

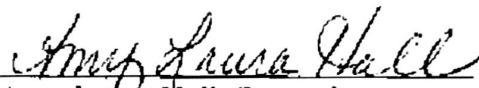
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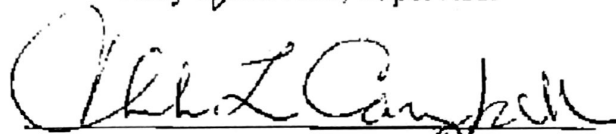
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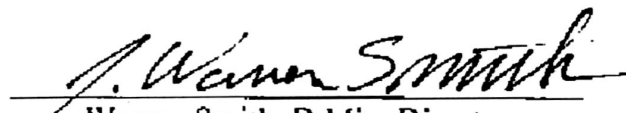
Mindy Louise Douglas

Date: 11 April 2017

Approved:

  
Amy Laura Hall, Supervisor

  
Charles Campbell, Second Reader

  
Warren Smith, D.Min. Director

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Ministry  
in the Divinity School of Duke University

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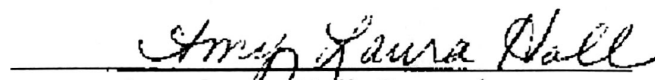
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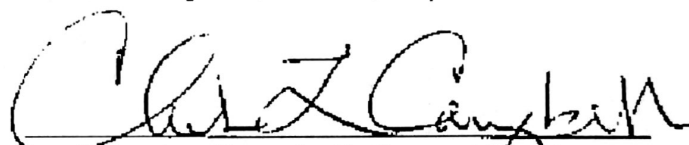
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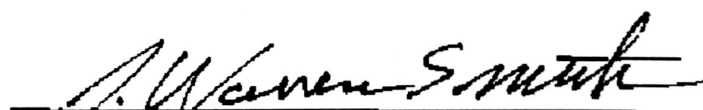
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## **ABSTRACT**

Membership in white mainline Protestant churches in the United States has declined over the past fifty years, particularly in recent years as an increasing number of people choose to define themselves as “nones” (meaning they have no religious preference) or “dones” (meaning they are done with attending a particular church and have abandoned traditional religious beliefs). This is in part, I argue, due to a loss of grace in the local congregation. This loss of grace is the result of the redefining of grace by United States culture, religious icons, and authors. It is also due to the judgmental, joyless, and unwelcoming nature of some church communities (perceived and/or real). In this paper, I explore grace as we find it in Scripture and as it has been understood by theologians (particularly those of the Reformed tradition) and offer stories and examples of how the church can be a community of grace through practices of hospitality, forgiveness, reconciliation, and attitudes of gratitude and joy.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this work to church leaders everywhere who respond in gratitude to God's grace in Christ by faithfully leading communities of faith of every size and difference in the way of grace, giving thanks to God through their attitudes and practices of grace in everyday life.

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I believe that we accomplish nothing in life without the love, assistance, wisdom, and support of others around us. The completion of this thesis is no exception.

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I am grateful for the two churches I have served during this time – for Chapel in the Pines Presbyterian Church and their unwavering support financially and emotionally! They were cheerleaders all along the way and are the ones who have taught me the most about what grace looks like in a community of faith! In this community, I shared my sermon series on grace and had the freedom to preach and teach about grace on a regular basis. The session, members, and staff members Nana Morelli, Mitzi Leshner-Thomas, and Jeremy Nabors taught me more and more about grace every day I shared with them.

I am also grateful for First Presbyterian Church and the support they have given me during this final year of writing, and to my colleague down the street at Trinity Avenue Presbyterian Church, Katie Crowe, who met me once a week to write with me and offered wisdom, spiritual insight, and irreplaceable support along the way.

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I truly don't know if I would have finished this (or even gotten started) without the support of my supervisor, Amy Laura Hall. When others could not grasp what I wanted



to say about grace, she did. When others looked confused as I tried to explain to them what I hoped to accomplish through this paper, she got excited and couldn't wait for me to begin! Her insight has been uncanny and her edits have been spot on.

Back in 2013, I asked my then-boyfriend what he thought about this D.Min. program. He was 100% supportive and encouraged me to apply. Since then, he has been through two years of classwork with me and another year or so of writing (yes, I took a break to recover from the classwork!). He has been unwavering in his support and has believed in me much more than I have ever believed in myself! He has a beautiful way of understanding grace and helped me think through this paper and how I would write it so that I could convey what I had experienced of grace in the church. He has been patient, understanding, kind, and insightful. He is truly a gift.

Finally, I hope that this paper gives glory to God, the author and giver of grace. To God be the glory. Thanks be to God.

Mindy

## **PART ONE – WHAT IS GRACE?**

### **Chapter One - *Grace Redefined***

#### *Popular culture defines grace*

Mainline Protestant churches have forgotten their theology of grace. This should come as no surprise. Society has hijacked the word grace as a marketing tool, and “Grace” has become ubiquitous, watered down to a sunny, feel-good word applied generally. Everywhere the mainstream, reading public turns, readers find another book, blog, article, or class with “Grace” in the title. Many popular Christian authors writing today have written a book or two about grace.<sup>1</sup> Leadership guides, novels, self-help books and memoirs often include something in their title about grace. Churches include grace in their name. President Barack Obama gave a speech about grace in response to the Charleston murders at Mother Emanuel A.M.E. Church in June 2015. Blogs such as “Grace Rules,” “Grace and Truth,” “The Path of Grace,” and “Defining Grace” are common today.

In nearby Morrisville, NC Grace Park is a popular planned urban village and includes housing, retail, schools and dining in one walkable location. My husband and I found our new hound dog Finn at a beloved dog rescue in Wake Forest named “Saving Grace.” “Grace and Heart” is a California jewelry business. High-end restaurants around the world use the word to attract patrons. A Chicago restaurant named “Grace” has recently been named the most expensive restaurant in the city based on starting price

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<sup>1</sup> For example: Max Lucado’s *Grace: More Than We Deserve and Greater Than We Imagine* and *Grace for the Moment: a 365 Day Journaling Devotional*, and Philip Yancey’s *Grace Notes*, *Vanishing Grace*, and *What’s So Amazing about Grace?*

(\$235 for the tasting menu).<sup>2</sup> Other restaurants named “Grace” offer tempting fare in Portland, Atlanta, Denver, Fort Worth, Pittsburgh, Berlin, Germany and Bristol, England. Planners, developers and marketers across the nation use the word to attract customers who desire the warmth, peace and welcome grace has come to connote in modern culture.

“Grace” is common in music, television, and film. “Grace” was a dance band in the 90s. Many songs use “Grace” as their title, including an Irish ballad about Grace Gifford, a 2008 song by Parachute Band from the album *Technicolor*, a 2009 song by Lamb of God from the album *Wrath*, and a 2000 song by U2. A 2014 drama film starring Annika Marks is called *Grace* (a 2009 horror film is, too). Television shows use the word in episode titles, including an episode of the TV series *Stargate SG-1*, an episode of the TV series *Homeland*, an episode of the science fiction drama *Falling Skies*, and an episode of the UK TV series *Skins*. The television show *Saving Grace*, starring Holly Hunter, had a three-year run on TNT (2007-2010).

Grace is what we say before meals, what we name our daughters, and how we describe the way one moves, dances or acts. Jackie Kennedy, Audrey Hepburn, figure skaters and old-school gymnasts all embody the popular idea of women’s grace.

The word grace also personalizes geographic locations and softens technological advancements. “Grace” is the name of towns in Idaho, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri (2), and Montana. Craters on the moon and the planet Venus both bear the name “Grace.” “Grace” is a college in Indiana and a university in Nebraska. Grace is the American codename for the Aichi B7A (a World War II Japanese bomber aircraft), Gravity

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<sup>2</sup> Ryan Sutton, “Grace Is Chicago’s Most Expensive Restaurant by Starting Price After \$30 Hike,” *Eater Chicago*, July 1, 2015, Accessed April 8, 2016, <http://chicago.eater.com/2015/7/1/8864717/grace-price-hike-most-expensive>

Recovery and Climate Experiment mission, a software, and a type of minivan made by Hyundai.<sup>3</sup>

For many grace is anything seen as a gift. For others, grace is gratitude. Grace is anything beautiful and unexpected. Grace is surprising peace amid chaos. Grace is these things and so very much more.

### *Cultural icons and authors define grace*

Oprah Winfrey is effective at promoting multiple understandings of grace. “Grace” abounds on her website and pages of links appear after a search of the word. “Grace” is a frequent topic of her “Supersoul Sunday” interviews, her radio shows, and her inspiration blogs. A video called “The Grace of Dawn” opens one of her “Supersoul” shows with a series of peaceful nature scenes. An interview with author and spiritual teacher Caroline Myss entitled “Intuition, Power and Grace” tells listeners that grace will help them “learn how to tap into [their] own gut instinct so that [they] can make the right choices.”<sup>4</sup> The grace Oprah presents to the world through her guests is a grace of natural beauty, inner power, and insight. Through this grace individuals are stronger, better, more at peace, and more equipped to make a difference in the world.

In a “Supersoul Sunday” article, Oprah shares a selection on grace from spiritual writer Adayashanti’s book *Falling into Grace*. He writes:

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<sup>3</sup> “Grace,” *Wikipedia*, Last modified on January 30, 2017, Accessed February 4, 2017, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grace>

<sup>4</sup> “Preview: Oprah and Caroline Myss on Intuition, Power, and Grace,” *OWN Supersoul Sunday*, Accessed on April 13, 2016, <http://www.oprah.com/own-super-soul-sunday/Preview-Oprah-and-Caroline-Myss-on-Intuition-Power-and-Grace>

Many circumstances and experiences are capable of opening us to this grace.

Whether it's a beautiful moment in nature or spending time with someone we love or just sitting quietly in stillness, for some reason, a whole new perspective opens up. We find ourselves filled with grace.<sup>5</sup>

For Adayashanti, Oprah, and other spiritual writers of today, grace connects directly to nature and leads to peace and a deeper and more profound engagement with self and the world. Grace is a gift given by a higher power, or by nature, or because of the individual's willingness to be open to the grace that already surrounds them. Christian mainline theologians of past centuries could not have foreseen the numerous ways grace would be misunderstood and misconstrued. They could not have known that a popular television talk show host, actress, producer, and philanthropist would be the main driver in sharing these notions of grace with popular culture.

