



Sermon by Pastor Tim O'Brien

March 5, 2017

New Testament Lesson

Ephesians 2:4-10

Gospel Lesson

John 3: 1-5; 16-17

Grace

A mother had invited some people over for dinner. When everyone was seated, she turned to her 5 year old daughter and asked her if she would like to say grace. "I wouldn't know what to say mommy," her daughter replied. "Just say what you hear mommy say," her mom said. Bowing her head, the little girl paused and then said, "Lord, why on earth did I invite all these people over for dinner?"

So, today we come to hear about grace. Of course, we all know about grace – like that little girls did - as the prayer you can say before you eat thanking God. There is the grace that we notice when we watch very beautiful dancers perform. But in the Bible the idea of grace is little bit different. The Greek word translated as “grace” in the New Testament is charis. And this word is the root word of another word if you take off the “s” and a “ty” it becomes charity. And charity means to see someone who is struggling and to help them through acts of compassion and kindness without them asking you. This is very close to what we mean by grace as the love and forgiveness of God given to us without our asking or deserving it. This is what Paul meant when he wrote – “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast” And it is this grace that is actively at work shaping us, forming us, and restoring us.

It is this grace at work as Jesus comes into contact with all sorts of people, where some chose to leave the same and others leave completely different. And then there are those who leave, apparently unchanged, but the words and presence of God continues to work on their hearts and lives. This presence of God that lingers and works in our lives is what we call grace. For when we walk with Jesus we walk in the grip of grace. The grace of God that saves us yes, but also shapes us, strengthens us, softens us, and puts within us a new heart. God’s grace that accepts us where we are but doesn’t leave us there.

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In our reading we see this slow persistent grace at work. Jesus receives a visitor at night. Nicodemus, one of the members of Jerusalem's ruling religious body, the Great Sanhedrin, comes to him, stepping symbolically out of the darkness. Coming with his questions both about who Jesus is and what that might mean for him.

Nicodemus recognizes Jesus as someone speaking for God when he says, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

And Jesus replies to him, "You must be born from above. Flesh is flesh, but spirit is spirit." In other words, God wants to do a renovation, a top-to-bottom overhaul of our lives. But Nicodemus is not ready to make this step and accept what Jesus is offering. In the end, Nicodemus goes back into the night. He doesn't reject Jesus, but something has started and it is clear that the slow grace of God is at work in his life.

When next we meet him, in chapter 7 of John, it is festival time in Jerusalem, the joyous feast of Booths. Nicodemus, in the Temple, is seated with the group of rulers who are awaiting the return of the Temple police who have been sent to the courtyard to arrest Jesus. When those guards return empty-handed, the authorities are not pleased. In fact, they are more than that, they are dismayed to hear the police say: "Never has anyone spoken like this."

In the ensuing condemnation, Nicodemus dares to speak up. It is clear the slow grace of God is nudging and working in him as he challenges the interpreters of the Law with their own respect for that Law. He says: "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?"

His small voice for justice is swept away by the scorn of those who share power with him and Nicodemus seems to once again drop back into the darkness.

But God's slow grace goes on working. Slowly and surely. We will never know how Nicodemus wrestles with it, how many times he comes close to seeing who Jesus really is.

But we do know how it ends. The last time we meet Nicodemus, death has already claimed Jesus, and as night falls quickly on Calvary's hilltop, two brand new disciples step forward. One is Joseph of Arimathea, boldly asking Pilate for

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the body of Jesus and offering his own tomb for the burial. And joining him in the task of ministering to the one who died as a common criminal is Nicodemus. The triumph of grace is so visible. It is he who brings the spices to anoint the body, coming to do what was traditionally a woman's task. But that does not matter now. He comes to claim the dead body of the teacher he was unable to publicly acknowledge in life. He comes to perform an action that belongs to the family of the deceased.

And so in every way, Nicodemus has been transformed as he chooses a new path. Grace has claimed him. Career, human respect, power, none of these matters any longer. With a new found love in his heart he comes to bury the Teacher whose words and love worked their way into this heart and back out again transforming him. As the sun sets on that fateful Good Friday, something wonderful is born in the soul of Nicodemus .

In his story we indeed see this slow grace working its transforming action. This love and patience on God's part are constantly active in our world. The grace of God is patiently working in our lives and others.

So, what does grace look like in our life? This week I was reading a story of a man who wrote about his picture of grace as he struggled in life and nearly lost everything because of his alcoholism. He said, "I remember my worst night. Everything was falling apart – my job, my family, my health. I remember sitting there facing the bottle of vodka – just staring at it. I had felt the stirrings to change and gone back and forth in my sobriety. But in that moment I stopped thinking about myself and what I needed. I thought about my little girl and my wife and what taking this drink would do to them, how it would destroy them. I had a friend who gave me a pamphlet on how to get help and on the back was a prayer I said aloud – God, give me grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, Courage to change the things which should be changed, and the Wisdom to distinguish the one from the other. Living one day at a time, Enjoying one moment at a time, Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace, Taking, as Jesus did, This sinful world as it is, Not as I would have it, Trusting that You will make all things right, If I surrender to Your will, So that I may be reasonably happy in this life, And supremely happy with You forever in the next. Amen. – and when I said in prayer the word grace, I knew I was not alone - my family, even through

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everything I had done to them, was still standing by me giving me support to get better. But I also realized that God who sees me for who I really am wasn't giving up on me either and was working within me, forgiving me, giving me the strength to want more out of life than what's in the bottom of a bottle. Isn't that grace? That God loves you just the way you are, but he doesn't want to leave you there. Isn't that grace? That works in you, even when you don't know it. And if you experience this you can't keep it to yourself and that's why after many months to get sober, I now work with others, to share my story, to let them know there is always hope and an amazing grace."

This is the slow persistent grace of God that works in our lives. For this is what Paul wrote about when he said – “Out of great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is a gift of God – For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works.”

In this season of Lent we are invited once again to follow Jesus, to walk in his footsteps to be forgiven and freed, strengthened and sustained, loved and led forward with a new heart to be living examples and pictures of grace. As we proclaim - “Here's my life, Lord. I give it to you. I accept your love and grace. I'm yours. Renew me and make me the person you want me to be.” So, let us accept this gift that came at great cost to Jesus was died for each of us, but is offered freely to us all. This grace alone that will renew, redeem, and restore our lives and our world. Amen.