



Sharing Grace

SECOND  
Presbyterian  
CHURCH

# Sermons on Grace

*February 2020*

# *A Way of Life*

*February 2, 2020*

Steve Jester

Before I read our scripture, there are a couple of aspects of this text that I wanted to say a word about, because it really impacts how you hear it. First, there's a reference in the second verse "to the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit now at work in the disobedient." In first century cosmology, the understanding of how things work, there was an understanding that the place between the moon and the earth was filled with powers that were basically out to get us, that that was where bad things originated, that there were spirits that occupied that space. That's not our understanding, obviously, but it is a way of saying that there is evil, there is a power at work that is close and pervasive.

The second thing is Paul refers here to "the flesh," and we often hear flesh as referring to what we do with our physical bodies and that it's a bad thing, etc. For this writer, flesh is a reference to the old life, a life of self-absorption, of self-obsession, of focusing on ourselves, a life where we rely upon ourselves rather than relying upon the grace of God. Those terms are somewhat odd for our 21st century ears, so I wanted to share that as we begin.

## *Reading from Ephesians 2:1-10*

I was talking with someone the other day and mentioned that I would be preaching on the idea, the concept, the reality of grace, and immediately she said, "Well, I have a story for you about grace." She said it was a time in her life when emotionally and spiritually she was at rock bottom and was even contemplating suicide. She was driving back from out of state to Louisville, and her car broke down in Evansville. She said, "This is it! I'm done. I can't go any further. I've had enough."

She felt as if there was no one to help her, there was a lot of confusion for her as to what to do next and how to get the car fixed. She was emotionally spent. She went and sat down on the curb beside the road where she had left her car, and she was hanging her head in despair. At that moment, she said, she began to let God have it, to tell God what for. In that moment, she was shaking her fist at the Holy One. She was spilling out her anger and her frustration and wondering why God wasn't present to her.

Then, she said, a stranger appeared and sat down on the curb next to her. He hands her a Coke, and he says to her, "It can't be that bad." Then this guy goes on to help her figure out how she can get her car fixed. I don't know if there was money involved, but maybe some of that as well. Then he gets in his car after her

car is fixed, and he follows her on the highway all the way from Evansville to Louisville, just to make sure that she's okay.

I would say that stranger was in that moment kind of a savior. He brought to her life a little bit of hope, a little bit of light, a little bit of new life, and all of that came into the land of deep darkness in which she was living at the time. As she put it, in that moment of alienation from herself, from other people, from God, she certainly didn't get what she deserved. She said she didn't get what she was expecting as someone who was in the process of giving God a hard time. Instead, what she got was a surprising, life-giving gift that just appeared.

"And you were dead through the faults and sins in which you once lived according to the ways of this world, but God brought us to life in Christ. It is through grace that you have been saved and raised us up with him. This is not from yourselves, but it is the gift of God." Grace—it's a word we like. Grace, the undeserved, unearned favor of God, given to us in Jesus Christ. Grace. It is the foundation of our faith. What anchors that foundation, what pulls that foundation together and holds it together like rebar in concrete is this realization, this acceptance, that we cannot save ourselves, that we cannot save ourselves from ourselves, that we cannot save ourselves from the forces of darkness around us.

We cannot overcome our sin, our life in the flesh, to use that Pauline expression, which is to say we cannot overcome who we are by our charm . . . darn it . . . by our hard work, by our intelligence, or by doing lots of good things for other people. We cannot be saved. We cannot be saved in the sense of being made fully alive and made whole and healed. We cannot be saved by how fervently we pray, or by how well we know the Bible. We need a Savior who is not us.

Last May, Diana and I were in Paris, and we visited the War Museum that is in the military hospital, the Invalides. That military hospital is connected to the cathedral in which the ashes of Napoleon are interred. We went through that museum and went through room after room after room of displays. There were uniforms and there were weapons, and there were written materials, and there were photos and film clips from World Wars I and II and other wars. There was even a trench coat from World War I with the original mud still on it. Amazing.

As we went through those rooms, I had a sense that these things are bearing witness to the ongoing willingness of our species

to inflict suffering on each other, a witness to our endless improvement and creativity when it comes to killing each other. In this complex there was also a temporary exhibit on the artist Pablo Picasso and his life and work during the World War I and II era. It was a great display, but as I was walking through one thing particularly caught my eye.

It was a case, a glass case, and in that case there was a sheet, a little bit yellowed like a contact sheet for photos, if you all remember when we used to actually develop photos. On that sheet were close-up shots of the faces of very small children. These children had been laid out in the street after being killed by the fascist forces who bombed this little town in Spain—Guernica—children who looked very much like the ones who run around in our Weekday School downstairs.