In the wide variety of grace-related posts on Oprah's website, another significant misunderstanding of grace stands out: grace as an energy source. In the inspiration section of her website Oprah shares an interview, "Finding grace in your life." A teaser summarizes the content:

According to spiritual coach Cheryl Richardson, grace is a divine energy or spiritual intelligence that comes from a divine source. "Some people call it 'God,' 'Jesus,' 'spirit,' 'the universe,' 'a higher power'—whatever it is, wherever you are in your path, that's your prerogative in terms of what you call it," Cheryl says. "This

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<sup>5</sup> Adayashanti, "Fall into the Center of Now," *OWN Supersoul Sunday*, April 17, 2014, Accessed on April 13, 2016, <http://www.oprah.com/own-super-soul-sunday/Book-Excerpt-Adyashantis-Falling-into-Grace>

beautiful energy is available to each and every one of us, regardless of whether you believe it or not, as well." <sup>6</sup>

The group Dove International, an organization based on small-group ministry across many different countries, refers to grace as a divine energy as well:

[T]he aspect of grace we want to look at here could be defined as “the power and desire to do God’s will.” The grace of God is literally “divine energy” that the Holy Spirit releases in our lives.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to thinking of grace as a divine energy source, many also define grace as balance, clarity, flow, or alignment with the divine. To be a person of grace is to be filled with a sense of peace in every area of life. In this understanding, grace is wholeness, inner peace, and balance with the universe. In many ways, this interpretation relies on a reader’s insecurity and belief that they lack grace. These ways of marketing “grace” tap into a sense that things are out of whack in a (usually female) reader’s life, and draw them toward resources that will help them practice a kind of self-help that they believe will lead to balance.<sup>8</sup>

Another popular understanding of grace comes from Glennon Doyle Melton, a woman who found her fame on Facebook as she connected with thousands of women through her Momastery blog and her recent book *Love Warrior*. Her appeal among

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<sup>6</sup> “Finding Grace in Your Life,” *Oprah.com*, June 1, 2009, Accessed on April 8, 2016, <http://www.oprah.com/spirit/Finding-Grace-in-Your-Life>

<sup>7</sup> Larry Kreider, “Grace, Grace! Release Divine Energy in Your Life,” *Dove International*, 2011, Accessed on January 14, 2017, <https://dcfi.org/resources/articles/grace-grace-release-divine-energy-in-your-life/>, Used by permission of DOVE Christian Fellowship International, 11 Toll Gate Road, Lititz, PA 17543.

<sup>8</sup> “What Is Grace,” *The Art of Grace*, Accessed on January 14, 2017, <http://www.artofgrace.org/whatisgrace.html>

women comes from her stark honesty about her own personal failures and her very real love for women of all kinds who have tried and failed, and who keep trying and keep failing. She has a warm, exuberant smile and an inviting air of non-judgment about her. She curses in her writing often enough for her readers to believe she is an authentic, real live human being struggling with an inability to be perfect and seeking forgiveness at every turn. She uses the word grace frequently in her writing and speaking. This grace is something she believes her readers desperately need. In one blog post titled “Grace is good enough for us” she tells an honest and ugly story of her own irritated impatience with and anger toward her arguing daughters. She describes how she totally loses her composure with them, storms out of her office and yells at them. In the process, she accidentally slams her toes hard against the wall. She yells in pain, curses like a soldier and takes it out on her kids. Then, she writes:

. . . they looked at me with the saddest eyes I’ve ever seen because their mommy was hurt and it was all their fault. And I looked back at them with the saddest eyes because my girls were hurt and it was all my fault. And I should have grabbed them right then and there – but I could not say sorry yet. I just could not. I was so tired. I just wanted everybody to feel as bad as I did for a little bit longer.<sup>9</sup>

She goes on to describe the way she sat in self-pity for a few minutes before she went out to find her daughters and apologize – for yelling, for scaring them, for cursing, and for blaming them. She assures them they have done nothing wrong. They hold each other and cry. About that time, Glennon looks up and sees her son Chase standing at the

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<sup>9</sup> Glennon Doyle, “Grace Is Good Enough for Us,” *Momastery*, March 4, 2015, Accessed on January 14, 2017, <http://momastery.com/blog/2015/03/04/grace-good/>

door taking a picture. She asks him what he is doing. He replies, “My homework for photography class is to take one picture that represents my family. This is it – with all the apologizing and hugging and crying and forgiving. This is us.” She closes her blog with these words: “Yes. This is family: With all the apologizing and hugging and crying and forgiving — a place to practice giving and accepting grace.”<sup>10</sup>

Christian publishers have also taken up this trend, encouraging and highlighting Christian writers who tap into a hunger for something related to “apologizing and hugging and crying and forgiving.” In other words, Christian publishers promote writers who appeal to a mainstream readership eager for answers in a social climate and economy lacking in grace. Philip Yancey, journalist and author of several books on grace, including the ones with grace in their title, *What’s So Amazing About Grace*, *Vanishing Grace*, and *Grace Notes*, writes on his website:

Many Christians understand grace only on the theological, abstract level but have not let it penetrate the soul. Frankly, I first truly understood grace while reading the great novel by Victor Hugo, *Les Miserables*. When the kindly bishop not only refused to punish Jean Valjean for his theft, but instead lavished gifts on him—in that scene I sensed the stirrings of God’s grace to me, who deserved just the opposite. There’s a good reason why that musical captured the attention of the world. It’s because we hunger for grace. . . . We need to let it soak in that there is nothing we can do to make God love us more...and nothing we can do to make

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



God love us less. God is love—a noun, not a verb—and cannot help loving. We should walk around humming that tune *Amazing Grace* all day long.<sup>11</sup>

Yancey grew up in a fundamentalist “toxic” church in the South, where God was an authoritarian figure who scowled down at anyone “who might be having a good time.”<sup>12</sup> Yancey faced the contradictions in his church and asked difficult questions about God. He confronted the racism he saw and the exclusive nature of the church. He wondered why the church he grew up in focused only on what you could *not* do as a Christian, rather than what you could do. Grace, for Yancey, was the answer to his questions about God and about the joy of being God’s beloved:

It strikes me as genuinely good news that we are creations of a loving God who wants us to thrive, not random byproducts of a meaningless universe. That God entered our world and demonstrated in person that nothing – not even death – can separate us from God’s love. That the story of Jesus has this main theme: “For God so *loved* the world that he gave . . .” That human existence will not end with the imminent warming of our atmosphere or the gradual cooling of our sun, and my particular destiny will not end with death. That God will balance the scales of human history not by karma but by grace, in such a way that no one will be able to accuse God of unfairness.<sup>13</sup>

Yancey writes about a grace that loves and forgives freely, even when the people of the world do not deserve such love and forgiveness. God’s grace accepts everyone,

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<sup>11</sup> Philip Yancey, “Q and A: Grace,” *Philip Yancey*, 2009, Accessed on February 5, 2017, <http://philipyancey.com/q-and-a-topics/grace>

<sup>12</sup> Philip Yancey, “About Philip,” *Philip Yancey*, Accessed on February 5, 2017, <http://philipyancey.com/about>

<sup>13</sup> Philip Yancey, *Vanishing Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 71.

meets them where they are in life, and believes the best about them. His writes his books to encourage individuals to love themselves and others the way God loves them - fully, completely, and unconditionally. He hopes the Christian community might also reflect such grace in their life together.

One highly promoted and showcased speaker and writer, Rob Bell, once pastored the Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, one of the largest churches in the nation. His books about grace became popular after he was officially disgraced by the leadership of his church. The leadership of the church forced him out after his 2011 book *Love Wins* made clear statements about the non-existence of Hell. Not long after his ousting, he became a speaker on Oprah. His argument against Hell (which appealed to many of Oprah's viewers) relates to his understanding of grace, that a God who loves humankind so much would not punish in such a way that led to the eternal torments of Hell. In a May 2016 interview, Bell argues that one cannot live a life of faith unless one starts with an understanding of grace:

So I begin with grace — that this is a gift. We are loved, and love is the ground of our being. And oftentimes we are spending extraordinary energy trying to engage that which we already have. I begin with the moments that you're trying to impress somebody, trying to win somebody's approval, trying to prove that you're bigger, badder, faster, smarter — those are moments when you've left home. You aren't trusting the grace and love that is already yours.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Jennifer C. Martin, "Author Rob Bell Talks About Christian Progressivism, Spreading Grace and the 'Real' Jesus," *Uproxx*, May 14, 2016, Accessed on January 4, 2017, <http://uproxx.com/life/interview-rob-bell-practical-faith/2/>

He argues that once one begins to trust the extravagant grace of God which comes as a gift, then a desire to serve those in need in the world emerges. The recipient of such grace asks, “What am I to do? Is there anyone here to help?”<sup>15</sup> and seeks to respond to the pains of the world. Grace requires and expects nothing, but the one who recognizes grace lives differently in the world from that point on. The knowledge of God’s gift of grace transforms lives.

Rachel Held Evans, a Christian blogger-turned-book-writer with no formal theological training, grew up in an evangelical faith community which she ultimately left because it was too judgmental and inconsistent with her understanding of God as a God of grace and inclusion. In her first book, *Searching of Sunday*, Evans weaves her understanding of grace throughout every chapter and page. She criticizes the “modern-day church” for trying to dress up and look “happy, put-together, finished,” as if following Jesus leads to perfection, wholeness, and easy answers to all life’s difficult questions. Evans argues that when a church presents itself in such a way, it hides the truth, which is much better.

[I]f the world is watching, we might as well tell the truth. And the truth is, the church does not offer a cure. It does not offer a quick fix. The church offers death and resurrection. The church offers the messy, inconvenient, gut-wrenching, never-ending work of healing and reconciliation. The church offers grace. Anything else we try to peddle is snake oil. It’s not the real thing.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2015), 208, 209.

She criticizes the religious community (including herself) for getting so caught up in doctrinal arguments and exclusive requirements for proof of faith and invites people of faith to embrace a different kind of understanding of God, through grace.

[W]e religious types are really good at building walls and retreating to temples.

We're good at making mountains out of our ideologies, obstructions out of our theologies, and hills out of our screwed-up notions of who's in and who's out, who's worthy and who's unworthy. We're good at getting in the way. Perhaps we're afraid that if we move, God might use people and methods we do not approve of, that rules will be broken and theologies questioned. Perhaps we're afraid that if we get out of the way, this grace thing might get out of hand. Well, guess what? It already has. Grace got out of hand the moment the God of the universe hung on a Roman cross and with outstretched hands looked out upon those who had hung him there and declared, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."<sup>17</sup>

Evans, who is in her mid-thirties, speaks to a younger generation that has left the church but has not abandoned faith in God. In her book Evans addresses one important reason she and these young people have left their religious homes – the stance of many evangelical church leaders and communities against LGBTQ men and women, which effectively excludes them from the church. Evans believed she could not be a part of a community that shut its doors to anyone. The popularity of her book and subsequent articles on this topic proves she is not alone.

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<sup>17</sup> Evans, 39-40.

To her credit, Evans takes care not to be consumed by cynicism toward her former evangelical community. She refers to such cynicism as “a powerful anesthetic we use to numb ourselves to pain, but which also, by its nature numbs us to truth and joy.” She warns herself (and therefore her readers) against the temptation of cynicism and name-calling about those in the evangelical community who have not embraced grace in the same way she has. She knows the pitfalls of being caught in a web of cynicism. She writes of what happens when she succumbs to cynicism:

I am missing out. I am missing out on God who surprises us by showing up where we don't think God belongs. I am missing out on a God whose grace I need just as desperately, just as innately as the lady who dropped her child sponsorship [through World Vision] in a protest against gay marriage. Cynicism may help us create simpler storylines with good guys and bad guys, but it doesn't make us any better at telling the truth, which is that most of us are a frightening mix of good and evil, sinner and saint.<sup>18</sup>

Here Evans demonstrates her understanding of grace, when she recognizes that not one of us deserves God's grace and yet all of us receive it. As recipients of such grace, our response to those with whom we disagree must still be love, welcome, and inclusion. In the end, we must also recognize God's grace at work wherever we are, even in the lives of those whose viewpoints differ from our own.

Yancey, Bell, and Evans left their evangelical communities of faith and worship because they did not find God's grace enacted and embodied in those places. This does not mean, however, that the word grace was not in the vocabulary of these evangelical

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<sup>18</sup> Evans, 222.

churches and leaders. It was. In fact, Christians from all over the denominational spectrum sing, preach, write, and pray about grace on a regular basis. From evangelicals to mainliners and many denominations in between, grace is a key word in sermons, books, Bible studies, and published statements of faith and belief. These Christian writers and church leaders often interpret God's grace theologically and doctrinally in a way that does not encourage communities of faith to receive, accept, interact with, and love God's people.

