

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ  
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost & Outdoor Worship- June 20, 2010

Scripture lessons: Psalm 34:1-8 & Luke 7:36-50

GRUMBLING ABOUT GRACE

Philip Yancey is one of today's best Christian writers. In his terrific book entitled, *What's So Amazing about Grace?*, he points out that several words which traditionally have been basic to our understanding of Christian faith seldom get used in daily life anymore. In times past, these words were regularly used apart from the church so that when Christians used them, people outside the faith could still clue in. But now we have to pump them up, lay them out, define, explain, and elaborate them before people can even start to "get" them. It makes it much harder to communicate.

In a society, for example, where people routinely were bought and sold into slavery and where being bought out of slavery was known as being *redeemed*, the word *redemption* carried readily available meaning that the early church could build on. In a culture like that, to say that Jesus was the *Redeemer* was to say something that would quickly grab people's attention. In our time, however, we don't even redeem green stamps at the grocery store anymore like my Mom used to do. Talk about redemption now and most people say, "Huh?"

Similarly, in a culture where numerous pagan cults routinely took ordinary objects and prayed over them to render them sacred, a word like *sanctified* also meant something significant that people widely understood. To claim in that setting, as the early church did, that every person could be *sanctified* was again to say something that would make ordinary folks sit up and take notice. But who uses the word *sanctify* now outside of church? We don't even use it that much inside of church anymore.

The word *grace*, however, is different. It's still central to our faith, yet also commonly used with readily understood meanings in our larger society. Philip Yancey highlights many of its derivatives that are frequently used outside of the church even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He writes, "We are *grateful* for someone's kindness, *gratified* by good news, *congratulated* when successful, *gracious* when hosting friends. When a person's service pleases us, we leave a *gratuity* . . . A composer may add *grace notes* to the score . . . Credit cards, rental car agencies, and mortgage companies . . . extend to customers a . . . grace period . . . Newspapers speak of . . . a "fall from grace" . . . We insult a person by pointing out a dearth of grace: "You *ingrate!*" we say, or worse, "You're a *disgrace!*" . . . A person who offends the U.S. government by some act of treachery is officially proclaimed a "person without grace" (a *persona non grata*).

Phil Yancey continues, "Grace, gracious, graceful. Are there any more beautiful words in our language?" I agree they're among the most appealing we have, but it's still an open question how much we actually welcome grace. Grace sounds good, but how far are we willing to go with it?

For instance, today's gospel story is all about grace. It's about the amazing grace of Jesus Christ, yet not everyone's happy with the grace Jesus shows. Maybe that's because it's a story about dinnertime.

The dinner table's a place where boundaries usually are firmly set. Normally, we don't eat with just anybody. Let's say our twenty-something daughter, just home from college, suddenly asks, "Can I invite Leo over for dinner with us?" Suddenly, our ears perk up. Who's Leo? Who is this that our daughter wants him to dine with us?

Or you're on your first week at a new job. You wonder if you'll like it, and especially how you'll get along with your new colleagues. Someone says to you, "There's a group of us that goes out for lunch every Friday. Would you like to join us?" That's a big deal because maybe these people will become your friends. Being invited to share a weekly meal with them opens that door wide.

The dinner table is a place of intimacy. Gathering to eat together is one of the best ways to bond more closely. That's why in our Jewish and Christian traditions, regular meals together are seen as a kind of sacrament of family life. They're commended to us as an outward and visible way to nurture the inward and spiritual grace of loving family ties.

For the Jewish people of Jesus' time, every meal had religious significance. In fact, as Christians, we get our custom of saying a blessing, of saying grace before meals, from our Jewish ancestors. In offering a blessing before eating, we follow the Jewish practice of claiming the dinner table as a fine place of God's grace. "God is great, God is good, we thank You, Lord, for our food" is a very Jewish prayer to pray. We've learned from our Jewish kin that we don't have to go to a mountaintop to meet God. All we have to do is consider the food on our tables and the companions we share it with.

Today's gospel reading brings us Jesus at the dinner table. He's the guest of a man named Simon, who is a Pharisee. As a Pharisee, Simon is deeply devoted to his Jewish faith. He's strongly committed to studying the Scriptures and applying them to his daily life.

His guests have arrived, the blessing's been offered, and the conversation begins. It's likely a religious conversation since Simon as a Pharisee has invited Jesus as a rabbi to this meal. All seems to be going well until a certain "woman of the city" (read prostitute) enters the scene. She's at Jesus' feet weeping. She washes his feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. She kisses Jesus' feet and anoints them with oil.

Simon doesn't like this at all, but it's not because the woman has violated proper social etiquette. As Jesus says, she's actually shown him great hospitality. At that time it was customary, when guests entered your home, to offer them a kiss and to wash their feet as acts of generous welcome.