Then when we went on to Madrid, I went to a museum, and there I saw the impact of that conflict, the impact of that terror on Pablo Picasso reflected in his masterwork called Guernica, a frenzy of terror and suffering. We really did have a good time on our vacation, and I didn't go around thinking these heavy, dark thoughts all the time! But in that moment it was a testimony to me of the depth and the pervasiveness and the closeness of evil. It is an atmosphere, a way of life, in which we all participate—an atmosphere, the air we breathe. I came away deeply convicted again—we cannot save ourselves. We cannot save ourselves from ourselves. We need a Savior. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves, but it is the gift of God."

The late priest and writer Brennan Manning says this, "Grace proclaims the awesome truth that all is gift. All is gift." God's healing of our broken human condition, God's treatment of our disease of self-absorption, that doesn't come about as the result of services rendered on our part. That doesn't come about because of our behavior or our status. No, God's acceptance of us, God's forgiveness, God giving us new life in Jesus Christ, is undeserved and unearned.

I am loved deeply, not because of who I am but in spite of who I am. I am loved deeply, not because of what I've done but in spite of what I've not done . . . or what I've done wrong. I once heard a speaker put it this way to describe grace: "There is nothing I can do, nothing I can do, that will cause God to love me any less or any more than God loves me in this moment." Salvation isn't our own doing. It is a freely given, costly gift.

I believe that grace is one of the most powerful forces in the universe. It is a central truth to what makes life, life. It is, if you will, good news on steroids. But the way of grace is often at odds with the way of this world. The way of grace butts heads with our normal view of reality. The way of this world says, "You gotta fight to get the good stuff of life, and then you have to fight to keep it."



You get what you deserve, good or bad. You made your bed, now you must lie in it. The good things of God, the good things of life, come to you as a reward because you've lived the right way. You have played by the right rules. I sometimes hear people make a joke like, "Well, I hope I've been good enough, preacher, to get to heaven someday."

Tonight is a spectacle. It is a worship experience. It is called the Super Bowl. I'm going to watch it. I do. I'm going to be like the 100 million who will watch it. I'm going to a great party. I'll probably even enjoy it. I'll probably even enjoy secretly and shamefully those collisions that are beyond comprehension when people just get mashed. Maybe it'll be a good game. But I also know that the Super Bowl is a display of the ways of the world at full throttle.

It transmits beautifully and so professionally the relentless message that the hardest working, most dedicated, smartest, youngest, strongest people not only come out on top and reap the rewards and the glory of victory, but that those kinds of folks and those kinds of actions mean they deserve it . . . they deserve it. Now, you may hear the winning coach, perhaps some of the players, interviewed after the game, "Our guys deserved this win. They worked hard. They worked hard all year. They overcame adversity. They stuck together when other people didn't believe in them. They've had one goal since training camp, and their eyes were

fixed fully on that goal, and so they really deserve this win.”

I guess that could be true . . . on one level. But didn't the other team work hard all year too? Didn't they do everything they could do to win? Wouldn't it be refreshing—maybe even shocking—to hear this interview: “Gosh, we were fortunate to win. In fact, we were just plain lucky. It wasn't really anything we did so much as we got a few breaks that went our way. I can't say that we deserve it more than anyone else. But hey, I'll take the trophy. I'll take the perks that go with it. I am speechless with gratitude,” says coach. Nah.

Our way of life says it isn't my performance, it isn't my achievement, it isn't my excellence that somehow secures the rewards of life—happiness, satisfaction, acceptance of myself, acceptance of others, peace with other folks, peace with God. In the end, all of it is a gift. All of it—acceptance, forgiveness, real change of our lives, a new life. I believe that when we keep before us the truth that grace is the shape of our life together, that grace is at the center of everything, I believe it can transform our lives. Just ask our friend sitting on the curb that day—astonished, ambushed by grace in the midst of despair, who receives care and concern and favor that saves her life and sends her in a different direction.

Our new mission statement is on the cover of your worship bulletin. That statement reflects who we believe we are as people of God and who we pray we might become—sharers of God's grace with each other, sharers of God's grace with the world around us, a world that so often seems dominated by the power of death. Grace is not a gift that we hoard in order to improve our wellbeing or to have better self-esteem. Grace is a gift to share, a way of life that changes the way we relate to each other and to the world. What that looks like in daily living is the focus for the next three Sundays. In the meantime, remember one thing—you don't get what you deserve, thank God!

