

**SERMON: “What Are You Getting for Christmas?... Grace Upon Grace”**

**December 13, 2009**

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: Eternal God, whose grace in Jesus Christ is the first and the last word you speak to us, open our hearts to all that you would reveal to us in him, that we, too, may be filled with your joy and live gracious and grace-full lives in the power of his Spirit. In his name we pray. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Zephaniah 3:14-20

New Testament Lesson: John 1:14-16

Throughout this Advent season we are focusing on the meaning of Christ’s birth in light of the magnificent **prologue to the Gospel of John**. There, in inspired theological poetry, John sets before us the most profound witness in all the New Testament to what we and all the world receive in the gift of Jesus the Christ.

Over the past weeks we have said that in the coming of Jesus, the Word made flesh, we receive a world of wonder and joy, created through him and for him. **“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”** All that is has come into being through the same divine love that dwelt among us in Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, John says, in him we receive **life** in all its fullness and the **light** that illumines every darkness. **“In him was life, and the life was the light of all. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”** So once again we sing as we did at the beginning of our service, “Light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings.”

This morning we come to the third thing that John says we get for Christmas... **“grace upon grace.”** John declares, **“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth... And from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.”**

If there is a more important word in the Christian vocabulary than **grace**, I don’t know what it is. Almost everything that is distinctive about the Christian gospel is packed into that lovely word “grace.” Grace stands at the beginning and end of all of God’s ways with us.

A couple of weeks ago I used a phrase in the sermon that you may not have caught at the time but that I think is worth exploring more fully. I said that our lives are lived within the **“parenthesis of God’s grace.”** A parenthesis is that set of curved lines that set off a phrase in a sentence. If you are reading a sentence and come to words set off by a parenthesis, you know that the words within the parenthesis can only be understood in light of what comes before and after the parenthesis. Suppose the words within the parenthesis say... “(with all its tragedy and terror).” Those would be frightening, ominous sounding words-- “with all its tragedy and terror.” Taken by themselves the words would have little meaning other than to disturb us. But suppose the rest of the sentence said, “By the grace of God in Jesus Christ, life itself—parenthesis “with all its tragedy and terror” close parenthesis—is nevertheless a good gift of God to be received with gladness and lived in joy.” You see how what is outside the parenthesis makes all the difference in the world in terms of how we understand the words within the parenthesis.

The same is true for our lives. As Christians we affirm that our lives are lived within the parenthesis of God’s grace. Grace is the first and the last word of God. Our lives, with all

their tragedy and terror, are nevertheless encompassed by the grace of God. It is by the grace of God that we are born, and it is through the grace of God that we are saved. The Scottish author Robert Lewis Stevenson exclaims, “There is nothing but God's grace. We walk upon it; we breathe it; we live and die by it; it makes the nails and axles of the universe!” Grace, encompassing us like the very air we breathe!

But what do we mean by the **grace of God**? What does that grace look like when it finds expression among us?

First, a working definition of grace: grace, we could say, is the **free, unmerited favor of God**. Grace is the **undeserved goodness of God** toward us. Grace is the **mercy** that forgives us and the **power** that redeems us. The Apostle Paul, the great apostle of grace, exclaims, “**God who is rich in mercy...even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.**” (Eph. 2:4-5) At the heart of the gospel is the good news of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. We are saved--we enter into a right relationship with our Creator--not by anything we achieve or intend, but solely by accepting the love of God freely offered us in Jesus Christ.

A lot of the great words in the Christian vocabulary have gotten lost over the years. Big, imposing, theologically loaded words like “justification” and “sanctification” are rarely used anymore even by preachers. A good many years ago, when we lived in Laurinburg, NC, a member of the church, who owned a furniture store and played guitar in a country music band, told me that the thing he liked about my preaching was “how untheological it was.” I think he meant it as a compliment. At least I took it that way. I think what he was saying was that he appreciated the fact that I didn’t use too much theological jargon in my sermons. At least I tried not to.

Over the years many of the great theological words have lost their luster, like silverware that never gets taken out of the drawer and polished. But not the word Grace. Grace still has a luster to it. Think how often you hear “Amazing Grace” sung or played on bagpipes—most recently at Mose Macfie’s funeral here yesterday. One lone piper playing “Amazing Grace” has become almost the national anthem of mourning in America. And we still often speak of people as being *gracious* or *graceful*. The word grace is still very much a part of our vocabulary, both within in the walls of the church, and outside.

Now, of course, there is always the danger that a word as familiar and beloved as Grace will lose the edge of its meaning. So step back from the usual definitions of grace and listen to how the novelist and preacher Frederick Buechner defines it. “Grace,” he says, “is something you can never get but only be given. There’s no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth. A good night’s sleep is grace and so are good dreams. Most tears are grace. The smell of rain is grace. Somebody loving you is grace. Loving somebody is grace.”