Many evangelical churches include a statement about grace as a part of their core belief system. Willow Creek Church, a non-denominational Christian evangelical mega-church outside of Chicago, Illinois describes salvation (one of the church's ten core beliefs) as a work of God's free grace.

"The salvation of humanity is completely a work of God's free grace; it is not in any way the result of human works or goodness. Each person can receive salvation by repentance and faith. God's Word assures individuals that He will continue His saving work in them forever."<sup>19</sup>

Grace is also the first of the "FiveGs" of Willow Creek Church, which you must accept before you join the church, "I have been saved by grace. I live by it and am committed to showing it to others. When I struggle in this area, I will dive deeper into my understanding of grace (Ephesians 2:8–9)." Yancey and others would challenge this church's understanding of grace as it still excludes LGBTQ couples from the covenant of

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<sup>19</sup> "What Willow Believes," *Willow Creek Community Church*, Accessed on October 26, 2015, <http://www.willowcreek.org/aboutwillow/what-willow-believes>

marriage and includes requirements for the ways members must prove themselves as deserving of God's grace.

Saddleback Church, a mega church in California lead by Rick Warren, evangelical author of the wildly popular Christian series *The Purpose Driven Life*, includes grace in the first of its ten values: "Second Chance Grace Place."

Thousands of testimonies have been shared over the years which confirm the fact that Saddleback is the place to come when you need grace, and when you need a second chance. From Celebrate Recovery to our free family and individual counseling, this is the place to be if you're looking to heal and rebuild.<sup>20</sup>

This church also has an extensive series of resources available, including a six-part series titled *Good News about Grace*, and one lesson on "God's Grace for Every Race."

Warren and other evangelical leaders such as Joyce Meyer, T.D. Jakes, and Franklin Graham, to name a few, also write, preach, and speak frequently about God's grace. Too often, however, these understandings of grace are but a shadow of the full meaning of God's grace for God's creation. The leaders above have a long list of requirements for salvation, including a clear stance against practicing LGBTQ individuals, an emphasis on financial contributions and sacrifice which prove faithfulness, a stance in favor of the death penalty, and more recently, a backing of the presidential order banning refugees from seven countries in an effort to prevent Muslim

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<sup>20</sup> "S.A.D.D.L.E.B.A.C.K. What Is It?" *Saddleback Church*, September 8, 2011, Accessed on February 4, 2017, <http://saddleback.com/archive/blog/community-blog/2011/09/08/s-a-d-d-l-e-b-a-c-k-what-is-it>

terrorists from entering the country. The language of grace pervades their doctrinal statements and policies, but the reality of God's grace disappears from their practices, procedures, or law-oriented actions.

David Semands, a journalist for *Christianity Today*, the prominent evangelical news magazine, recognizes this contradiction. He writes:

Many years ago I was driven to the conclusion that the two major causes of most emotional problems among evangelical Christians are these: The failure to understand, receive, and live out God's unconditional grace and forgiveness, and the failure to give out that unconditional love, forgiveness, and grace to other people. We read, we hear, we believe a good theology of grace. But that's not the way we live. The good news of the Gospel of grace has not penetrated the level of our emotions.<sup>21</sup>

Change is in the air, however. Over the past decade evangelical leaders such as Brian McLaren, Max Lucado, Tony Campolo, Jimmy Carter, and Jim Wallis have embraced a definition of grace that is deep, wide, and full of the unconditional love and forgiveness of God. This is the grace which comes to us through all of Scripture, and particularly through the gospel message found through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The *word* grace appears regularly in evangelical, mainline and emergent church writings and statements of faith. Clearly Christians place an important weight on the word itself and the theological understanding of the word. In most every denomination, grace describes salvation in Christ as God's free gift to all. Too many mainline Protestant

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<sup>21</sup> David Semands, "Perfectionism: Fraught with Fruits of Self-Destruction," in *Christianity Today*, April 10, 1981, 24-5.



church leaders and members, however, understand grace in words only. In such situations, congregation members do not enact and embody grace through their attitudes and practices as people transformed by grace. I propose that the *absence* of a reality of grace in many mainline Protestant communities is a primary reason why people of faith leave their churches. Mainline Protestant leaders and members must return to an active way of living out grace in our communities of faith. We must ask what it means to *live* lives that are different and grace-filled because of our knowledge and awareness of God's grace. This paper sets out to explore the many ways grace can become alive as the community lives and works together.

## CHAPTER TWO - *Where Is Grace?*

Many Christians today refer to the mid-twentieth century as the best of times for mainline Protestantism in the United States and note with despair the yearly diminution of membership from then until now. Elesha J. Coffman, however, in her book *The Christian Century and the Rise of the Protestant Mainline*, disputes this narrative of mainline Protestant decline. She writes:

The mainline declension narrative has concrete support. Social scientists can demonstrate that membership and monetary giving in the major mainline denominations began a downward trend around the mid-1960s. Using this data to demonstrate the rise and fall of the mainline tradition, however, is a more subjective enterprise and one that, ironically, takes as markers of strength and authority criteria that early mainline leaders distrusted. The conflation of big numbers with cultural authority was, in fact, one of the chief mainline complaints against Billy Graham. From the turn of the century through the 1950s, the quest for cultural and religious authority was anything but a popularity contest. Cultural capital, not raw numbers, built the mainline, and those coffers remain relatively full. . . . No accounting of what the mainline has lost makes sense without an accounting of what it once possessed—and what it still possesses.<sup>1</sup>

Mainline Protestant church leaders, however, cannot resist emphasizing the importance of membership and attendance numbers. Even in the 1950s many such leaders worried about the failing strength of their beloved institution when their membership numbers seemed smaller than they had been in the past. “How could this

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<sup>1</sup> Elesha J. Coffman, *The Christian Century and the Rise of the Protestant Mainline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 8.

be?” we ask upon hearing this information today. Everyone knows that mainline Protestantism was not dying then. Mainline Protestantism is dying NOW. Anyone living in twenty-first century North America and Europe can see all too well what a dying church looks like, and it does not look like the church of the 1950s. Regardless of Coffman’s arguments for increased *cultural* power in the Protestant mainline, most church leaders still believe that numbers hold the real power. These leaders point to study after study showing that membership numbers in Protestant mainline churches have been decreasing yearly since the turn of the millennium. Church members across the nation (over the age of 50) yearn for the “good ole days” when everyone-who-was-anyone joined a mainline Protestant church. In most communities (particularly in the South) city governments based their rules on their white Anglo-Saxon Protestant understanding of morality and law. One example of this was the prevalence of “blue laws” in many states. First established in Connecticut in 1610 as a law requiring church attendance, local governments based their blue laws on religious moral beliefs with the intention of getting people to worship on Sunday morning without amoral distractions. These laws continued to thrive into the twentieth century, especially those requiring stores to be closed on Sunday morning and only allowing the sale of essential items (bread, milk, gasoline) on Sunday throughout the day. Many states, including North Carolina, still prohibit the sale of alcohol on Sundays.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Melissa, “What Are Blue Laws,” *Today I Found Out*, December 29, 2014, Accessed on January 12, 2017, <http://www.todayifoundout.com/index.php/2014/12/blue-laws-come/> ; “McGowan v. Maryland,” *Findlaw*, Accessed on January 12, 2017, <http://caselaw.findlaw.com/us-supreme-court/366/420.html> ; “18B-1004,” Accessed on January 12, 2017, [http://www.ncleg.net/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/HTML/BySection/Chapter\\_18B/GS\\_18B-1004.html](http://www.ncleg.net/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/HTML/BySection/Chapter_18B/GS_18B-1004.html)

At least one prominent theologian of the twentieth century, Reinhold Niebuhr, recognized a fear, real or imagined, that pervaded many mainline Protestant church communities and leaders in the 1950s: the fear of death. He accused church leaders of compromising the foundations of their faith in order to keep the church more attractive and more popular to the masses. Individual church communities allowed their fear of dying to control their actions, he claimed, and some of them endeavored to keep themselves alive at the expense of following Christ. In one of his essays, Niebuhr directed mainline Protestant church leaders to find life again by living into the full ministry of Christ's grace. He wrote:

. . . [I]t is true of the Church as it is true of individual life that "whosoever seeketh to gain his life will lose it." In short, a full ministry of Christ's grace to tortured and anxious and harassed souls, which give contemporary relevance to the age-old Gospel, is the best way of giving vitality to the Church and guaranteeing its life.<sup>3</sup>

The fear Niebuhr recognized in mainline Protestantism over fifty years ago continues in the twenty-first century in even more pronounced ways. Many religious leaders and even distant observers today make the claim that the institutional Church as we know it is dying. The numbers support these claims: membership in mainline denominations has declined over the last ten years (an 8-percentage point drop between 2007 and 2014),<sup>4</sup> leaving many leaders scrambling for ways to keep ministries alive and

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<sup>3</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Church as a Community of Grace," *Reinhold Niebuhr Papers* (United States: Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, 1956).

<sup>4</sup> "America's Changing Religious Landscape," *Pew Research Center*, May 12, 2015, Accessed on December 31, 2016, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>

sanctuary doors open. Finance committees in individual congregations have tightened their belts and cut funding once available for new and existing ministries and staff members. Such budget cuts have forced some clergy to adopt non-traditional models of ministry, including bi-vocational ministry, emergent church ministry, coffee shop congregations, and house churches. New books, articles, and blog posts appear seemingly daily, decrying the problem, expressing anxiety, and occasionally offering potential solutions. No one knows exactly what to do, but everyone knows that *something* must be done if mainline Protestantism is to continue to be the influential, hopeful voice of the gospel message of Jesus Christ for the world. Niebuhr, in arguing for the full ministry of Christ's grace as that which enlivens Christianity, also implies that any Christian community that thinks it faces death has lost its understanding of God's grace and what it means to embody such grace. The absence of grace in many Christian communities is a primary reason why people leave the church.

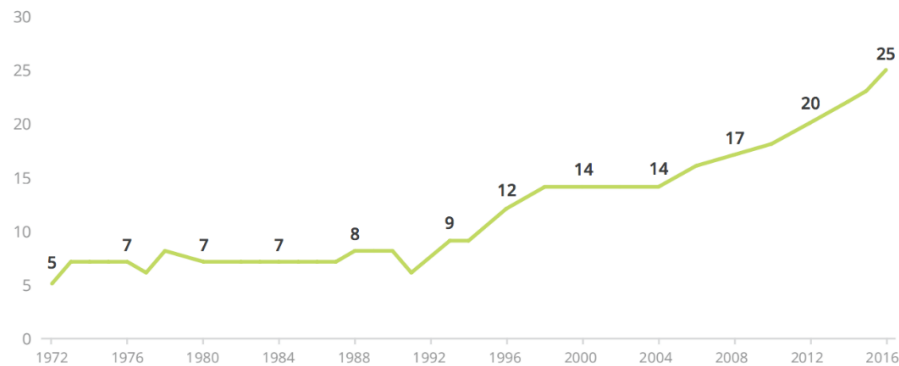
The movement away from American Christianity began in the early 90s, says PRRI's August 2016 report, "Exodus: Why Americans Are Leaving Religion and Why They Are Unlikely to Come Back." From the early 70s to the early 90s, the number of people who said they had no religious affiliation remained at around 6%. From the early 90s that percentage grew; now 25% of survey respondents consider themselves to be non-religious.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Robert P. Jones, Daniel Cox, Betsy Cooper, and Rachel Lienesch, "Exodus: Why Americans Are Leaving Religion and Why They Are Unlikely to Come Back," *PRRI*, September 22, 2016, Accessed on December 31, 2016, <http://www.prri.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/PRRI-RNS-Unaffiliated-Report.pdf>

**FIGURE 1. Growth of the Religiously Unaffiliated, 1972-2016**

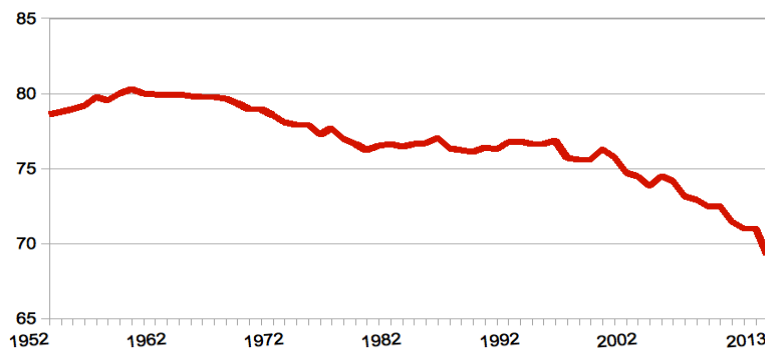
Percent of population



Sources: General Social Survey, 1974-2012; PRRI Surveys, 2014-2016.