All praise, honor, and glory be to the One who raises us to new life in Christ.

# *State of Grace*

*February 9, 2020*

Nathan Sautter

*Reading from Romans 3:21-31*

This week we continue our series on our new mission statement—sharing the grace of God with one another and the world around us. Last week, we began by looking at one of the key texts of the Reformation in Ephesians, Paul’s understanding of grace, and I want to continue thinking together about grace. This morning we read another text from the Reformation, from Paul’s letter to the Romans, where he further clarifies his understanding of grace and its connection to faith.

Luther and Calvin and many other Reformers came to this text to make sense of their theological understanding of grace, an idea that became known later as *sola gratia*, or grace alone. Grace becomes, in many ways, one of the most important Reformation ideas, and we understand it today as a Presbyterian distinctive, one of the things that we as a tradition say is important to who we are and defines us. But what exactly is grace?

In the book written by author Philip Yancey, *What’s so Amazing about Grace?* he says that it is the last best word in Christianity that has not been spoiled by misunderstandings. He talks about how we use it all the time, and its meaning is still pretty well understood. He gives numerous examples of how we use the word. We say grace before a meal. Anyone still do that in the home? We say grace. We are grateful, we’re gratified, we congratulate, we are gracious. We leave a gratuity, or at least you should leave a gratuity. A composer uses grace notes to add something extra to a piece of music. Someone has grace, or they move with grace.

Yancey notes that in England, British subjects address royalty as “Your Grace,” students may receive a grace exempting them from certain requirements, or Parliament declares an act of grace to pardon a criminal. In the United States, the government might declare someone as a *persona non grata*, or a person outside of grace. We use the word all the time. We might even know somebody named Grace or perhaps several.

A quick search through my own music library brought no less than 98 songs with the word grace somewhere in the title, and we sing “Amazing Grace” at pretty much every funeral we have in this sanctuary. In fact, we sang “Amazing Grace” last week as our closing hymn, and before that we heard it as an instrumental in the same worship service. I’m pretty sure that we could sing “Amazing Grace” again this morning and no one

would complain. That song has gotten so deep within our bones, because we understand deeply how much it means to us. Grace is all around us. It is something we ought to know well. But why are the Reformers so interested in it and what is Paul’s understanding of it? He says, “By grace you have been saved, and all are justified freely through his grace.” So what is grace?

There’s a famous story—I’m not sure if it’s true, but it’s a great story nevertheless—about a comparative religions conference happening at Oxford University. People were arguing over what the most significant idea within Christianity was. Was it the resurrection? Or perhaps it was the life of Christ? C.S. Lewis walked in and asked what all the fuss was about—what are you all arguing over? So they asked him. He looked at them all and said, “Well, that’s easy. It’s grace.”

Grace so weaves its way in and out of the biblical narrative that sometimes you forget it’s even there it is so constant. From the beginning God created the earth and all that is out of nothing. All that is seen and unseen, that is grace. Then God gives humanity sabbath or rest, as one theologian calls it “grace.” We didn’t deserve it, we didn’t do anything for it—grace.

Then along comes Noah, and God shows grace. God could have destroyed the world but doesn’t. God gives us a sign to remind us always of grace—the rainbow. Then Abraham and Sarah have a child when they are old, 100 years old. After they have tried their own way and forgotten God’s promise, still God gives them Isaac—grace. Joseph becomes the steward of all of Egypt, thus saving God’s people in the midst of famine—grace. Moses delivers them from Egypt—grace.

There is the Passover and they walk on dry ground through where the Red Sea belongs—grace. After they had forgotten God’s saving power, God still provided manna and the pillar of fire in the desert—grace. The story continues with Joshua and Rahab—grace. The judges—grace. Ruth and the story of David, and even in the prophets—grace. Israel has forgotten God, but God has not and will not forget you—grace.

Then . . . Jesus. He didn’t have to come. He didn’t have to reveal himself to us. He didn’t have to go to the cross for us. He did not have to defeat death for us. All of this is grace. In our first reading from the gospel of John, it reminds us that Jesus is grace itself,

that God sent Jesus to be grace, to reveal grace, so that we might receive grace upon grace. All of this—it's a gift. Life itself is a gift; it is grace. This is what grace is, and Paul reminds us in both Romans and Ephesians and throughout his letters that this grace is not anything that we have done for ourselves. It is all God's doing.

