body.* God looks at us with bright eyes...not because of anything we've accomplished, not because of any accolades or awards. God loves us simply because we are. And that is grace.

Grace is woven throughout scripture. It's interesting to take a look at the original language of the biblical texts in which "grace" is found. In the Hebrew scriptures, we find that "grace" is often translated from the word "Hesed" such as Psalm 51—*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love, according to your abundant mercy.* It denotes just that: steadfast love, goodness, kindness, lovingkindness, mercy. It is mega-love, the abundant BIG LOVE. Grace—the kind of love that would cause one to look on another with bright eyes!

In the New Testament, in Greek, grace is most likely translated from the word Charis. It's used in Luke's gospel at the beginning: *The angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary for you have found favor (grace) with God.* Charis indicates, active kindness, gentleness, forbearance, dealing gently with.

What has captured my attention is the repeated use of "grace" in the opening verses of the gospel according to John.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Grace upon grace—written in a way that denotes grace cascading, kind of like a gentle but steady waterfall... Can you picture that? The lavishness of God's grace, cascading over us, washing us, refreshing us, renewing us, as God captures our gaze with bright eyes.

I think our Quaker friend Philip Gulley is right on, in the definition that he provides in his book, "If Grace is True."¹ He writes: *Grace is not an expected reward earned by good people. It is not a divine gift offered grudgingly to a chosen few. Grace is God's unfailing commitment to love. Grace is...God's unfailing commitment to love.* That resonates with God's focus on our faces, in order to be delighted, to see the person, the people, the beloved, that God has made. God looks at us with bright eyes, eager for us to return the gaze with equally bright eyes. And God's grace cascades over us with an unfailing commitment to love...no matter what. We see God's grace manifested in the bright eyes of the baby in the airport, and in the bright eyes of Amy and Lana.

Grace is foundational to our faith. There is so much more we can say about grace—so many stories to tell. Books have been written about grace. Yet it's not simple. There are times in all of our lives when we search for those bright eyes...that unfailing love...and we seem to come up empty-

¹If Grace is True, p. 7.

4 handed. The truth is, life can be hard. When we look at the way the world really is, we see that bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. That's just the way it is. And grace can seem far, far away.

One of the precious opportunities and responsibilities of pastoral ministry is sitting with folks who are asking incredibly difficult yet real-life questions. When a loved one dies, or when someone receives a terminal diagnosis or when that hoped-for baby never is conceived, or when a relationship seems painfully fractured beyond repair, or when the joy seems to have gone out of living and anxiety and depression sap all strength ...and we've cried out to God, but the bright eyes are out of sight...where is that grace upon grace?

Just on Wednesday this past week, many of us gathered at the peace pole at the college for 17 minutes, each minute to commemorate a person who was killed in the most recent school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. As we stood together in the bitter cold with snowflakes dancing in the wind, the college chaplain read the name and age of each of the 17 victims, while a chime sounded. Many of the victims were 14-years-old... children precious in God's sight. And we wonder...

...Where is grace? What about those who perpetrate violence—what about the shooter? And the “coward cop”? And what about those of us who hear the news, feel the pain and yet are trapped by inertia? Sometimes it seems that people are in the wrong place at the wrong time, and bad things happen, without explanation. No easy answers...questions that humankind has struggled with from the beginning of time. And we wonder, where is God? And we hunger...for grace.

LET'S RETURN TO THE PASSAGE IN JOHN:

The word “grace” is used only four times in the whole gospel of John, and all four are right here in the prologue. Once the Word becomes flesh, grace is then incarnated in the rest of the Gospel. And that’s Jesus. Jesus, by the manner of his living and his teaching, shows what grace looks like, tastes like, smells like, sounds like and feels like. “From his fullness” has the sense of the sum total, complete, “superabundance” of grace. And grace upon grace...that cascading grace...grace heaped upon grace; an inexhaustible supply of grace. That is Jesus. And as followers of Jesus, that is us. Grace is God’s unfailing commitment to love. We too can embody grace for one another and for the world, as followers of Jesus, the one who embodies grace in superabundance.

I have had the privilege of spending time these past couple of months with the Dali’s while they are here in E’town. Dr. Samuel was president of the church when the insurgency of the Boko Haram hit Nigeria in 2014 and thousands of people were kidnapped and killed and villages were destroyed by the terrorist group. Dr. Rebecca has been working relentlessly to help through her NGO, CCEPI—Center for Caring, Empowerment and Peace Initiatives. We’ll hear from her next week.

We in the church US have been awestruck and inspired by the resiliency of our Nigerian brothers and sisters in the face of their persecution. Even just months after the worst of the violence, we heard things like “I am grateful to be counted among the living” from those who lost family and friends and home and church. And even in the face of great loss, we hear them say, “We thank God—it could have been worse.” To be sure, they have done tremendous work in trauma healing to cope with their losses. They have also drawn on their deep faith, which carries them.

6 In 2016, a team of 10 of us from this congregation traveled to Nigeria to support the EYN, our sister church in Nigeria. We attended the crossover service on New Year's Eve, where we literally prayed in the new year. Each year, the church chooses a theme to guide their worship and learning and gatherings. Shortly after midnight, a large banner was unrolled from the balcony, amidst drum rolls and cheers, and revealed the new theme for the year. It was a theme embraced in unity by all of the EYN churches for 2016. And the theme—Accepting God's Gift of Grace. I asked the Dali's about that theme last week. And they said that through grace, "God has given us a chance to be what is supposed to be."

One of the most meaningful experiences for our group was to help with a food distribution to widows, whose numbers were growing daily. We served several hundred women, many of whom had several young children and carried babies on their backs. After the distribution, we huddled to pray together with Dr. Rebecca. And I asked her what she would like us to tell the church US upon our return. She said, *tell them the violence continues. Just a few days ago, the Boko Haram slaughtered 7 more people in Chibok. Over 8,000 EYN members have been killed and the violence continues. She said, pray for peace. And then she, and we, were moved to tears as she said: Your love is overwhelming...it is as if we're holding hands around the world and across the ocean.*

AUTHOR PHILIP YANCY WRITES:

Perhaps the grace of God means something like this: it's as if God is saying: here is your life. You might never have been, but you are, because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you. There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours if only you reach out and take it and share it, with bright eyes.

In grace, God has given us a chance to be what is supposed to be.

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God is searching for us ...and as we turn to God, as we, too, search with bright eyes, we have a chance to be.... what is supposed to be. Grace upon grace upon grace.