A more comprehensive survey published by Pew Research showed a 6.7% increase between 2007 and 2014 in those who say they have no religious affiliation, putting the percentage at 22.7% in 2014. The PRRI study notes that among young adults between the ages of 18 and 29, the rate is significantly higher at 39%. Not surprisingly, religious leaders fear for the future of mainline Protestantism.<sup>6</sup>

### The Great Decline: Religiosity in the United States (1952-2013)



Graph by Corner of Church & State, an RNS blog  
Source: Aggregate Religiosity Index, updated from Grant, *Sociological Spectrum* 2008

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<sup>6</sup> “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” Accessed on December 31, 2016; “Exodus,” Accessed on December 31, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Tobin Grant, “The Great Decline: 61 Years of Religious Decline in One Graph, 2013 Hits a New Low,” *Religion News Service*, August 5, 2014, Accessed on January 7, 2017,

The evidence is before us: people are leaving American Christianity. But why? Research shows that those who leave their local churches have many reasons for doing so. According to the PRRI poll, 60% of those who claim no religious affiliation say they no longer agree with the teachings of Christianity (though the research does not explore with *which* teachings they no longer agree). 32% said their families were not particularly religious growing up, and 29% said they left because of negative teaching about (or treatment of) gays and lesbians. In my own conversations with those who grew up in a Christian church but no longer attend, I have heard many say the Christian religious community is no longer relevant. Barna research supports this, noting from their surveys of unchurched individuals that 49% could not identify a single positive impact the Christian community makes in society and 37% could not identify a single negative impact. In other words, American Christianity has no impact, negative or positive, for many who are religiously unaffiliated. For too many, churches as religious communities have become meaningless. They make no difference at all.<sup>8</sup>

Others find American Christianity to be judgmental and therefore hypocritical (this reflects the 29% of the PRRI survey who left the church over its negative treatment of gays and lesbians). These ask, “How can a denomination or religion which says it is all about love judge others so harshly?” I have heard this not only in connection to the treatment of LGBTQ individuals, but also related to the treatment of those who are divorced, who have a child or live together outside of marriage, and who are people of

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<http://religionnews.com/2014/08/05/the-great-decline-61-years-of-religion-religiosity-in-one-graph-2013-hits-a-new-low/>

<sup>8</sup> “Exodus,” Accessed on December 31, 2016; Barna Group, George Barna and David Kinnaman, eds., *Churchless* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2014), 23.

color. Additionally, I hear: “If the Christian community is so accepting, why do I feel so judged when I worship with them – because of my job, my marital status, my clothes, my hair color, my race, my partner, or my tattoos?” Most people want to be accepted for who they are. They do not want to be required to conform to any standard of dress or behavior that they feel is random, unjust, or based only on “the way we’ve always done it.” This explains in part why coffee shop church or beer and hymns worship attracts so many – worshipers can come as they are and be who they are without fear of judgment from others who have specific expectations of dress, etiquette, language, and behavior otherwise deemed appropriate for worship.

Judgment may also have to do with what you believe or do not believe. My teenaged son Tyler, whose thoughts about God and religion are a far cry from orthodox, once stormed out of a youth group Bible study because he felt judged based on what he had said about his belief system. The teacher wanted his ideas about his faith to fit in a pre-packaged box. She did not allow him space to be open and honest about what he believed (and did not believe) without the fear of being judged. He did not return to that group for a very long time.

Another frequent complaint about mainline Protestantism is that it is boring. Older folks who have left the Christian community argue that they have more interesting ways to spend their time – reading a novel or the *New York Times*, having coffee with a significant other, exercising, catching up on errands and chores, or having quality time with the family. On the other end of the age spectrum, worship for many millennials is too long and too slow. These young adults are used to a fast-paced, highly energized world. The world to them these days is pumped up and shown to them in rapid-fire .25



second images and 10 second sound-bites. For example, over the last ten years the University of North Carolina basketball games have gone from being very exciting basketball games to being events that require significant hype, especially pre-game, half-time, and post-game. As the arena lights dim, a sound and light show of larger than life video images, loud, pumping music, and an announcer who makes you think you are at the NBA Finals begins. Some mega-churches have tried to emulate this hype in their own worship, believing that if they make worship exciting enough to emulate pop-culture, they might have a chance to compete for an hour or so on Sunday morning.

Many people avoid attending a local church these days because they do not want to go somewhere and be told how bad they are. They do not want to feel guilty about doing things they should not do or not doing things they should do. They also do not want to feel frightened by the threat of hell (spoken or unspoken). Many churchgoers today (non-mainline Protestants, primarily) believe that a significant reason to believe in Jesus is that they will go to hell if they do not. This also is often their primary motivation to bring others to worship. A friend of my son seems truly tormented by Tyler's inability to articulate a clear statement of belief in Jesus. He continues to warn Tyler about hell and is genuinely concerned that Tyler will end up there. His negative rhetoric causes Tyler to turn away not only from his friend's community of worship, but also from his own.

Christian church communities focused on avoiding hell at all costs often establish their own laws and rules that must be kept to prove the strength and legitimacy of one's faith in Jesus. Years ago, when I was a campus minister at a large public university, I received a call from a terrified father. His daughter, who had been raised in a mainline Protestant congregation, had become involved in a cult community. Members of this

church welcomed her with open arms at first but soon made it clear that if she was going to stay in the community she would need to prove her faith by keeping a long list of requirements. She did her best to abide by the rules of the church leaders. The cult leaders convinced her it was the only way to avoid hell. Her father quietly expressed some concern about this church community from the beginning, but ultimately recognized the seriousness of the situation when his graduate student daughter gave up her nursing internship because it required her to work on Wednesday, a day reserved by the church community for worship and Bible study. In the eyes of the leaders of this church, her absence from required activities would prove her unfaithfulness and unworthiness. Terrified, she quit her nursing job and almost gave up her calling to health care altogether – all because a church had abandoned any understanding of God’s grace in Jesus Christ and focused on saving themselves through self-imposed laws.

Fear, shame, guilt, irrelevance, and judgment? Jesus opposes these when he teaches “Fear not,” “Judge not” and “You are the light of the world and the salt of the earth” (Matthew 14:27, 7:1, 5:13-14). Christian communities that focus on such negative feelings do not exhibit God’s grace.

As a result of such Christian communities void of grace, like the one described above, too many people have left American Christianity. Such communities do not exhibit in their actions the basic truths of Christian faith, that the grace of God in Christ is loving and non-judgmental, that this grace affirms the beauty and significance of each individual and is not “boring,” and that this grace is the bond between God and God’s people - both individuals and communities – and binds human beings to God and to one another. Guilt does not motivate a person to follow Jesus. Gratitude - for all that God has

done for us in Christ - does. Grace-full living reflects depth of meaning in life, depth of relationships of love (with God and in the world), and a depth of peace in one's spirit. Grace draws people to a particular Christian community - grace enacted and embodied through a human (and imperfect) community as it responds to the amazing grace of God in Christ for us all.

I have seen this grace in the worshiping communities of my experience, over and over again, and this is why I stay in a mainline Protestant worshiping community, particularly in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

One of my favorite stories of grace enacted and embodied in a community of faith comes from a small Presbyterian church in Townville, SC. Many layers of grace add to this story over the years. The first layer of grace came when the members of this dying congregation of 33 members in the middle of cornfields and cattle farms in rural South Carolina decided to risk calling a woman to be their pastor. The year was 1983 and while folks in urban areas had started to see (or at least "hear tell of") a woman here or there in a liberal, mainline Protestant pulpit, rural communities had only just started to consider women as ministers. A woman preacher in a rural area was unheard of. But this woman, fresh out of seminary, with lots of energy and passion, wanted to pastor a church. And here was this community of faith with death closing in. What did they have to lose? Choosing to listen to what God might be doing, choosing to believe that God wanted them to live, and choosing to believe that God might bring the gospel of Jesus Christ through the leadership of a woman, they called my mother to be their part-time pastor.

Early on in her time there, two stalwart leaders in the congregation, Dub Brooks and Hershel Walker, decided they had a role in living out the good news of God's grace

in Jesus Christ about which this woman pastor preached. The more they understood that God had come to them through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus - not because of what they had done or the way that they had kept the law, but because God loved them - the more they wanted to share that news with others. One morning, as Dub and Hershel met for their weekly breakfast together at the local truck stop, they made a plan to invite people to worship. They implemented their plan with their server that morning, Della Day, inviting her to join them on Sunday for worship to hear the gospel message of grace for herself. Della, estranged from the Christian community for several decades, was taken aback by their invitation. How could they want *her*? Surely, they knew who she was and how she lived? She was far from perfect. But they seemed genuine in their invitation. They really did want her to come. So the next week she showed up. She climbed the steps of the 200-year-old church between the cornfield and the graveyard and pushed open the door. Inside, she found welcome. She found a small but grace-filled community that brought her in without judgment and gave her a place in their midst. She knew she had come home. Before long, Della became an integral part of the community, sharing freely of her significant musical talent on the piano, and joining her two friends from the diner in inviting others from the community to come experience the grace of God in Christ, enacted and embodied in a little South Carolina country church, which did not die, as many had expected, but grew as a vital and vibrant community of grace - in faith, in numbers, and in service to the world.

Recently, I saw grace in a local sanctuary when two men stood in the chancel area and took vows to love one another in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, for as long as they both should live. One of these men blinked back his

tears of disbelief. For years he had been told by his congregation that his sexual preference for men was a disorder, an abomination before God which must be fixed. At the encouragement of his pastors, he endured endless sessions of reparative therapy which tried to make him into someone he was not and tried to make him hate the person he really was. He wanted desperately to be heterosexual, to be “normal” in the eyes of his denomination, and to be the way his community told him God wanted him to be. But the more people told him his urges were evil and that he must change in order to be right with God, the more his self-loathing increased. He was on the brink of despair when God pulled him by grace to a different church – a community of faith that told him he was loved by God exactly the way he was. Here he knew he was God’s beloved and God’s grace in Christ invited him to see and claim God’s love so that he could love himself and love others. He left his former congregation that continued to be enslaved by the law and came to a place where grace abounded (a place that accepted him before he was ready to accept himself). He found a community of faith, a home where he could worship God as one freely given the gift of God’s redemptive grace. On his wedding day, years later, he stood on the steps of the chancel as a part of a community that welcomed him and did not condemn him, and wept with gratitude for the chance to love – to love God, to love his spouse, to love the Christian community, and to love the people who enacted and embodied grace around him.