In his commentary on Romans, theologian Karl Barth talks about how grace is not grace unless it is incomprehensible, or as others have said, unless it is scandalous. This is what grace is, and there are thousands upon thousands of stories that we could share about our own lives—and I about my own life—and I'm sure you have, as well. I remember when I was young, my mom would choose to help me with my homework, even though I had just been terribly mean to her all day long. That's grace. Or perhaps when you forgive your spouse for something even though they don't deserve it. Or when something amazing or wonderful happens and you don't really know why. This is all grace.

Jesus tells a story about grace. There's a son who asks his father for his inheritance, takes it, and spends all of it. He finds himself sleeping in the pig slop. He wakes up one morning and decides he should go home, but he's worried about how his father will react. But he says, "It can't be worse than this." How does the father respond? When he sees the son coming home, he runs out to meet him and throws a party like no one has ever seen before to celebrate the son who was lost and who has now been found. This is grace. The theological or technical word for all of this is justification, that God welcomes us home, that God justifies us, that neither you nor I have to do anything. We are simply welcomed home . . . just as we are. It's always there. It's always waiting for us. Grace.

There is an element of accountability here. We are asked to do something. Paul talks about it by "keeping the law." This is the part that I think sometimes we as Presbyterians struggle with, that we love God's grace. We love that it's amazing and all-consuming and defines us no matter where we go, but if we have truly experienced grace, then it will lead us to walk in a different way, to live a different kind of life. Friends, that is a difficult task, because it might mean that we have to change our way of being. We might have to alter our habits. We don't do this out of guilt, but out of gratitude, because if I have received life when I deserved death, then I should want to tell everyone that story and I should go seek to find ways to make God's kingdom on earth.

The Apostle Paul says that we should "walk worthy of the grace we have received." Grace leads me to live a different way. Grace leads me to Portland to hand out food and clothes. It leads me to UCHM to help in the food pantry or the youth program, or to grab a bag and fill it up. It leads me to the Cabbage Patch to go Christmas shopping and to wrap clothes or to drive to Lexington to visit a college scholar. It leads me to climb down a mountain to visit brothers and sisters of Christ in El Salvador. It leads me to invite neighbors and co-workers, friends, to experience God's

grace for themselves, because experiencing grace changes the way I see the world.

It means that I seek help for my addiction or counseling for a broken relationship, and responding to grace means that I seek the wellbeing of all of God's children, even when it might not be the easiest thing to do. It means seeking after God's kingdom first, not my own wellbeing. It means using God's gifts for others and not for myself. Sharing grace means I put others first. It means participating in the life of faith. It means being committed to a community of faith even when it's difficult.

It means making decisions about what is important and drawing distinctions between the things that will last and the things that won't, to seek the greater things. This is not a one-size-fits-all approach to life, and it isn't about making a checklist and marking off who has done what and who hasn't. No, it's about a way of being in the world, to live a life that is worthy of the grace that we have received, the grace upon grace. It's about living in a state of grace.

So, no matter where we find ourselves this morning, Regardless of what you've done or haven't done, you are welcomed home into the loving arms of the Father, or perhaps into a case of abounding arms that welcome you home. This is why every week we begin with the means of grace—to remind us of the truth that we are always welcomed home, that we are never outside of God's grace, that in the Font of Identity and the Word of Life and the Table of Sustenance we are reminded week after week that we belong to God, body and soul, in life and in death.

Last week we celebrated communion. We shared in grace. We experienced grace. This morning at 8:30, we did a baptism, where we experienced grace again, and perhaps we bathed two children in grace. We call the sacraments outward and physical signs of an inward and spiritual grace, because they remind us of the gift that is waiting for us all the time. There is nothing we have to do. There is no way to merit this grace. It is simply there. God is waiting, always waiting, to welcome us home. This is our narrative. This is who our God is—grace. Do you see it? Can you taste it? Do you know what it looks like?

So I invite us this morning to sit a little longer with amazing grace. Let it get deeper into our bones, into our souls, because it is freely given and it is freely ours. May we all find and experience God's grace this day so that we might freely share it.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

# “What a Relief”

February 16, 2020

Steve Jester

*Reading from Matthew 18:21-35*

You may be familiar with the southern gothic Roman Catholic writer, Flannery O'Connor. Flannery O'Connor was a writer who filled her stories with odd and disturbing characters who acted in creepy ways. One of her stories involves a psychopathic person who executes an entire family, one after the other, while he is sharing profound philosophical insights. There's a con man who pretends to be a Bible salesman, who woos a young farm girl that he meets at one of his stops. This girl happens to have an artificial leg, and so he gets her up into the hayloft and then he steals her artificial leg and disappears.

