

Healing Grace

Genesis 50: 15-21 Matthew 18: 21-35

A young employee secretly misappropriated several hundred dollars of his business firm's money. When this action was discovered, the young man was told to report to the office of the senior partner of the firm.

As he walked up the stairs toward the administrative office, the young employee was heavy-hearted. He knew without a doubt he would lose his position with the firm. He also feared the possibility of legal action taken against him. Seemingly his whole world had collapsed.

Upon his arrival in the office of the senior executive the young man was questioned about the whole affair. He was asked if the allegations were true, and he answered in the affirmative.

Then the executive surprisingly asked this question: "If I keep you in your present capacity, can I trust you in the future?" The young worker brightened up and said, "Yes, sir, you surely can. I've learned my lesson." The executive responded, "I'm not going to press charges, and you can continue in your present responsibility."

The executive concluded the conversation with his younger employee by saying, "I think you ought to know, however, that you are the second man in this firm who succumbed to temptation and was shown leniency. I was the first. What you have done, I did. The mercy you are receiving, I received. It is only the grace of God that can keep us both."

The whole story seems pretty hard to believe, doesn't it? There are several places that can leave you shaking your head in disbelief. He didn't get hauled out by the police, but gets a summons to the head office. After confessing, he isn't fired. The exec doesn't ask for restoration of the stolen money. The exec had done something similar as a young man himself, and he didn't get fired. The whole thing is unreal. By its unreality, the story proves the exceptional nature of grace.

There are favors and kindnesses that we might experience on any given day, and one could rightly say that those gestures come from a gracious spirit.

For Christians, we encounter grace in our relationship with God through Jesus. We Presbyterians set God's grace as one of the central precepts of our faith life. We acknowledge our great and persistent sinfulness – our "total depravity," together with our inability to even begin to pay the cost that would release us from bondage to the debt of sin. Our situation is hopeless and we are effectively powerless to save ourselves, and no one and nothing else in creation can do so either.

We come to realize that only sacred grace, the unmerited favor of a loving God, can redeem the debt of our sinfulness. Our debt is paid in full and forever by Jesus on

the cross who offered himself for the satisfaction of our sins, and brings about our salvation not matter how undeserving a person might be. This sacred grace is completely irrational and typically inexplicable and wholly unjustified.

Of course, such sacred grace did not start with Jesus, having been featured regularly throughout the Hebrew Bible as God relates to the ones he calls, first with his human creation, Adam and Eve, then Noah, then the patriarchs, then the Hebrews in Egypt, then the nation-states of Israel and Judah, and then the Jews as a people as they became dispersed throughout the world – the diaspora.

When grace has been experienced, and one has been humbled by the generosity of the gift, senses the deep love of the Giver, and esteems the precious value of what could never be acquired in any other way, it is always hoped that the one receiving this would come to reflect this grace in their conduct and attitude.

A great example of this comes from Joseph in today's reading. At this point, Joseph and his brothers have buried their father Jacob back in the homeland of Canaan, and have returned to their new home in the land of Goshen in Egypt.

Upon some reflection, or maybe after drinking too much wine, the brothers start to wonder about Pharaoh's powerful prime minister, their brother Joseph who they had tried to kill off many years ago when Joseph was only a child. In their conversations together, they speculate that maybe now with their father Jacob dead, Joseph may be inclined to unleash the wrath he *surely* must bear towards them for their heinous acts against Joseph long ago. The brothers cannot believe that Joseph would not seek some sort of revenge for the despicable acts of his brothers. They come to figure that he was only restrained this long out of respect for their father Jacob. Now that Jacob has died, what's to stop Joseph from giving them a taste of their own medicine?

Their collective genius comes up with a brilliant plan to save their own keesters. On this genius scheme, please note my early remark about the possible influence of heavy drinking. They send Joseph a letter that purports to share the deathbed wishes of Jacob that Joseph should spare his brothers and forgive them their sinful actions against him. The text says that Joseph wept, although it does not say why he wept.

Then the brothers appear. I call attention once again to the speculation of their heavy drinking during this episode. The brothers fall down at Joseph's feet, perhaps because they were unable to stand any longer. Regardless, as they declare to Joseph, "We are your slaves," this does fulfill the prophecy from the beginning of the Joseph saga that the brothers will be bowing down in service to Joseph.