Madeleine L’Engle recognized grace in what happened to this man and why his faith in Christ was stronger in his new church home than it had been in his old one:

We draw people to Christ not by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it.<sup>9</sup>

Grace, as many Christians have traditionally understood it, is the gift of redemption and salvation that comes to us not because of what we have done but as a gift from God. A primary Biblical understanding of grace comes from the book of Ephesians:

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the 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* – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. *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* (2:4-8) (italics mine).

If we are to understand God's grace, we must first recognize that our relationship with God is broken. When Adam and Eve took the law into their own hands and decided for themselves that they would eat from the tree in the center of the garden, they broke relationship with God. In so doing, they declared themselves separate from God. They ignored God's one command and leaned on their own understanding of what was good and right. Their disobedience turned them away from God and toward themselves.

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<sup>9</sup> Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1980), 122.

Throughout history, God has come to God's people, longing for a healed relationship with them. God's people have always turned away. God punished. God forgave. God made a covenant with the people of Israel that God would be their God and they would be God's people. Still they turned away. Still they worshipped other gods. Still they acted selfishly, seeking their own good rather than caring for the widows, orphans, and those in need. Through the prophets, God admonished the people to be just, righteous, and good, but they failed to do so again and again. Repeatedly, the people of God turned to their own ways and rejected the ways of God.

Finally, God knew that only One could be righteous enough to repair the breach that had widened across time between God and God's creation. Only One could be without sin. So God became incarnate – God with us – in human flesh and blood, but without sin. Holy. Righteous. The instrument of reconciliation between God and humanity was fully each – fully God and fully human. In the incarnate one, God's Son, Jesus of Nazareth, God reconciled Godself to the world.

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.” (John 1: 14).

In Jesus God becomes human – the incarnate one- God with us. Fully human and fully divine, Jesus, God's beloved son, lived among us, suffered with us, and died for us that we might have eternal life and that we might be dead to sin and alive to all that is

good. This redemption comes to all humanity not because we deserve it but because God loves us and accomplishes reconciliation with us through Christ's act on the cross. This God loves us so much that in Christ's life, death, and resurrection we are reconciled with God. Christ's sinless nature and defeat of sin and death forgives, renews, and restores all people to wholeness.

In my experience as a Christian and as a pastor, I have found that many people encounter significant challenges when it comes to accepting God's grace and living that grace in their lives with one another. For these people, their understanding of grace has deformed over the years as they have tried to mold grace into something that they *do* rather than understanding grace as that which God alone purely gives. While these individuals are often able to articulate God's gift of grace to us through Scripture – "It is by grace we have been saved through faith. . . this is not our own doing, it is a gift from God," and "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us," they continue to believe that their salvation comes because of what they do and not because of who they are as God's people. They desperately want to prove their worthiness. They want to earn their own salvation. They want to DO something and be rewarded for doing it well! And they certainly do not want to be handing out assurances of God's redemptive love to those who have not earned it and who do not at all deserve it.

In her article "Graced Practices: Excellence and Freedom in the Christian Life," Reformed theologian Serene Jones takes an in-depth look at the two theological sides of grace –sanctification and justification – through the lens of Reformer John Calvin's understanding of double grace (which I address later in this paper). As two sides of one coin, justifying and sanctifying grace help us understand how those redeemed by God's



grace are also transformed. Justifying grace comes as a free gift of forgiveness, unmerited by the receiver. Sanctifying grace draws an individual into a life with God, in which the one forgiven recognizes the gift of grace and responds in repentance and a desire to live in a right relationship with God.

“Sanctification,” writes Jones, “occurs when our eyes are opened to the grace-filled covenant God has made with creation and we seek to live according to its order, the Law . . . in a Christ-like fashion.”<sup>10</sup> Sanctifying grace is God’s *forming* grace. It shapes us into people who seek to follow Jesus and live the way he taught us to live, in love for God and one another. This side of the coin is the side which forms the way a Christian lives his life, by following Jesus and the law of love and by living in response to God’s grace as one who embodies God’s grace through attitudes and practices such as forgiveness, gratitude, generosity of spirit, hospitality, joy, hope, and love.

The other side of the coin is justifying grace, God’s *freeing* grace, which comes to God’s people not because of anything they have done, but because of who they are as God’s beloved. This grace is God’s forgiveness for the way they have turned away from God. This grace restores the broken relationship between God and God’s people by putting the righteousness of God in Christ onto the people of God. By grace, God’s people are put right, forgiven and reconciled to God. Jones reminds us that:

. . . because God decides to love us freely, there is nothing we can do to earn that justification. This means that no degree of excellence in Christian practice has the power to win for us the saving love of God. . . That love is a gift, pure and simple,

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<sup>10</sup> Serene Jones, “Graced Practices: Excellence and Freedom in the Christian Life,” in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, Mirosław Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 59.

and it comes to us quite apart from our own merit. The doctrine of justification reminds us that we do not, in any way, save ourselves. We are saved by grace of God.<sup>11</sup>

Jones calls upon her understanding of grace as that which frees (justifies) and forms (sanctifies) to help her take a theological look at a situation facing her congregation. The people in her congregation have become discouraged and wracked by guilt because of their belief that they should be doing more than they are physically, emotionally, and spiritually able to do.

“Is this what it means to be church?” one of the church’s newer members finally asked, “believing you should do all these things and then feeling worn out and guilty because you cannot? Is this the Good News we celebrate?”<sup>12</sup>

Jones’ congregation, like every congregation I have ever known, had lost sight of the depth and reality of God’s grace. Church leaders had fallen back on the false belief that we earn our salvation, that our own efforts will bring about the Kingdom, that God cannot do this Church-thing without us. When this misunderstanding of grace takes hold of us, we fall tragically into this trap of un-grace, believing that we can only be loved by God if we kill ourselves proving how worthy we are.

Ann Powers, a dear friend of my family, grew up in a denomination that preached salvation by works. Her church leaders made clear that a Christian followed very clear rules and acted in very specific ways. As Ann became a teenager and young adult, she began to despair. She knew she could not fit into this perfect mold of Christianity. She

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<sup>11</sup> Jones, 64.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 58-59.

felt unloved by God and rejected by the community. She could not comprehend that God loved her just the way she was.

When she moved to our small South Carolina town, she started to visit our Presbyterian (U.S.A.) church. My mother, a newly elected deacon, went to see her in her home. Ann told my mother about how she knew she could not be the person God wanted her to be. She believed she was too feisty and thought that God would never accept her the way she was. My mother told her about God's grace. It was the first time Ann had ever heard of such a thing. Forgiveness? Acceptance? Unconditional love? She drank in all of it as a woman parched from heat and thirst. She joined the church, surrounded herself with those who embodied grace, and found God's grace in Scripture, theology, and her new community. She now understood that God not only loved her but also accepted her for who she was, in all her imperfections, and wanted to be in relationship with her. She was never the same again. As I grew up in that congregation, she shared her new-found understanding of God's grace in Christ with me and with endless others longing for love, acceptance, and a deep relationship with the Divine. Ann Powers was one of the finest Christians I have ever known.

Philip Yancey, in *What's So Amazing About Grace*, recalls the moment of stress during the last games of March Madness when a young player stands at the free-throw line with the entire game riding on his final second shot. This basketball player knows that his worth, his acceptance by his coach, his teammates, other students and perhaps millions of fans, depends on what he does. If he makes the shot? Love. Acceptance. Fame. If he does not? Hatred. Rejection. Shame. Yancey compares this man's dilemma to

the world's understanding of grace. "The world runs by ungrace. Everything depends on what I do to make the shot."<sup>13</sup>

The problem is, as Paul says, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" and "There is no one who is righteous (worthy), not even one" (Romans 3:23,10). Accepting God's redemptive grace in Christ begins with accepting our own unworthiness for such grace. Our efforts are futile. We cannot save ourselves. Only God can save and only through Jesus can such grace be made known to us. When we begin to name and claim our own undeserving and God's own free gift of redemption that comes in spite of our actions, not because of them, we begin to glimpse grace. Grace is always about God and God's action:

Grace is a love that has nothing to do with you, the beloved. It has everything and only to do with the lover. Grace is irrational in the sense that it has nothing to do with weights and measures. It has nothing to do with my intrinsic qualities or so-called "gifts" (whatever they may be). It reflects a decision on the part of the giver, the one who loves, in relation to the receiver, the one who is loved, that negates any qualifications the receiver may personally hold. . . . Grace is one-way love.<sup>14</sup>

But if grace is one-way love, what does that mean for the recipients of such one-way love? Does this mean we are not required to love in return? Does it mean that God's love comes so freely to God's people that we can bask in such love and not be overly

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<sup>13</sup> Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 71-72.

<sup>14</sup> Paul F. M. Zahl, *Grace in Practice: A Theology of Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 36.

concerned about our actions or inactions? Does this mean we can live our lives however we wish and still be forgiven, still be reconciled to God?

Of course, it does not mean this. To imagine such a grace is to be caught up in the ways of the world, where we constantly try to beat the system, to have our cake and eat it, too, so to speak. To imagine such grace is to distort God's deep loving kindness for God's people and miss completely the point of true reconciliation and a return to the wholeness intended for us at creation. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *The Cost of Discipleship* refers to this misunderstanding of God's grace as "cheap grace."

"Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without . . . repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession. . . Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."<sup>15</sup>

Bonhoeffer writes during a time when he sees mainline Protestant church leaders dispensing cheap grace and the people eager to receive it. But cheap grace is not God's grace. Cheap grace, he argues, is Christianity's complete misunderstanding of God's grace. Cheap grace is leaders of the Christian Church handing out doctrinal holiness passes and get-out-of-hell-free cards. Cheap grace is the Christian community putting faith in a human-constructed system instead of following Jesus for the building up of God's Kingdom. God's people starve for rich meat and red wine and the Christian religious institution gives them cheap grace in the form of stale bread and water that will not satisfy. The prophet Isaiah knew the difference. "Why do you spend your money for

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<sup>15</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1949), 47.

that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourself in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live” (Is. 55:2-3a).

Bonhoeffer argues that the only real way to follow Jesus is to recognize the costly grace of God that comes to all God’s people as a gift. This gift of grace, once recognized and realized (or even glimpsed!), is transformative and the recipient of such grace cannot *not* be moved to discipleship born out of deep gratitude and love for the Giver. Those who realize the costly grace of God for what it is will give their lives to the Giver as a life-response to this gift of grace.

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is . . . the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.

Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: "ye were bought at a price," and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Bonhoeffer, 47-8.

Grace, therefore, is God's free gift to us, poured out in abundance for us through Christ. We cannot earn this grace through our own actions. We cannot create this grace through our own efforts. We also cannot, having experienced this grace, do anything but seek to love God and follow Jesus in our life. Does this mean we will be perfect? No, for only Christ is perfect. In all our attempts to love God and follow Jesus perfectly, we will fail. God's grace, however, awaits us, picks us up, and sets us on the road of faithful discipleship and loving obedience once again. As those who are endlessly grateful for the life-changing power of such grace, we will live our lives as those seeking to be who God intends for us to be in this relationship God began with us at creation.

We will never be worthy of God's grace no matter how many hours we spend studying our Bible, attending worship, visiting the sick, caring for those in need, praying our prayers, feeding the hungry, digging in the church's garden, and planning for the Easter brunch. God's grace frees us from our efforts to save ourselves. This is the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ! When we realize the magnitude of God's gift of grace to us, we become so caught up in gratitude and praise that we cannot help but respond with our lives – not to the point of exhaustion as a result of our striving, but as a natural result of our joy in praising God and living lives of obedience in love with the one who loves us endlessly, freely, and unconditionally.