Many times, as you might imagine, Flannery O'Connor was asked, “Why do you use those kinds of grotesque, ugly characters and images?” Her answer was something like this: “Sometimes a mule who is stubborn – well, you can get that mule's attention with a shout or with a whack on the rump, but sometimes it takes a two-by-four upside the head to get them to listen, to get them to move.” That's what Flannery O'Connor was trying to do – to get people to hear with fresh ears, to hear particularly what she was saying about God and the Christian life.

Jesus shares this story—the story or parable of the unforgiving servant—and I think he is doing something similar with this story. This story is filled with bizarre details, one of them being an amount of money that is absurd, a figure that is beyond comprehension. This story has within it human trafficking. It has violence. It has torture. It has a powerful person who with a word can make or break the lives of other people, this powerful person who in a rage changes his mind and changes the life of someone else.

I wonder if this is Jesus' way of grabbing our attention, we people of faith, Jesus' way of waking us up to an essential truth—something we've heard so much we may not pay attention to it anymore—but an essential, central truth about being a disciple of Jesus. It's this: Forgiveness is not an optional part of the Christian life. Forgiveness is required. Forgiveness is what holds us together as his followers. Forgiveness is what makes life itself possible with others.

Last year, Diana and I (actually Diana, because I'll give her the credit), decided that we should take advantage of these incredibly low interest rates—you've heard about this—and that we should do some refinancing of various things through our bank because it was a good time to do so. As a part of that process, of course, there's a routine credit check. What came back from that credit check was not routine. Imagine my surprise that the Department

of Transportation was telling us that we had a five-year-old debt to the tune of \$8000 and that the Treasury Department was acting as a collection agency to come get our money.

What I didn't mention at the 8:30 worship service is that, oh, yes, the IRS decided it would be a good idea to take our tax return and apply it to that debt. There was no indication on this piece of paper as to what this debt was about. We went through a saga of phone calls and emails and people saying, “I'm very sorry, you know. I can't share any details about this with you, but I will pass you to the next person up the line who may be able to help you.” We knew it was a mistake. We knew that we didn't owe that money. We were pretty sure we weren't going to have to pay it. But still, what if? What if?

Finally, Diana contacts the right person. We are able to discover what the debt is about. There's a guy named Steven A. Jester (spelled like me, but I'm Steven P). But Steven A. Jester, somewhere in California, had failed to pay some fee related to being a part of a skydiving school. We had some amusing phone calls, such as: “Now are you sure that your husband has never been involved with a skydiving school?” We're still untangling the threads, but what a relief to have evidence. What a relief to know for sure that such a debt isn't weighing us down. What a relief to be able to breathe a little easier.

A financial manager for a king gets caught by an audit—it happens. Whether it's mismanagement, embezzlement, whatever it is, this guy owes his boss 10,000 talents. Now, a talent—let's say it this way—10,000 talents equals 150,000 to 200,000 years of an average salary. That's a lot of cash! It's an absurd amount of money, and there's no way that this guy could ever pay it back. His life is over as he knew it, and the king can't begin to cover those kinds of losses, but still, he can make this guy pay... in some way. He sells him and his family into slavery, he liquidates the manager's assets, and he applies all of that to this unpayable debt.

Then the manager begs his boss for mercy. He says, “Just be patient with me. Give it a little time, and I can pay it back.” Of course, he can't, but that's what he says. Unbelievably, the king gives the manager even more than he has asked for! All he has ever asked for is just a little time, a little patience, but what he gets is the complete forgiveness of the debt! It's wiped off the books. It's as if it never existed. It's amazing! Can we imagine the relief that would be felt to be relieved of such a crushing debt? Which is why the colleagues



of this manager cannot believe what happens next.

The guy leaves the boss's office, he goes to the break room, where he encounters another employee who happens to owe him a few hundred bucks. He demands that this guy pay up right now, and the guy says, "Please, give me some time. Have some patience with me." He says, "No way." He throws him into debtors' prison. It's grotesque that someone would be forgiven that kind of debt, and then couldn't turn around and forgive someone else a little piddly debt!

His colleagues turn the manager in to the boss, and surely they're satisfied and happy when they stand back and watch what the boss does with this guy—he gets what's coming to him. The boss reverses his decision and says, "You're not only going into slavery. In fact, I'm going to put you into prison, and you're going to be tortured for the rest of your life." You can just see everybody saying, "Yeah, he got what was coming to him! He deserved it. Justice is done." I mean, don't we hear this story with a sense of outrage as well? How could somebody who's been forgiven like that not turn around and forgive someone else their minor infraction?

