



"A Sanctuary in the City... Living Faith"

*Saving Grace We Can Understand*

May 27, 2018

Trinity Sunday

Isaiah 6:1-8; John 3:1-17

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Isaiah felt the awe-filling presence of God. The holiness. When our hearts get caught in the web of life so much bigger than our little selves. Goodness so much better than our imperfect attempts to be upright and worthy. Love so much more powerful than our limited attempts to make a difference. The mysterious ground of all being, so far beyond ability to comprehend. Maybe we can recall such a moment of insight, humility, inspiration. Maybe in the mountains, at the ocean, amid a redwood forest reaching for the sky. Maybe in some human experience at work, around town, in the quiet of home. Maybe in a place of worship as beautiful as this sanctuary. We can never full understand it. How do we express being so embraced? Isaiah uses an image from familiar life, like a king or queen's robe. Except just the tiny hem at the bottom of God's robe fills the entire vast sanctuary.

According to John, Nicodemus is a good Jewish leader. He knew Isaiah's image. He longed to feel such Holy Grace inspire his life, real salvation. He's heard about Jesus, but never met him yet. Hear what the Spirit may say. {Read John 3:1-17}

Nicodemus tries to understand. Even better he tries to believe. More than probing with his mind, he starts to open his heart. Better than hearing about Jesus, he gets to know Jesus. Beyond how *other people* experience God's love, he comes to give his trust, his hope, his life to Jesus. He tries to understand ... and John tells us all of

this, he says toward the end of his gospel, so that we may believe in Jesus Christ. And we may have life in his name, his divine presence, his holy power of love.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. As much as the physical realities around him, John adds these details to convey the metaphoric core of what's going on inside Nicodemus. He's enlightened in religious ways. He's studied a lot of scripture and theology. As a Pharisee, he focuses on practicing these principles in daily tasks, working for justice, freedom, and peace. Yet, he comes to Jesus in the dark.

He slips out the door of his home, as the bustle of community life wanes into night. Songbirds long since fell silent. Laughter carries faintly from houses he tiptoes by on the way. To avoid suspicion or criticism from privileged peers if they knew, he's willing to risk dangers that might lurk around corners. He weaves in and out of shadows cast by clouds across moonlight, like questions and frustrations shrouding his faith. He longs for life richer in kindness and goodness, deeper in peace than he feels after all his effort to be perfect. He's heard about how Jesus touches and transforms evens the least, lost, outcasts. He gives new life. That seems right. He's glimpsed the joy people share in Jesus' presence. That's so attractive.

Nicodemus reaches the door where he sleuthed out Jesus is staying. Tentative, he knocks. Gracious, Jesus welcomes him in. Nervous, he begins. "We've heard your teaching. We've seen the impact you've had, what good things you've accomplished. You must be doing God's work." "To enter God's Kingdom, to really share God's presence," Jesus replies, "it's not just what we know in our mind. It's how we orient our heart. How compassionate love shows in what we say and do." Through the rest of the conversation, Nicodemus tries to understand this way of grace.

Now John doesn't literally use the word "grace." Still it's the ground of all being arising in what Jesus says and does. For Jesus, grace is not ultimately something to be studied and analyzed on the surface. Faithfulness isn't an exam of cognitive content. Grace becomes real in how we live through tests and trials, questions, celebrations we share. As one of you sent me in an email this week, at best, grace like gravity, compels when we act and how we act without hesitation.

Grace. What is grace, really? We say a dancer is graceful. We say grace at meals. We might say someone graced us with her presence. In terms of faith, holy grace is the source of goodness manifest in and through all of life—in our dancing, our meals, our relationships, at their best. Grace flows like a river to empower life in us, and among us, and all creation. Grace is every single breath we take. Grace is moments of joy, peace, love in its many forms. Grace is mercy and forgiveness and compassion whatever impulse moves us beyond our selves to care for others and connect with a wider community. Grace forms the words we offer with every breath in bonds of relationship, beauties and goodness of life we cherish. And sometimes grace helps us keep our mouth shut at opportune times! Grace in ordinary tasks and relations brings possibility for abundant life even where it didn't seem to exist before.