Simon's problem isn't with what the woman is doing- it's with who she is. He says to himself, yet apparently loud enough for everyone else to hear, "If this man was a prophet, he would know who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him- that she is a sinner."

According to Simon, prophets are supposed to recognize major sinners when they see them and make sure to steer clear of them. Prophets lay out the boundaries between the righteous and the unrighteous and make sure no one crosses them. But Jesus disagrees and tells a parable in reply.

One man owes a creditor a small sum. Another man owes the same creditor a large sum. When neither man can pay, the creditor decides to forgive both debts. Jesus asks Simon which debtor will be the most grateful and when Simon gives the obvious answer Jesus gets right to his point.

"Simon, do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little."

Know yourself as a forgiven sinner and your heart fill with love and gratitude. Figure yourself as a pretty darn good person and your love and gratefulness will go thin. So says Jesus.

Where is each of us in this story? I'm probably Simon. I'm the one who along with Erin has the big theological education. I'm the supposed expert in things religious, the so-called "Master of Divinity" who's officially ordained as a minister.

Yet then again, maybe not. Remember that the Pharisees like Simon were lay people. You're the ones who got out of bed on this sunny Sunday morning to come and worship as seriously religious lay folk. Maybe you're Simon.

I'd say it's easy for all of us to be Simon- to be there when God's grace is poured out on an obvious "sinner", on an outsider, on someone who is so not "one of us". It's easy to see grace freely given and then grumble about it.

How common is it to harp on the sins of others while going easy on, forgetting, or even denying my own? How easy is it to proudly relish my particular achievements while overlooking my failures and playing up others' shortcomings? We usually don't do this sort of thing out loud, of course, since it is bad form, but do we quietly do it in the corners of our hearts?

I remember hearing about a man on death row. He had murdered an elderly woman in cold blood. Just before his execution, however, the prison chaplain announced that the man had become a Christian. He had given his life to Christ and now asked for forgiveness from his victim's family. The family said, "Are you kidding? There's no way."

Would you have forgiven that man? Would I have forgiven him? Might this thought have crossed our minds? “Sure- now that he’s about to be strapped to the executioner’s table, he gets religion. Now he finds God. How convenient is that?!!”

Philip Yancey is right. *Grace* is a lovely word that still carries a great deal of meaning in our time, even outside of church. But whether in or out of church, when we see grace freely given, given to someone we consider inferior to ourselves, to someone who in our eyes is so obviously a loser how does grace sound then?

Even though we know that grace is always a sheer gift, it’s still something we can feel that we, of course, deserve while others . . . well, you know, they probably don’t. Yet here comes Jesus again in today’s gospel lesson with grace for *everyone*. He’s determined to make the table a place of gracious welcome not just for insiders, not just for the deserving, not just for family, but for *all*.

Jesus says to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” If faith is a truthful way of seeing, then this woman has it. She sees who she really is and who Jesus really is. She humbly sees herself as a sinner and Jesus as her gracious and welcoming Savior. She sees him as the One who’s hot to invite every sinner, i.e., all of us, to God’s gospel feast. Simon, for his part, sees himself as a pretty darn good guy. He sees Jesus as a maybe prophet who should join Simon in making sure that all the good guys don’t get contaminated by the sinners.

But we are the church and as followers of Jesus we see as this woman does. Every time we gather for a meal, whether for the Lord’s Supper or for breakfast like today, we know that Jesus is with us. We know he’s calling us to see everyone- including and especially those who aren’t like us, who are outsiders, who everyone else sees as losers- to see all of them as our sisters and brothers, every one of them as welcome at the table, invited by Jesus to God’s feast of salvation.

One of the worst tragedies of our histories as human beings is that we so often use our religions to split up self-righteously. We use them to draw lines across the world that mark us as the saved and others as sinners, us as the faithful and others as infidels, us as the winners and others as losers. Of that kind of religion, no matter what tradition it’s in, Jesus says, “To hell with it.”

He simply wants us to be his disciples. We are his disciples when we hear him say, “Sinners, infidels, and losers, welcome to the feast” and know that he’s talking to us. We’re his disciples when we turn to everyone else and say, “Come with all of us sinners, infidels, and losers to the joy of Jesus’ table. It’s the place of amazing grace.” Amen.

Kurt Kirchoff

#### PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious Lord, in this Pentecost season we keep praying for Your Holy Spirit to come upon us. By Your Spirit, free us from every foolish fear and insecurity that we have. Keep us from trying to cover over them with any false pride that leads us to look down on others. Forgive us any prejudice or self-righteousness that we use to see ourselves as the superior ones. Give us instead the gospel courage and sense of self-worth that come from knowing that we and all people are Your precious children, that we and all people are welcome at the feast of Your gracious love. Bind us together in Your mercy so that we will know ourselves as one in Your Holy Spirit, as one in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ in whose name we pray and as he has taught us, saying together, “Our Father . . .” Amen.