Can you imagine such a jerk doing something like that? Why, he deserves...oh, oh ...look at the damage that's being done. Look at the lives that can be destroyed by the withholding of mercy. As we fall into the same dark pit as that ungrateful manager who won't

forgive, and neither will we. "He deserves what he gets," we find ourselves thinking. We insist that others get what they deserve. Lord, how often must I forgive my brother or sister who wrongs me? As often as seven times? I'm being very magnanimous, Lord. Seven times—it's only three that's required by the Bible. No, not seven...about 77 times. "And were you not bound," says this king, "to have pity on your fellow servant just as I had pity on you?"

The new mission statement that we're dealing with all month long speaks of sharing the grace of God with one another and with the world around us. We are those servants who owe a debt that we cannot begin to pay back. We are those servants who over and over and over hear and know the relief of having that burden of selfishness and the burden of pride and the burden of indifference to the needs of others lifted off of us by the promise that comes every Sunday from behind that communion table. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. We are those servants who in grateful response to that pardon are bound to, must forgive, our debtors. You remember that phrase from the Lord's Prayer? Forgiveness. Forgiveness is the primary way that we share God's grace with one another in this community of faith and in all our communities.

At our staff meeting on Tuesday morning, we do what we always do, which is I read the text, this story, at the beginning of the meeting and then ask for the staff to basically write the sermon for me by giving me good ideas! I read the parable and then the staff responded well and we had a great conversation. One of our staff members asked a profound question. The question was this: For what do we at Second Church need to forgive each other? For what do we need to forgive each other? In other words, what are the particular debts that are a part of our life together in this place with each other? What are those things that are particular to our community?

There were lots of different answers, but I was able to bundle them into one basic statement, and that is this: We need to forgive each other. We need to forgive ourselves for being human. We are a high expectation church. We have high expectations of ourselves, of each other. We hold exacting standards of competence and achievement, and that's a good thing. It makes it an exciting place to be. But it also means we often have a low tolerance for mistakes and for lapses in judgment. It's not easy for us to let go when someone lets us down, when somebody fails to meet our needs, when somebody isn't there in a large enough way when we are hurting.

There's a truism that a large step in the process of growing up, of maturing as a person, is when we are finally able to forgive our parents for being human, for failing us, maybe abandoning us at certain moments, having weaknesses, being human. In every marriage, really in every intimate relationship, there comes a moment, I believe, when we are called to forgive our partner, to forgive them for not being the ideal figure we made them out to be, to forgive them for being human. I think it's a struggle for us to forgive each

other for not being generous enough, at least based on what I think generous means. It's tough to forgive each other when someone doesn't have the courage of our convictions, when somebody won't make the hard commitments that we make.

Early in my time here, a very wise person shared a perspective with me. He said that this church has a history of being scolded by various entities, various parties; a history of being scolded for not doing enough, for not giving enough money, for not being involved enough. He said to me, "This congregation needs to know that they, like everybody else, are loved as they are and that God's mercy is for them, too." There is this Latin phrase you may have heard recently. You may never want to hear it again—quid pro quo. Quid pro quo is simply a way to say that how we operate is that when something is given to you or done for you, it only happens in return for what you have given or done for somebody else. It's transactional.

This story says that's not how it works in God's reign. That's not how it works in God's society, God's economy. This manager doesn't receive forgiveness because he has worked out a payment plan that satisfies the king. This manager doesn't receive forgiveness because he has decided to change his way of life. No, the debt is forgiven because the king decides to show mercy, period. When we forgive each other, we're not saying that what you did to me doesn't

matter, and we're not saying to the other person, "You don't deserve to be punished," or we're not saying, "There are no consequences to your behavior. We're not patting you on the back and saying now, now, there's no problem." We're not saying that we don't have standards for behavior.

To forgive is to choose not to hold a grudge. To forgive is not to seek revenge. To forgive is not to try to make the other person pay, even though it might be fair and just, and even though you might have every right to do so. To forgive is to cancel a debt, not because the offending party has lived up to your standards or the offending party has met all your requirements. It's because that's what Jesus' people do. That's what we do.

What a relief it is to live in the assurance that God doesn't expect us to be more than human, and so we don't have to expect that others are more than human. We don't have to hold each other to these absurdly superhuman standards, because in Jesus Christ, God cancels an incalculable debt, an unpayable debt that we owe. We must do the same for each other. And when we do, we are sharing the grace that gives life and makes life possible.