By definition, holy grace is beyond our ability to create or control. Flowing from the Spirit of God. Breezing, sometimes gusting through our lives, blowing where it will puffs of air here and there, upon which we depend for every breath we take. By implication, we receive grace and gratefully try to nurture in all life the salvation that is eternal life. Through boundless grace, God so loved the world in Jesus Christ that we may believe and share eternal life—quality of life, spiritual transformation of ordinary life that is real, not merely making it all last longer.

Sometimes in the darkness it's hard to see holy grace. It's hard to see the gift of grace when we're paralyzed in crises. It's hard to understand promises of grace amid questions about what's happening, why, where it's all going. Like Nicodemus we try our best to understand. And sometimes it's hard to see grace in the brightest spotlight success moments. Because we can be seduced by the illusion that our celebrations are all the result of we've accomplished on our own. Or what we think we know for certain can often lead to condemnation of others. Unlike Isaiah beholding divine glory we fail to humbly confess our unclean lips, our uncomplete lives.

Friends, we'll have dark nights of the soul when we wander through frustration, anger, fear, sadness, echoing: O Lord, hear my prayer. Come, listen answer me. Like prophecy about a broken society, Isaiah would speak. Like people whose lives Jesus would share as he gazed upon the world with radiance of divine love in his eyes. Like the times Nicodemus would defend Jesus among his privileged religious peers, and would join Joseph of Arimathea to lovingly anoint Jesus' body after crucifixion. He bears the light of love into the darkness—as John promises: no darkness shall overcome it. Here's the great promise of the resurrection, the very core of our Christian faith we proclaim. That same grace of Divine Love that raised Jesus Christ from the tomb continues to flow unhaltingly, hindered only by our hearts when they close, shut it out, cut off the flow. Sometimes like Nicodemus we don't understand. We conclude impossibilities, which prevent us from recognizing sacred grace right before us. Lacking humility, we miss fresh movement of the Spirit.

Nicodemus' conversation with Jesus reflects the ongoing conversation—really the conflict and mutual condemnation—between the earliest Christian community and their Jewish progenitors. That's why John tells us this story about a Jewish leader. You see, Jesus invites us to widen the vision of goodness and scope of possibility for life in grace beyond accepted limits of religion and society. As Jesus invited

many others, he essentially says to Nicodemus: You may struggle to make sense of what I'm saying right now. Come join me on the journey of living faith in God's love. You will come to see these signs of grace for yourself, in yourself, through yourself. You will understand. You will respond. In gratitude, you will pass it on. If Nicodemus is a learned teacher, so lacking and so loved, maybe there's hope for the rest of us, too!

Friends, I cherish our conversations of faith when through our questions and confusion we share insights that inspire. That's why our "Thoughtful Readers" gathered this past week to discuss the book *Ordinary Grace*. It's a good read for your summer list. The plot is a mystery about how a series of six or seven people die over the course of one summer. It's really the story of young Frank and his family discovering how to truly live.

Twice the author quotes the Greek playwright Aeschylus. How through our suffering and pain and despair, "comes wisdom through the awful grace of God." "Awful?" the boy Frank asks his minister father.

"I don't think it's meant in a bad way. I think it means beyond our understanding."

"I guess there are graces I like better," Frank concludes.<sup>1</sup>

Friends, it seems we're all like Nicodemus and Frank, trying to understand grace in our existence. Where does life come from? Where is it going? Why is the world the way it is? What I am doing as part of it all? Christians over the ages developed ideas like the Trinity to try to explain / inspire how divine grace works in our lives—creating life, redeeming life, sustaining life. Whatever the details, our doctrines about the Trinity; whatever our images of God as "source, sovereign, rock and cloud," we try to convey the fundamental promise the Bible tells us over and over, from beginning to end: *God is with us!* Still, often, even our images and insights can be a bit confusing as limited language never fully expresses what ultimately remains

an awe-infused mystery. It doesn't mean we shouldn't try! It can be fun! As long as we remember theology is far more poetry than scientific principle.