What, then, does Niebuhr's "full ministry of Christ's grace" look like in the contemporary Christian community? I would argue, as Niebuhr does, that communities of faith which embody Christ's grace through their worship and ministry in the world will be full of life and vitality. The full ministry of Christ's grace also includes important

reflections of that grace as communities of faith enact together the attitudes and practices of gratitude, forgiveness, reconciliation, generosity, hope, joy, welcome and hospitality.

What is a contemporary theological definition of grace? How does Scripture define grace? What attitudes and practices model grace in our lives and in our communities of faith? How can the recovery of the foundation of grace in mainline Protestantism (no matter what form this grace takes) extricate American Christianity from this perception of irrelevance and even death? How can a clarification of the centrality of grace - both as it is conceptualized theologically and as it is manifested through congregational activity - reframe the local mainline Protestantism as a relevant, dynamic, and engaging part of the modern experience?" I will consider how mainline Protestant churches embody grace through their attitudes and practices, leading to grace-filled living and a community of faith reflective of God's grace.

Having glimpsed these many understandings of grace, let us examine the "very much more" of grace as it is found in Scripture, mine the depth of its meaning through years of theological study, and claim the way grace shapes how we live our lives in Christian community. As beautiful as some of our modern ideas of grace may be, they do not and cannot compare to our biblical and theological understanding of grace which guides our living as children of God and undergirds our life together.





## CHAPTER THREE - A Biblical Understanding of Grace

### *The Old Testament*

*In life there are two governing principles that are at war with one [an]other. The first is law; the second is grace. So powerful are these two principles, so virile and unquenchable, so captivating and irresistible, that all relationships, all human operations, simply lie down before them. The law crushes the human spirit; grace lifts it.<sup>1</sup>*

In this quote, Episcopal priest Paul F. M. Zahl invites his readers to consider the radical difference between a life lived with the belief that the law is the way to salvation as opposed to a life lived with the belief that God's grace is saving and sufficient. As Christians study the Old Testament, the place where God's law comes and directs the faithful living of God's people, grace appears around every corner. Too often, however, people of faith forget the very strong presence of grace in all of Scripture.

One of the great tragedies in American Christianity is that many Christians dismiss the Old Testament as a guide for faith because, they claim, it is void of God's grace. These Christians argue that the Old Testament teaches God's people to live by the law, and thus, to be saved by the law. This is a faulty understanding of God whose grace has been present to all creation from the beginning of time. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace" (John 1:1, 16).

Hebrew Scripture does not use one word to encompass the full meaning of grace the way *charis* does in the Greek New Testament. In fact, the New Revised Standard

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<sup>1</sup> Paul F. M. Zahl, *Grace in Practice: A Theology of Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 1.

Version of the Old Testament seldom translates a single Hebrew word into the English word grace. One notable exception would be Jeremiah 31:2: “Thus says the LORD: The people who survived the sword found grace (*chen*) in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest.” Instead, several Hebrew words – *chesed*, *chen*, and *raham* - commonly translated as loving kindness, favor and mercy (respectively) – combine to represent an understanding of God’s grace based on God’s relationship with God’s people.

Many English versions of the Bible translate the word *chesed* as “loving kindness” or “steadfast love,” translations which reflect God’s love and compassion toward God’s people. *Chesed* describes the depth and quality of relationship between one and another, particularly the relationship God has with God’s people as in Exodus 15:13, “In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed; you guided them by your strength to your holy abode,” and in Psalm 36:7, “How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.” The word *chesed* appears throughout the Hebrew Bible (245 times), from the Torah to the prophets, and significantly in Wisdom literature (127 times in the psalter). God’s grace cannot be understood apart from God’s loving kindness toward God’s people.

Another Hebrew word for grace is the noun *chen*. This word, used 67 times in Hebrew Scripture, refers to the way one looks upon another with favor, particularly the way God turns God’s face and eyes toward those God loves. In Numbers 6:25 the priestly blessing refers to such favor from the Lord. Many Protestant pastors still use these words of blessing at the end of worship today.

The LORD bless you  
and keep you;

the LORD make his face shine on you

and be gracious (*chen*) to you;

the LORD turn his face toward you

and give you peace.

A third Hebrew word, *raham*, has its roots in the word “womb” (*rechem*) and represents the deep love, faithfulness, and tenderness of a mother toward her child, a love which is but a shadow of the depth of God’s grace for God’s people. *Rahum* emphasizes God’s mercy or compassion, and often appears as a companion to *chesed* and *chen* as in Exodus 33:19, “I will be gracious (*chen*) to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy (*raham*) on whom I will show mercy,” and Exodus 34:6, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful (*raham*) and gracious (*chen*), slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love (*chesed*) and faithfulness.”<sup>2</sup>

These three Hebrew words, which appear often throughout Hebrew Scripture, encompass the meaning of God’s grace to God’s people. The deepest understanding of God’s grace, however, comes from the arc of salvation history that begins in the moments of creation and continues as God’s people realize the height, depth, breadth, and width of God’s love for them. God’s presence and action in Hebrew Scripture (God’s grace) is so profoundly evident that the actual word grace need not appear.

The journey of grace begins at the beginning of time. Humanity’s first experience of grace was in the act of creation. God, who is above all and through all and in all, spoke the word that brought creation into being. *Ex nihilo* – out of nothing - God formed the earth and the sky, the waters and the land, the plants and every creature. Before God

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<sup>2</sup> Robert K. Johnston, L. Gregory Jones, Thomas A. Langford and Jonathan R. Wilson, eds., *Grace Upon Grace: Essays in Honor of Thomas A. Langford* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 64-5.

spoke, the earth was formless and void. After God spoke, the world contained life and life abundantly. This life was God's creation and the world's relationship with its creator began then. Those first humans had done nothing to deserve God's creative power and they had done nothing to deserve God's intense love and desire to be in relationship with them. They were acted *upon* and the gift of life was a gift of God's grace – given in love – not because of anything they had done, but because God loved them and wanted to be in relationship with them.

Such was the beginning of grace.

Too often in mainline Protestant Christian communities, however, women and men forget about God's initial act of grace in creation. We forget that God created us in love, and gave us life to be lived in relationship with God and one another. We forget that we are God's beloved children, chosen by God for a life lived in love and fidelity with all creation. We cannot imagine that we, who constantly fail to live up to God's intentions for us, could still be loved. We cannot imagine that we could deserve God's grace. Too many people of faith deny God's love by living with feelings of unworthiness, self-doubt, and insecurity. As a pastor, much of my work involves reminding members of the Christian community that we are recipients of God's grace from the moment of creation - lovely, beloved, forgiven, and worthy in God's eyes.

God's grace also came to Abram and Sarai, who were called to leave their homeland and become God's chosen people. Long before God gives Moses the law on Mt. Sinai, God chooses childless Abram and Sarai and promises them innumerable descendants, land for their nation, and a covenantal relationship with the Lord God. They

had done nothing to deserve God's favor, yet it was bestowed upon them freely, generously and without requirement beyond covenantal love.

“It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you – for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors” (Deut. 7:7-8a).

“I will be your God and you will be my people” (Exodus 6:7).

God's grace continually shows up in salvation history, where God calls upon leaders like Jacob, David, Ruth, Esther, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, not because they have somehow proved their worthiness, but out of sheer grace. God chooses them because God *wants* to choose them. They often agree to God's plan with doubt and tentativeness, but the more they recognize God's grace in their lives, the more they respond with gratitude and faithfulness. With these leaders, as with God's people, God remains faithful - even when they turn away.

One of the best examples of God's grace comes from the book of Jonah. This text reveals first and foremost God's grace and ability to forgive even the most wicked who turn back to God. God sends Jonah, a reluctant prophet, to cry out against the wicked city of Ninevah and announce its inevitable destruction. To Jonah's surprise (and irritation, perhaps), the Ninevites repent and turn back to God. God, as a result, changes God's mind, turns from fierce anger, and does not destroy them (3:10). The prophet cannot believe such a reversal and bemoans the grace and mercy of God. “That is why I fled to Tarshish in the first place! For I knew that you are a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing” (4:2b). Jonah

was so angry with God for forgiving Ninevah of their evil ways, that he comes close to choosing his own death -“kill me now” (4:3) - rather than living to see the Ninevites thrive under God’s undeserved grace. Jonah’s human limits of forgiveness and grace contrast sharply in this story with God’s unlimited, abundant, and restorative grace.

The grace of God so present in Jonah appears also in the prophets. Joel refers to God as one who is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing” (2:13). Amos yells one threat after another at the people of Israel, practically begging them to come back to God, leave their sin behind and return to a right relationship with God. But in the end the grace of God raises up David’s Kingdom again, repairing its breaches and rebuilding that which has been lost and destroyed. God’s grace appears frequently in Isaiah and Jeremiah as God continually calls God’s people through these prophets to return to a right relationship with God, living in peace with one another, working toward a world that is full of the love, light, and knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:9).

Paul F.M. Zahl, Episcopal priest and writer, helps preachers, teachers and those hungry for a word of grace see that the Old Testament prophets share such grace as they call the people of God to recognize who God is and what God has done for them:

The prophets deliver hope, not in themselves, but in the God of grace, who forgives the law-exhausted failures of the people. This hope comes not only from the major prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah but also from the minor prophets such as Habakkuk, Zechariah, Micah, Joel, and Hosea. Each of these prophets understands the fruitlessness of the law to amend their people’s shattered existences. Each of them is forced in to the corner of speaking grace, the complete

book for new beginnings in the light of pathos and repentance. Their message, again and again, is heard by a remnant of the people.<sup>3</sup>

It is a message of God's grace.

Finally, and perhaps most profoundly, the psalms are full of references to God's grace. At times the psalmists call upon it:

"But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. Turn to me and be gracious to me. . . . Show me a sign of your favor" (Ps. 86:15-17).

"The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Ps. 103:8, 145:8).

"The Lord is gracious and merciful" (Ps. 111:4).

"Gracious is the Lord, and righteous" (Ps. 116:5).

In other places, the psalmists celebrate God's grace, as in Psalm 89, "I will sing of your steadfast love/loving kindness, O Lord, forever" (v.1), in the opening of Psalm 107, "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever," (v.1), and in the joyful, confident refrain of Psalm 136, "God's steadfast love endures forever."

Some preachers and congregations bypass the reading and interpreting of the Hebrew Scriptures in worship, arguing that they reflect only the law and not grace. American Christians, however, miss out on a significant message of God's grace when

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<sup>3</sup> Zahl, 8-9.



they do not share, study, and celebrate these stories, poems, and pronouncements on a regular basis.<sup>4</sup>

### *The Gospels*

“Grace is the overarching paradigm of the New Testament,”<sup>5</sup> writes Paul F. M. Zahl. While this should be good news, some people find grace unacceptable because it goes against their human understanding of what is fair and just (think back to the story of Jonah). For Americans Christians who believe strongly in the American Dream, grace can be problematic. According to the American Dream, grit, hard work, and determination lead to wealth, position, and happiness in life. Laziness, sloth, and apathy lead to poverty, insignificance, and sorrow. In this way of thinking, a person gets what he/she deserves. If one works hard and follows the rules and norms of society, success will follow. If one is lazy and does not do what society requires, the result is failure. Fair is fair. The model of the American Dream, however, is not the way of God’s grace. If we Christians received what we deserved, we would be lost and alone, without God, without salvation, and the without the freedom that comes from God’s grace. Thankfully, God’s grace is a gift to those who do not deserve it (all people) and brings life to those who would, on their own, be dead to sin.