To God be the glory, now and always.

# “Streams of Mercy”

February 23, 2020

Steve Jester

*Reading from Luke 10:25-37*

“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho.” The man doesn’t have a name; he’s just a man. We don’t know really if he is a Jew, if he is a Samaritan, if he might even be some Gentile, a pagan. We don’t know why he is on this desolate, dangerous stretch of road that runs about 18 miles and has a terrible reputation for violent crime. All we really know about him is that he is assaulted, that he is robbed, that they ripped his clothes from him, and his vulnerable body is pummeled to the point that he is barely hanging onto life.

Without clothing, he doesn’t give any clue as to where he comes from or whether he’s rich or whether he’s poor, what his trade might be. He’s anonymous. He’s just another pitiful, broken person along the road. All we can know for sure is that he is desperate for help, a human being who needs help.

I know this is not breaking news for most of you, but there are vast numbers of people in this world who are lonely, who are isolated, who feel forgotten by other folks, who feel anonymous. I read an article on the internet recently that caught my attention. Some research has been done, and the research indicates that a stunning percentage of older adults in Great Britain fit into this category: they see one flesh and blood person, on average, a week . . . one flesh and blood person a week.

The article referenced the very British response to what some call the epidemic of loneliness. Back in 2017, they created an official government office—you may have heard about this—it’s called the Ministry for Loneliness. Seriously. That sounds like the beginning of a Monty Python sketch, but it is a sad reality they’re trying to deal with. In this country, one-third of older adults now live completely alone; and two out of five of us of all ages—40% of us—say that we often feel lonely or socially isolated.

Many years ago, I participated in a workshop, a seminar, on helping us renew our pastoral care skills. It was led by an experienced hospital chaplain. This hospital chaplain impressed on us something that was so impressive that I still remember to this day what he said. He led us through what it feels like to be a patient in a hospital. He said when you come into the hospital, almost immediately you begin to lose your identity and your individuality.

They take your clothes away for one thing, and they give you one of those hinky gowns that don’t work right, and you are wearing

what everybody else in the hospital is wearing. There’s no real privacy for you. Dignity is just a word, not part of the deal. The situation is out of your hands. You’re not in control for the most part, and you can easily become just another case—a patient, not a person. He urged us always to be alert and to be sensitive to that reality—how it looks and how it feels from a patient’s perspective. He encouraged us always as ministers to see them as people, not as anonymous cases.

A priest happens upon this broken man. With a glance he takes in this man’s situation, and then he detours to the side of the road and passes him by. A Levite, a lay leader in Judaism, arrives on the scene and he also takes a detour around this man and passes him by. Folks love to speculate about why these two religious leaders pass by this man in need. Some people say maybe they were afraid it was a setup, you know, that this was a plant. This guy wasn’t really hurt, that he was just play-acting and that when the traveler got close, the “victim’s” colleagues would jump out from behind the rocks and attack and rob the unfortunate traveler.

Or maybe, some people say, these religious leaders were on their way to Jerusalem. No, they weren’t, they were coming back to Jericho. So maybe they were going to do some religious task, and if you touch a corpse or get too close, you’re unclean. Maybe they thought this guy was dead and they didn’t want to risk being contaminated, and so they passed him by. Some just say these guys were selfish and uncaring. But for whatever reason, they passed him by. Like so much of what we do and how we act, it is a fear-driven response. If I get involved, what might happen?

What’s the price I’m going to pay if I help out? Can you guarantee that I will be safe? It’s something like how we as a world are responding now to the Coronavirus. There are very good and very understandable reasons why we want to say, “Keep those infected people away from us! Confine them to their own space, with their own kind, because we don’t want to get it.” But the fear, the fear of contamination, reaches ridiculous heights. I saw the image somewhere of a cat somewhere in the far East. This cat was wearing a stylish blue mask over its face. That may be over the top!

“But a Samaritan traveler who came on him was moved with compassion when he saw him.” This religious outcast, this Samaritan who’s considered the enemy—hated, despised by both the priest and the Levite—this outcast doesn’t pass by. He doesn’t take

a detour. He goes to this wounded man and he touches him. He touches him as he cleans up his wounds and treats his wounds. He touches him as he lifts him up onto his mount. He carries him to the inn. He spends the night watching over him. The next morning, he leaves his credit card number with the person behind the desk to pay for any expenses incurred during this man's recovery.

