

Lighten Up: The Joyful Truth about Sin and Grace

Lent 3: What is Grace?

Ephesians 2:4-10

Rev. David Lewicki

North Decatur Presbyterian Church

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God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which [God] loved us⁵ even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶ and raised us up and seated us with [Christ] in the heavenly places,⁷ so that in the ages to come we might be shown the immeasurable riches of grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—⁹ not the result of works, so that no one may boast.¹⁰ For we are what [God] has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

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Grace is *the most important idea* in the Christian tradition.

Grace is also *really* hard to talk about. I've been reading for weeks in preparation for this preaching series. There are so many books about sin. People love talking about sin. It makes sense—it feels like it has a physical reality to it. Remember our biblical metaphors? Weight, the stain, the debt, missing the mark. Sin is felt in our body. Our brains are wired to remember pain more than anything else. Sin is easy to talk about, and so it occupies a too-large place in our theological imaginations.

Grace is not easy to talk about. Grace shimmers. Grace luminous. Like light, it's hard to hold or quantify. Because it seems so ephemeral, grace gets squeezed out of our imaginations by the vigorous intrusion of our big, bodily sins. Which is terrible—because there is nothing more important for us to hold in our heart & head than grace.

What I want to do today, and over the next 3 weeks, is get you comfortable thinking and talking about grace. Let's get our hearts and minds oriented to grace. I'd love it if the very first thing you think of—the first thing you feel—when you think of God to be grace.

What is grace?

Grace is the undeserved, unprompted love of God. It's God's love for you. God's love for us all.

Theologians from across generations all agree on this basic definition of grace. God loves each of us, all of us. God's love isn't conditioned on anything about you or anything you do. You don't earn it. You don't necessarily deserve it. God loves you because God wants to, because it's God's nature to love everything that God has made.

Theologians agree on the basic definition of grace, but they struggle to pin grace down to specific examples. Grace is not like sin, where, in many cases, we can name the time, date, place, and perpetrator. It's like when you get injured—when did the bone break? You know

exactly when. When did the bone heal? It takes time, it's a process, it happens almost in secret. Grace is like that.

Grace is also a shape-shifter, she shows up in so many different ways, in so many different places.

- Is grace in the ripple of light on the surface of the water, or in bud in spring, or this wild, wonderful world in which you are made to fit *just so* with every other living thing? Yes, Creation is full grace.
- Is grace the mercy that is new each morning? The second chance? The realization that while you have done things you shouldn't have and left undone things you should have done—that God does not condemn you? Yes, forgiveness is grace.
- Is grace the confession that you know what loving your neighbor is supposed to look like and still you choose otherwise—and yet God receives you with open arms like the father welcoming the prodigal home? Yes, that's also grace.
- Is grace the breath that sustains you every moment of your life? Yes.
- Is grace the moral agency you have? Yes.
- Is grace the freedom you have to live and move and have your being? Yes.
- Is grace friendship and the birth of your children and sitting with your beloveds as they die? Yes.
- Is your daily bread grace? Yes.
- Is laughter grace? Yes.
- Are tears of joy and sorrow grace? Yes.
- Is the hope that death is not the end, and the awareness that death has lost its sting—is that grace? Yes.

You see the problem with pinning grace down. Once you start looking for signs of God's love, you see it in all kinds of places. It's all around. It's, even if you look, inside. God showers us with grace. God *is* grace.

There are sober-minded, rational folks among us—bless you all—who will respond to these declarations of mine and say, “give me some proof.” You don't have to believe in God to believe in sin. The concrete evidence of sin is all around. Children in the Ukraine who are not alive. An earth that is burning up because of human greed. Every case of domestic abuse. Sin leaves a mark. It's *easy* to believe in sin.

Grace is harder. Often, the work of grace is quiet, like the healing of the bone. It is gentle. It doesn't call attention to itself. But she is there, relentlessly restoring life.

I can't prove grace exists. Some days grace is near impossible to see. But I know what my heart feels: that underneath all of this brokenness, there is an urging in the direction of wholeness. There underneath what has been torn, is an energy toward its mending. That in every fractured human relationship, there is an invitation toward its reconciliation. That whenever evil or apathy diminish integrity, something wants human integrity restored. Something at the heart of

this existence feels irrevocably sacred. So sacred that it feels like even the most twisted arc of history feels can be bent... that which bends history itself toward righteousness... that force is grace. Can I prove it? I'm afraid not. Will I stake my life on it? Every day.

I said earlier that not much has been written about grace—at least not compared to sin. But among all the things that have been written, the best, most lucid, most evocative depictions of grace I've ever encountered are 700 years old. They were written by a woman named Julian from the town of Norwich, in England. Julian wondered about the meaning of this life during a time when diseases killed 30% of her countryfolk—possibly even her husband and her children. Julian was sick herself, almost to death. And while so many who face the hardest realities of life, find suffering overwhelms every good impulse, Julian stared at pain. And she asked God for an explanation. She said:

I wanted to know what was our Lord's meaning.... I was answered in my spirit's understanding. "You would know our Lord's meaning in this thing? Know it well. Love was His meaning. Who showed it to you? Love. What did He show you? Love. Why did He show it? For love. Hold on to this and you will know and understand love more and more. But you will not know or learn anything else – ever.

Love, she said, is the heart of all things. Julian saw it everywhere. Christ became her mother; nothing, she knew, in all human experience, is as strong as a mother's love for her child. Julian found no anger in God. Every time we imagine that God is angry we look at the ways we project our own bitterness and anger on God. Julian wrote about a God who loves us with infinite patience—as long as we need to be loved, until we finally grow up and see ourselves and see each other as God has always seen us: good and whole and lovely.

As for sin, Julian puts it in its place. Remember how we said sin *feels* more real than grace? Julian disagreed. "I believe that sin has no substance," Julian wrote, "not a particle of being." Sin is not in our nature, and certainly not in God's. What changes in your mind, in your heart, if you believe that all of creation is a unity—it's made of one thing, and that thing is love?

I know the inclination is to hear descriptions of God like Julian's and think, "she's not being realistic." But what intuitively feels right is Julian's belief that love is most true part of existence. And that when we human beings find ourselves under the spell of sin, and we feel its pain, what finally heals that pain, what releases us from sin's spell, is not revenge, not vicarious suffering, it is love.

There is a divine reality that is greater and more wonderful than we can begin to imagine; this divine reality creates all things, loves all things, keeps all things in its care forever.

Everything is held by grace. Or as Julian said, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