This week, I guess I didn't feel the Spirit move me much to talk about natures and relationships of the three persons who are really one God. More like the Pharisees at their best, I want us to get practical. I long for "better graces" of God-with-us we can understand in our everyday lives. Maybe it's a dancer, artist, musician, or a kind stranger, inasmuch as we see God as the source of all beauty and goodness. Maybe it's a word of forgiveness instead of revenge. Maybe it's simply giving time to be with someone in need. Maybe it's medical professionals and teachers and social workers and laborers and business people in myriad forms, all of us in our ways, inasmuch as we try to empower abundant life in others. Maybe it's reflection on our life in the past or present that brings joy, gratitude, peace amid all our imperfections. Maybe it's only the earnest longing to keep seeking, pursuing fullness of life in peace, as God works through us far better and beyond our best laid plans.

Sometimes, she said in our discussion of the book, grace really becomes evident when we look back on life. And so for us, today it's also Memorial Day weekend. Time to remember veterans and everyone we love and holy graces we received through them as maybe we visit their graves. Like these gospel stories of Jesus they're not just testimonies to life in the past, rather recognition of graces in our lives at present, and inspiration for the future. Ever in the eternal purposes of God's loving salvation.

Years later, in the epilogue of Ordinary Graces, it's Memorial Day. Frank picks up his father from a retirement home, once so strong and vital, now rising and hobbling to the car like a man built of toothpicks. They join Jake as they do each May at the cemetery in their old hometown. "It seems to me, says Frank, "that as we look back at life, ours or another's, what we see is a path that weaves into and out of deep

shadow.” Through what stands in the light and what we imagine in the dark where we cannot see, like my memory of that summer long ago.

His younger brother Jake waits at the cemetery gate. It’s just the three of them now as their children are grown and their spouses have made the trip so many other times. “Every year,” Frank explains, “we visit a lot of graves. . . . We lay flowers at the headstone of the boy Bobby Cole. I’ve always believed his death on those train tracks was a tragic accident, probably due to his mental disability and tendency to lose himself in daydreams. We also lay flowers at the headstone with no name where the itinerant stranger is buried; and at the headstone of Karl Brandt who in his misery, drove his car into the tree. We always lay a small bouquet and spend a moment at the graveside of Morris Engdahl, the sadly twisted bully who so fiercely wanted to kill me. It’s clear every year that we’re the only ones who bother but my father insists. We lay flowers on the graves of Emil and Lise Brandt, brother and sister, each so broken in their way, now buried side by side for eternity as they lived their best years together.”

“There’s another grave I’d visit if it were here,” Frank says, “for Warren Redstone.” Warren fled our town under false accusation, including how I wrongly condemned him in my heart for killing my sister Ariel. I found him many years later fishing in the river as he always loved to do. I came to apologize. But he said, “I figure I owe you my life. Always been grateful you kept your mouth shut while I crossed that train bridge. Those policemen, they’d have shot first and asked later.” Later as I walked away, he called and I turned back. “They’re never far from us, you know. The dead. No more’n breath.”

“Our final stop,” Frank says, “is always the small section beneath a linden tree where Ariel and my mother are buried. We stand the three of us where such an important part of our lives lies buried. ‘It’s been a good day, a good life,’ my father

says with satisfaction. And then we turn, bound by love, by history, by circumstance, and most certainly by the awful grace of God, and together walk a narrow lane where headstones press close all around, reminding me gently of Warren Redstone's parting wisdom, which I understand now. Life and death entwine in the eternity of sacred grace separated only by a single breath, as small as a puff of air."<sup>ii</sup>

For in Jesus Christ, God so loves you and me and all the world, dear friends, not to condemn, but that all may share the salvation that is eternal life in him.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> William Kent Krueger, *Ordinary Grace* (New York: Atria, a division of Simon Shuster, 2013). 289.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.* 301-307.