Those who subscribe to the American Dream will inevitably experience significant tensions in the Gospels between God’s grace and what they understand to be

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<sup>4</sup> Preston Sprinkle, “Grace in the Old Testament?” *Theology for Real Life*, August 6, 2012, Accessed on January 7, 2017, <http://facultyblog.etsbiblecollege.com/2012/08/grace-in-the-old-testament/#.WHFzivrJhE>

<sup>5</sup> Zahl, 39.

fair. We claim this tension as we examine how Jesus shares God's grace through his life, teachings, death, and resurrection.

To begin with, Jesus is the embodiment of the grace of God. As the Incarnate One, Jesus walks, talks and becomes grace to the world wherever he goes and whatever he does, giving grace freely to all those who need it, not because of what they have done (as those who have followed the law, or not), but because of who they are as children of God. The gospel writer John writes in his prologue of this grace which defines Jesus: "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law was indeed given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:16-17).

In his life, as shared in the gospels, Jesus lives this grace as he touches teaches and enacts grace wherever he goes. He touched the unclean, healed the undeserving, ate with sinners, and cast out demons from the mentally ill. The word grace never appears in the synoptic gospels, but in Jesus grace abounds before the world. This grace is a living grace, exhibited through Jesus' actions and shown in story through his parables.

The grace Jesus enacts is multi-faceted. This grace includes a freedom from enslavement to the law, the forgiveness of sin, second-chances, welcome and hospitality, benevolence, inclusion, and acceptance. "Jesus' life was a labor of grace."<sup>6</sup> The grace of God in Christ extended throughout his life and all the way to the cross, where he was unjustly persecuted, beaten, mocked, spit-upon and ultimately crucified and killed. The grace of God in Christ extended even beyond the grave, when God in Christ defeated death and sin so that in Christ all would not die, as in Adam, but would be made alive for all eternity.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 40.

In his life, Jesus' greatest enactment of grace came in his reception of those the world considered to be sinners. He ate with tax collectors and sinners and when the Pharisees challenged his behavior, he countered, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. . . I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners" (Mt. 9:12-13, Mk 2:16-17, Luke 5:32). Jesus has no desire to be with those who already believed that they had saved themselves through the law. Those who seek to earn their salvation by their own works do not need him. They do not need God. Jesus comes to those who already know their inability to fulfill the law. They are the ones who will fall at the feet of God in gratitude for the gift of grace which comes to them even with their shortcomings, even with their inadequacies, even as they are unable to keep the law on their own, and even as they have failed to reach perfection. These are the ones who are searching for God's grace. These are the ones who find it in Jesus.

Jesus embodies grace in his acceptance of the sinful woman who washed his feet with her tears (Luke 7:36-50), his requesting to visit Zacchaeus the tax collector in his home (Luke 19:1-10), his speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well at midday (John 4:1-42), and his forgiving of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). Jesus looks beyond the sin and into the heart of the sinner. He offers to them life through forgiveness, hope, peace, and unconditional love.

Religious leaders of the day did not approve of Jesus' acceptance of these sinners, nor did they approve of Jesus' playing loose with the law when it came to his own actions. They accused him of breaking the law by healing on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-28) and collecting grain (i.e. working) on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1-8). He rejected these accusations, saying, "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the

Sabbath; so the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27b-28). Keeping the law should never limit or omit the care of God’s children, either in terms of giving them food, healing their diseases, or treating them as fully human. The care of humankind should always be the first order, and when the law prohibits such care, something is wrong with the law.

In addition to making grace known through his actions, Jesus also taught his followers about grace through his parables. Perhaps one of the most well-known parables about grace is found in Luke 15:11-32, known to many as The Parable of the Prodigal Son. This parable tells the story of a loving father with two sons. One son, the younger, abandons his father, takes him for granted, runs off and rejects any relationship he might have had with his brother and father, and lives a life of selfishness and greed, until he realizes his utter dependence upon his father and returns home begging for forgiveness. When the father not only accepts the younger son home, but also celebrates his return with an extravagant party, the elder son, who has remained faithfully at his father’s side for all his hard-working life, cannot accept it and refuses to offer his brother the grace of his father. This is a story much more complicated than it seems at first glance, but ultimately it is a story that points the reader directly to the incredible forgiving love of the father, who rejoices in restored relationships and celebrates a child’s homecoming with great abandon. This story tells of the forgiveness, reconciliation, love and joy that are evident in God’s grace for God’s children, as they are evident in the Father’s grace toward his two sons. Writes one preacher:

This is the heart of the gospel and of Jesus' message: no one is too far gone, too low, too abased, too bad to be removed from the unconditional love of [God] ...

and no one is too good, too dutiful, too full of rectitude, for that love. It is the nature of the Father to love those to whom he has given life.... [Some] will notice that the prodigal son acknowledges his sins, but it is not the confession that triggers the love but the father's love that triggers the confession.<sup>7</sup>

Many embrace the parable of the prodigal son in theory, but not as many in practice. Such grace is easy to talk about in the abstract and much more difficult to enact in real life. I will further address such challenges to the church to live in such forgiveness and reconciliation in the second part of this thesis.

A parable of grace less beloved by many (particularly those who subscribe to a strong belief in the “American Dream”) is the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16). In this story, a vineyard owner hires some workers early in the morning and agrees to pay them a daily wage for a day’s work. Around 9 a.m., he sees some idle workers in the marketplace and recruits them to work, promising to pay them fairly. At noon and three and then again at five o’clock, he notices other laborers who remain idle and he sends them to the vineyard to work for him. All this goes well until quitting time arrives and the workers line up to receive their pay. The first to be paid are the last ones hired. They have only worked about an hour. They receive a full day’s wage. The early morning workers like this, as it surely means they will be getting significantly more. After all, they have worked much harder for much longer. Instead, however, the landowner gives them the same pay. They receive exactly what they have been promised - a fair wage for a day’s work. Yet those early morning workers feel like

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<sup>7</sup> Peter J. Gomes, "It's About the Father: The Prodigal Son," in *Strength for the Journey: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2003), 237-8.

they have just been robbed blind. How could the landowner pay the others the same as he pays them? They did not do the work! They did not put in the hours! “You have made us equals,” the early workers grumble. “You have made us equals and we do not like that one bit.”

This story is about the kingdom of heaven where nothing is as it should be and nothing looks at all like our tit-for-tat world. This story is about grace. When God’s grace enters the picture, everything turns upside-down and we cannot for the life of us make sense of it. The last are first and the first are last and the landowner – God – cares equally for all and showers all generously and lavishly with abundant grace, mercy, forgiveness, and love. Such lavish, generous grace flows freely even upon those who did the least amount of work, even upon those who came late to the party, even upon those who (when you bring out the ledger) fall way behind the others, even upon the sinners, and even upon the undeserving.

This parable reflects the generosity of God’s grace. A truly generous gift is the kind of gift given in unconditional love - without any expectation of repayment in any way. The landowner did not pay the one-hour workers a full-day’s wage with the expectation that they would work for free the next day. A truly generous gift, as God’s generous gift of love for us in Jesus Christ, comes with no strings attached and expects nothing in return. God’s grace comes to us in the love shown through a journey to the cross, to death, and to resurrection which brings forgiveness and eternal life. God really does give us such love without expecting *anything* in return.

As incomprehensible as it may be, this is grace. God's gift in Christ is a free gift for all – love given without caveat, without bargaining, with no strings attached. It is unconditional love. It is unmerited grace.

As noted above, such grace and love do not fit very well into our nation's worldview. We would rather earn our way into God's arms of grace, into the kingdom of heaven. We prefer equal pay for equal work. We prefer time clocks and hourly wages. We understand this system. It is fair. We like it. Most of the time it works for us - at least it works for the early-arriving, hard-working laborers (unless they are people of color, women, or differently abled). They only want to get what they deserve. But they also want everyone else to get what they deserve, too. It is only fair.

God, however, is not fair. Most of us, if we are being honest with ourselves and with God, acknowledge that we, like the later laborers, get far more grace, mercy, forgiveness and love from God than we could ever expect, imagine, earn or deserve.

### *Paul's Writings*

Writer Frederick Buechner describes Paul's encounter with God's grace in this way:

He was on his way to Damascus when he received it, of course. His mission was to round up as many followers of Christ as he could lay his hands on in order to bring them in chains back to Jerusalem, and it was precisely on his way to accomplish that mission that Christ appeared to him in a vision and asked him to become a follower himself. When it seems to him that he deserved nothing so much as to have God give him up, God in Christ gave him himself instead, and

Paul never forgot it his whole life long. “By grace we have been saved,” he wrote, because he believed that, with no questions asked, no conditions laid down, no qualifications required, no strings of any kind attached, God had loved him enough to save him – *him* of all people – and from that day forward every word he ever wrote and every weary mile he ever traveled sprang from his passion to touch the heart of the world as his own heart had been touched by the revelation of that extraordinary moment.<sup>8</sup>

Paul experiences God’s grace first-hand in his conversion on the road to Damascus. Before that day, when his name was Saul, he persecuted the church in Jerusalem (Acts 8:3a), approved of the stoning of Stephen (8:1), dragged men and women from their homes and threw them in prison (8:3), and breathed threats of murder against disciples of the Lord (9:1). As he travels from Jerusalem to Damascus, however, he finds himself face-to-face with the one he has been persecuting. He is on his way to Damascus to collect any followers of “the Way,”<sup>9</sup> bind them and bring them back to Jerusalem - men and women alike. But God hinders his mission with a blinding flash of light and a voice from God, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” In his literal blindness he finally begins to see clearly his former slavery to sin, God’s calling to him, and God’s grace. From that moment on, he preaches Christ’s death and resurrection. He preaches God’s unmerited mercy and divine favor for all through God’s Son, Jesus Christ. Paul preaches grace.

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<sup>8</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Longing for Home* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 175-6.

<sup>9</sup> “The Way” referred to the path of belief in Christ.



For the rest of his life Paul does not cease to proclaim the grace of Jesus Christ he experienced so profoundly on that roadside. He, formerly the greatest of persecutors, knows that he deserves God's wrath and punishment, and yet he receives God's mercy. He actively persecuted followers of Jesus and yet Jesus has mercy on him and invites him into a new and reconciled relationship with God. He has done nothing to earn this gift of grace; in fact, he has done much to ensure he does not deserve it. Yet, in God's abundant mercy and overflowing grace, God welcomes Paul back into his arms as a parent receives a reconciled child.

Following his conversion, Paul acknowledges that the law cannot save him. Only God's grace can do that. In all his striving to fulfill the law, he cannot be justified before God. God's gift of grace through his son Jesus Christ is the only way Paul can be set free from his striving and welcomed into a restored relationship with God. Paul's understanding of God's grace for all becomes the bedrock of his preaching and writing to the new churches he starts and nurtures for the rest of his life.