The Samaritan gives away a lot for the sake of the wellbeing of this other person. He gives away his own comfort and security and his own guarantees of safety. He gives up convenience. He gives up his own needs, his own schedule. He gives up his time and his energy, and he gives up what could be a substantial amount of money. All of this he does for one who isn't a friend of his, who isn't part of his group. He does it for this anonymous, broken man, who in fact may be his enemy, one who would normally despise a Samaritan savior.

Why does he do it? There's no speculation in scripture as to the motivation of that Samaritan, but I think it gets back to this thing that we've been dealing with every Sunday this month—this idea of grace, because we are those who often live as enemies of God. We are disobedient, we are destructive, we are selfish, but we are also those for whom Jesus risks and gives everything, those for whom Jesus gives away himself to make us well.

In this Jesus, God comes to us, comes to our broken and bleeding and undeserving selves, and God lifts us up and carries us to a place of healing. God gives us hope, and God gives us new life, and Jesus says that to do the same thing for others is to know what life is all about. To do the same for others is to know life as God intends it to be.

Recently there was the observance of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, that Nazi death camp in which over a million people died. Those who died were mostly Jews, but there were also Communists and Gypsies and gay people and Russian POWs and people with physical and mental challenges—a variety of humanity. But what they all had in common was that there was a regime that didn't see them as people, but saw them as subhuman categories, saw them as those unworthy of life. There were those, of course, who saw this evil happening and just passed by, including most of the Christians in Germany. They passed by because of real fears, and they passed by maybe because of indifference.

It's a dark, dark example of what happens when we don't see. But there were a few voices in the church then insisting that the call of the church, the job of the church, is to draw near to those who are despised and discarded and wounded, that we are to give ourselves for the sake of the wellbeing of those who are forgotten, those who are outcasts, whatever the risk might be, whatever the cost might be. We do it—and we're called to it—because we follow a Lord who identified with the least and with the lost, the Lord who took on suffering, who took on the suffering of others and made it his own.



Sharing grace with the world around us is more, much more, than being nice to other people, much more than providing aid to someone whose car is broken down on the expressway. Those things are great, but to share grace is to see, to really see, those wounded, anonymous people who lie beside the roads that you and I travel every day. It is to see them and to make a decision that we are going to reach out in compassion. You know literally what compassion means—it means to suffer with someone.

Who are those men and women on the side of the roads that you travel who are wounded, who have been ambushed by this harsh world, and who are barely half alive? Could it be those lonely, isolated people of this world who sometimes aren't much fun to visit with because they're so needy? Could it be someone who keeps making bad choices and then expects others to rush in and fix them and the situation? Could it be mentally ill people whom we have compassion for, but not when they won't stay on their meds? Could it be losers of all kinds who keep messing up marriages, and failing in their business, and placing burdens on their families? Could it be those stuck in the cycle of poverty from generation to generation and can't get off that wheel? Who is it? Who is it on the road you take who is dying for compassion, who's desperate for help?

I had a great bike ride this past Monday. We crossed the Big Four Bridge into Jeffersonville and then went down the Ohio River

Greenway toward New Albany. There was one little thing I had forgotten to take into account, and that was that the Ohio River was flooding—I'm not always the sharpest tool in the shed! The trail was open. It runs fairly close to the river, and I began to notice that there was water pooling in places where it doesn't usually pool. Water was seeping into all the low spots, carrying tons of garbage and debris. We finally came to a spot on the trail where everything was fully submerged for about 75 yards under a couple of feet of water. I said, "Well, heck, you know, no big deal. Let's just go ahead." Nah, I really didn't. We turned around . . . wisely . . . and went back the other way.

I know water like that is a dangerous thing. It's a destructive force. But as I was riding that trail, I was also aware of something else—the power of water like that, the pervasiveness of water, the persistence of water. Water finds its way to where it wants to go, and it'll get there. Water can disrupt and it can dominate a situation.

I wonder if the offering of mercy to another person, a simple act of grace, is something like that mighty river. I wonder if streams of

mercy—as we sang in the opening hymn—I wonder if streams of mercy like that flooding river are pervasive and persistent and beyond our ultimate control? Silently, surprisingly, relentlessly, that stream rises up and it transforms the landscape of our lives and of the life of this world. I know we get discouraged. We believe that our efforts at compassion don't amount to much, that they feel like a trickling little creek, but God takes those acts of mercy, that compassion, and fashions it into a mighty river of life. Go. Go and share the mercy that has been shared with you.

And to God be the glory, now and always.



3701 Old Brownsboro Road  
Louisville KY 40206  
2ndpreslou.org