Joseph then tries to explain events to them in faith terms. While their plans were certainly oriented to harm Joseph, it was, is, and always will be God's plans that are fulfilled. Joseph says, *God intended [your action against me] for good to accomplish ... the saving of many lives.*

Joseph is giving them a lesson in grace, and no one better than Joseph had already experienced a life of grace. With a heart of faith in God, Joseph is made aware of the power of faith as a central character of the God of his faith. As Joseph received God's grace in his life, it can be anticipated that the experience of sacred grace got reflected by him as a witness to the love of God.

In his ongoing encounters with his brothers, they still cannot comprehend the grace that Joseph is showing them. Just as we found the whole story earlier of the embezzler keeping his job as unreal, so the brothers can't believe that Joseph isn't going to suddenly pull the rug out from under them, not unlike the way they ambushed Joseph.

Joseph also uses grace as a measure for healing. Joseph's grace stands at the center of the new relationship with his brothers, trying to bridge a huge divide between them. We can imagine that this use of grace will succeed eventually, and bring healing and some sense of normalcy to their interactions.

The word for grace in Greek is *xaris*, like charisma. It has a variety of meanings including the word used of a gift. Grace is precisely a gift, and generally one that is very precious indeed. As I said before, for Christians, our God-given, Christ-derived grace is something that is beyond price or value, like the treasure in the field or the priceless pearl; the grace of God is life giving, life saving, and most importantly, for our healing. The precious gift of grace can, as in Joseph's story, bridge old and intense divides that seemed impossible to repair. Some grace can go a long way.

In the reading from Matthew, the story line continues on forgiveness. You'll recall last week it was the manual of church discipline in confronting and correcting an unrepentant sinner. Jesus now wants to reinforce the lesson of forgiveness which is a companion to precious healing grace at the heart of the good news of the gospel.

It starts with Peter wondering how often he would have to forgive, as many as seven times? No, Jesus answers **seventy** seven times. Of course, this is not a literal number to be taken legalistically, but a figure of expression that dismisses the number Peter suggested and inflates it ridiculously. It's clear that Jesus is teaching that there is no limit to the forgiveness a disciple should show. Implicitly inferred is that you disciples have had countless of your sins forgiven by your gracious and loving God who seeks your healing and your peace. How corrupt it would be for you to put limitations on the gracious forgiveness you would extend. And that calls for a parable.

The parable of the unmerciful servant begins with the one who was forgiven an unbelievable amount of money – ten thousand talents. As a comparison, all of the tax revenue from the entire region of Judea, Samaria, Galilee and the rest amounted to 800 talents. Ten thousand talents may have been the total earnings of the entire province, a sum that a single individual could neither possess nor owe. The extraordinary exaggerated sum parallels the exaggeration with Peter of forgiving seventy seven times.

However, this servant who had received a totally unbelievable cancellation of his debt – pure incredible, irrational, grace – this servant came upon a fellow servant who owed him about \$20 (a hundred denarii), attacking him and insisting on payment. When the servant asks forgiveness, he gets thrown in prison.

The other servants went to the master and explained what happened. The master called in the unmerciful servant, the one who had his incalculable debt cancelled so graciously. The master chastised the servant for his unforgiving and ungracious conduct, and had him punished, tortured until payment in full was made, or as we call it, eternal torment.

Jesus wants his disciples to take this lesson to heart. So much of what we do and say can be graceless unless the awareness of this precious gift we've received is truly appreciated. Grace sets a whole new path and can open doors in relationships that had seemed locked and sealed forever.

The fiery leader of the Irish Protestants, Rev. Ian Paisley, died the other day. He struggled bitterly, indeed viciously against his Roman Catholic opponents. A break-away Presbyterian, he did as much as he could to maintain the wall that divided Protestant and Catholic for decades in Northern Ireland. In the end, he eventually came to recognize that peace and co-existence could occur. Acts of grace from both sides brought an end to the "troubles" that had caused Northern Ireland such grave trauma for all of those years. Thankfully, the day ultimately came when peace could be sought and healing could begin. The strife that Paisley promoted cannot be overlooked, but his legacy will be of one who opened the door to new life for Northern Ireland, bringing a measure of peace and a chance for healing.

God's grace is born out of God's love, and Jesus' teaching expects the faithful to reflect such love in our own lives. By such gracious action, we, too, can be bearers of peace and a chance for healing, the new life promised in Christ fulfilled by his faithful and merciful servants. In this, we show our allegiance to the Kingdom, not to ourselves, our clan, or our agenda. By our faith in the new life promise of our Lord and Savior, acts of grace that come from our faith witness can be the source of healing miracles.