Moving into more theological language, Buechner says, “The grace of God means something like this: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you *are* because the party wouldn’t have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don’t be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It’s for you I created the universe. I love you. There’s only one catch,” he says. “Like any other gift, the gift

of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift, too."<sup>1</sup>

Grace is perhaps the most precious word in the vocabulary of faith. No other word serves so well to name God's relationship to us as grace! John exclaims that from the fullness of God's love in Jesus Christ "**we have all received grace upon grace.**"

That's an interesting phrase, isn't it? "**Grace upon grace.**" What do you think it means? One way to think about it is to picture a glass of water. You fill the glass up to the brim—that's grace. But if you keep pouring, and the water overflows and sloshes all over everything, that is "grace upon grace." Grace freely given, then given again and again, exceeding all expectations, overflowing all boundaries--the lavish goodness and mercy of God beyond all we can ask or think or ever deserve. "One blessing after another," is the way some versions of scripture put it. Eugene Peterson says simply, "**Gift after gift after gift.**"

From the fullness of God's Word that became flesh in Jesus Christ—"we have all received grace upon grace." But what does that lavish, overflowing grace look like in common life? How do we recognize it when we see it? Consider a few snapshots of grace.

In a room at the National Health Care Center, standing beside the bed of his grandfather, soon to die, a young boy, Sam, age 10, offered as lovely and heart-felt a prayer as I've ever heard. He ended by saying, "Now it's your turn, Allen." There was nothing I could say any better, except "Amen!" "Grace upon grace."

In her book *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, Kathleen Norris tells of a time when she was waiting at the departure gate of an airport—about as boring a thing as you imagine. But she happened to notice a young couple with an infant nearby. The baby was staring intently at whoever was around. Every time he would recognize a human face, no matter whose it was, no matter whether the person was young or old, pretty or ugly, bored or happy or worried-looking, the baby "would respond with absolute delight." Norris says, "It was beautiful to see. Our drab departure gate had become the gate of heaven." And "I realized that this is how God looks at us, staring into our faces in order to be delighted, to see the creature he made and called good, along with the rest of creation," leading us "to laugh and sing, and be delighted, because God has called us his own."<sup>2</sup>"Grace upon grace," even at the departure gate of an airport.

In his book on the practice of Christian *Testimony*, Tom Long tells of the memoir by Mary Ann Bird entitled *The Whisper Test*. Mary Ann was born with multiple birth defects. She was deaf in one ear, had a cleft palate, a disfigured face, a crooked nose, lopsided feet. As a child, she suffered not only from her physical limitations, but far more from the taunts and teasing of the other children. One of her worst experiences at school was the annual hearing test. The teacher would call each child to her desk, and the child would cover first one ear, and then the other. The teacher would whisper something to the child like, "The sky is blue" or "You have new shoes." If the child could hear and repeat the words of the teacher, the child passed the whisper test. To avoid the humiliation of failing the test, Mary Ann would secretly

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (Harper and Row Publishers, 1973) pp. 33-34.

<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Theological ABC* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998) pp. 150-151.

cup her hand over her one good ear so that she could hear what the teacher had whispered in her other ear.

One year Mary Ann was in the class of Miss Leonard, one of the most beloved teachers in the school. All of the students wanted to be noticed and liked by her. Then the day came for the dreaded hearing test. When it was her turn, Mary Ann was called to the teacher's desk. As she cupped her hand over her good ear, Miss Leonard leaned forward to whisper. Mary Ann writes, "I waited for those words, which God must have put into her mouth, those seven words which changed my life." This time Miss Leonard did not say "The sky is blue" or "You have new shoes." What she whispered was "I wish you were my little girl." Long says that "Mary Ann Bird went on to become a teacher herself, a person of inner beauty and great kindness,"<sup>3</sup> largely because of the gracious words of a teacher... "grace upon grace."

The grace of God comes to us in a wealth of different ways. To some it comes in a time of intense struggle when you feel you have betrayed the trust of others and made a mess of your life. To others it comes in a moment of ecstatic wonder, as you hold in your arms your first child—as Buz and Ryann will soon experience. To still others, grace comes in worship when suddenly, as an old hymn puts it, "sometimes a light surprises." A phrase in a sermon or hymn or prayer "strikes fire," and kindles something deep in your soul and assures you that not matter what, it's going to be okay. You are loved, you are accepted, your life has meaning and purpose and value beyond anything you ever expected. "Grace upon grace."

And sometimes, very often indeed, the grace of God comes to us through others. They serve as channels through which the lavish grace of God flows into our lives and overflows in "wonder, love, and praise." I remember well a Sunday afternoon ten years ago when Bill and Mary Monahan and I took communion to my uncle, Bill McSween. It may have been the last time Bill received the sacrament of the grace of God embodied in bread and wine. As we were serving communion, I must have said something about God's grace, because Bill responded, "Every time I hear the word grace, I think of two things, not one. I think of the grace of God and of my own Grace," referring to his lovely wife Grace. Yes, "Grace upon grace," grace mediated through the gracious and graceful lives of those whom we love and those who love us.

"What are you getting for Christmas?" How about this--a world of wonder and joy, created through Christ and redeemed by Christ...and the gift of light in every darkness and life in all its fullness. And all these are expressions of the "**grace upon grace**" which comes to us through the fullness of God's love made flesh in Jesus Christ. That's what we are getting for Christmas. Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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<sup>3</sup> Tom Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (Jossey-Bass, 2004) pp. 85-86.