Because of this transforming encounter with Jesus and God's grace, Paul urges all to recognize and receive God's grace as a gift and to acknowledge that justification comes to all through such grace, apart from the law (Romans 3:28). He takes no credit for his preaching or leadership, but points always back to God and the grace God has given him (Romans 12:3, 1 Corinthians 3:10, Galatians 1:15, 2:9, Ephesians 3:8). This grace, Paul argues, is a free gift in Christ (Eph. 1:6, 2:8) and comes to us as forgiveness and redemption. This unmerited gift is a result of Christ's defeat of sin and death (Eph. 1:7, 2:5, 8). In such, we who are sinners have been declared innocent. We have been forgiven for our alienation from God. We have done nothing to earn this gift of grace; Christ died

for us while we were still sinners! God, in abundant grace and mercy, overlooked the ways we have turned from God and relied on our own wisdom rather than God's wisdom. Through the saving death and resurrection of God's Son, Jesus Christ, we are set free from the power of sin, made new creations and reconciled to God forever. This is God's undeserved gift to us all.

Grace plays the central role in Paul's understanding of God's activity in his life. He begins many of his letters with a reference to his calling which came to him "by the will of God" (1 Cor. 1:1 and 2 Cor. 1:1). He claims the apostolic nature of his work as one who has been "set apart for the gospel of God" (Romans 1:1). Having established himself as one called by God (therefore referring to his conversion as an act of grace from God), he continues by offering a salutation of grace to each community to which he writes: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

His focus on grace does not end with his greeting, though. The Greek *charis* (grace) dominates Paul's writings, appearing over sixty times in his uncontested letters and numerous times again in letters written by those he likely influenced. "Grace," writes D. Moody Smith, "is a characteristically Pauline theological term." Even when the word itself is not used, it is often implied. Brad Eastman, in *The Significance of Grace in the Letters of Paul*, sees grace in much of Paul's writing which focuses on humanity's dependence upon God.<sup>10</sup>

In Romans 3, Paul reserves righteousness for God, reminding his reader that all (Jews *and* Greeks) are under the power of sin. To prove his point, he recalls the way the

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<sup>10</sup> Johnston, Robert K., L. Gregory Jones, Thomas A. Langford and Jonathan R. Wilson, eds., *Grace Upon Grace: Essays in Honor of Thomas A. Langford* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 27; Brad Eastman, *The Significance of Grace in the Letters of Paul* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 10.

psalmists, Proverbs and Isaiah describe the self-serving, worthless nature of humanity.

Humanity is so full of sin and evil that it cannot save itself, even using the law as an attempt to correct. “No human being will be justified in his sight; by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin” (3:20).

The good news, Paul knows, is that humanity does not have to save itself (or die striving!). Humans are made righteous “through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe” (3:22). All have sinned. No one is righteous. The gift of God’s grace, the redemption of all through Christ, is what justifies humanity, not the law. Paul’s language, writes Paul F. M. Zahl, “admits to the impotence of law before the success of grace. It is always a four-word sentence from God: law fails, grace succeeds. Grace does what the law cannot do.”<sup>11</sup> By grace, God saves us from our striving and releases us from the power of sin and death. By grace, God makes us to be whole and acceptable in God’s sight, even though on our own we are unworthy. By the grace of God, we have new life, new hope, and a new opportunity to live in a relationship of obedience to God and love for others. In this is our joy.

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<sup>11</sup>Zahl, 47.

## CHAPTER FOUR - *Perspectives on Grace from Theologians*

*Grace is the creative arrival of the eternal love of God in the I-center of a person. Through it, a person is yanked up out of the limits of [his/her] nature and into fellowship with God. Simultaneously [he/she] is equipped with abilities that make it not only possible but even easy and taken for granted. From grace “flow” faith, hope, and love. Yet all of this is the world of a God who shows [God’s] power precisely in ruling over the ways [God’s] creatures find their way to [God] “suaviter” – gently – through the irresistible lure of [God’s] love.<sup>1</sup>*

*Theology is not only knowledge of human reflection about God; theology is also a constant doing, as well as a remembering, a transmitting, a refining. Theology is something that the church does, not only something that it has.<sup>2</sup>*

### **St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430)**

Most accounts of the development of Western Christianity argue that St. Augustine’s doctrine of grace developed significantly as a response to the writings of Pelagius, a British monk teaching in Rome at the same time Augustine was preaching and writing in Hippo. In an attempt to address the moral depravity of the masses, Pelagius began to teach and preach that good works and human free will could lead to salvation.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Klaiber, *Justified Before God: A Contemporary Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 133-134. This is a quote summarizing Thomas Aquinas’ thinking on grace, found in Otto Herman Pesch and Albrecht Peters, *Einführung in die Lehre von Gnade und Rechtfertigung*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989, 89.

<sup>2</sup> Childs, James M. and Richard Lischer, eds., *The Eloquence of Grace: Joseph Sittler and the Preaching Life* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 75.

He did not believe in original sin, but rather insisted that humanity was basically good, and believed that once people knew the way to live as God commanded, they could live a life that would lead them to salvation. By their own merit, apart from God, individuals could perform the commands of Scripture, including prayer, fasting, and following the Law of Moses, and by sheer will achieve their own salvation. Pelagius and his followers used Deuteronomy 24:16 to defend their opposition to original sin in humanity: "Fathers shall not be put to death for *their* children, nor shall the children be put to death for *their* fathers; a person shall be put to death for his own sin." The Council of Carthage declared him a heretic in 419 A.D.<sup>3</sup>

Augustine responded adamantly to Pelagius, rejecting the idea that Adam's sin was *not* passed on through generations and following Pauline theology in that "Adam's death in sin meant the death in sin of us all" ("For as in Adam all die. . . ." 1 Corinthians 15:22.). As descendants of Adam, humanity was not without sin and therefore could not merit salvation on its own but only through Christ, as a gift of grace from God.<sup>4</sup>

Augustine claims:

From . . . Scripture, we gather the proof that God's grace is not given according to our merits. The truth is, we see that it is given not only where there are no good merits, but even where there are many preceding evil merits: and we see it given so daily.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Augustine, *A Treatise on Grace and Free Will by Aurelius Augustin, Bishop of Hippo Addressed to Valentinus and the Monks of Adrumetum, and Completed in One Book*, ed. Philip Schaff and trans. Peter Holmes and Robert Ernest Wallis (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), 441–65; Stephen N. Philippo, "St. Augustine and Pelagianism," *Ignatius Insight*, Accessed on April 20, 2016, [http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2008/sfilippo\\_augustinepelag\\_jan08.asp](http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2008/sfilippo_augustinepelag_jan08.asp)

<sup>4</sup> Larry D. Sharp, "The Doctrines of Grace in Calvin and Augustine" *Evangelical Quarterly*, 52.2 (April-June 1980), 85.

<sup>5</sup> Augustine, 441–65.

For Augustine, Christ is the source of merit for all humanity – “Even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:22). God gives God’s grace to humanity as a gift for salvation. This grace in Christ is the means by which men and women are able to be faithful. They are saved by faith, but faith is not a result of their own good works, but rather a gift from God through the saving activity of Christ.

This question then seems to me to be by no means capable of solution, unless we understand that even those good works of ours, which are recompensed with eternal life, belong to the grace of God, because of what is said by the Lord Jesus: “Without me you can do nothing” (John 15.5). And the apostle himself said, “By grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2.8-9). . . . It follows then, dearly beloved, beyond all doubt, that as your good life is nothing else than God’s grace, so also the eternal life—which is the recompense of a good life—is the grace of God; moreover [eternal life] is given gratuitously, even as that [good life] is given gratuitously, for which [eternal life] is given. But that for which it is given, is the intended meaning, solely and simply: grace. This therefore is also that which is given to it, because it is its reward— grace is for grace, as if it were remuneration for righteousness—in order that it may be true, because it is true, that God “shall reward every man according to his works.”<sup>6</sup>

For Augustine, God’s grace is healing power, a medicine for a sick soul, given in association with “the Holy Spirit and with God’s poured-out love. That is, it is something

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<sup>6</sup> Augustine, ch. 20.

infused in us in a new way of salvation based on God's forgiveness." Grace is God's love for humanity shared freely so that the human soul might be whole again and know freedom from sin. Salvation comes through healing, when the sin sick soul is revived again and made whole so that the intended relationship between God and humanity might be restored.<sup>7</sup>

Salvation is a gift from God by way of humanity's good works (i.e. exhibited faith). "The elect are saved not because they have generated faith, works and merits in their own power, but because these things are given by the grace of God." God's grace enables us to do the good works which then in turn save us. We will see below how this understanding differs in Luther and Calvin.<sup>8</sup>

### **Martin Luther (1483-1546)**

Martin Luther's understanding of grace, as Augustine's, cannot easily be encapsulated. He has written volumes on the subject of grace, faith, sin, justification and sanctification. For the purpose of this paper, I will examine his theological understanding of grace by sharing his understanding of what grace is *not* paired with the opposite understanding of what grace *is*.

What grace is *not*:

- 1) A quality held within the human soul. "Here, as ought to be done, I take grace in the proper sense of the favor of God – not a quality of the soul, as is taught by

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<sup>7</sup> Sharp, 86; Klaiber, 133.

<sup>8</sup> Sharp, 87.

more recent writers.”<sup>9</sup> If grace is a quality of the human soul, then it is no longer *God’s* grace. *Gratia externa* – grace that comes outside of the human soul comes as a gift from God. Without God’s gift, humanity would not possess grace.

- 2) A medicine given out in different measures and degrees. Peter Lang, in *Grace and Gift*, shares Luther’s opposition to this misunderstanding of grace, “Grace is not an object outside God himself. Grace is not a thing that can be divided and quantified. . . . [G]race is not allowed to be split up and portioned out. Grace is one and whole. Such is grace because it is unseparably (*sic*) united with God, the only true God.”<sup>10</sup>
- 3) A way to achieve merit in the way of Christ (condign merit/worthiness). Luther rejects this notion as it assumes that humanity joins with God as a partner, with each offering something to the other. Humanity, argues Luther, is unable by its own merit to offer anything to God to achieve grace. Instead, God gives all things to humanity as undeserved gifts. Luther turns to Paul to argue against the proponents of the belief that grace is given according to merit, works or any sense of worthiness.

[W]e are justified only by his grace apart from all works and therefore apart from the law itself, in which all works, great and small, congruous and condign, are included. Now go and boast of your ancient authorities, and rely on what they say, when you see that they have one and all

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<sup>9</sup>George W. Forell, ed. *Luther's Works, Vol. 32, Career of the Reformer II* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1948), 227.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Lang, *Grace and Gift* (Frankfurt, Germany: Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2008), 79.



overlooked the clearest and plainest teaching of Paul as if they deliberately shunned this morning star, or rather the sun, because of the carnal notion they doubtless entertained that it would be absurd to have no place left for merits.<sup>11</sup>

The crux of Luther's understanding of grace is that it is a gift from God. Humanity cannot in any way earn it and does not in any way deserve it. Grace is God's gift to God's undeserving people and it brings them back into a right relationship with God. The good works of individuals grow out of that grace from God and are not prerequisites for it. None is righteous apart from God. None can boast of righteousness through works. Grace cannot be earned, deserved or demanded. It comes as a gift from God. We are justified by God's grace apart from anything we have done.

Some will argue that this understanding of grace is too harsh, as it removes any possibility of goodness from human soul on its own. Others will argue that it is too lenient, as it does not require enough from humanity and therefore humans will "continue in sin so that grace may abound" (Romans 6:1). Luther argues that this theology is not his own idea, but that it comes straight from Scripture, particularly from the Apostle Paul, who writes that God's gift of grace has come to us (as a gift) through our Lord Jesus Christ (5:1-2), who died for the ungodly (5: 6), (i.e. all of us), because "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift" (3:23-24). Paul erases any attempts for humans to argue that they might be justified through

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<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther, "The Bondage of the Will," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, Timothy F. Lull, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 200-201.

merit: “there is no such thing as merit, but all who are justified are justified freely (gratis), and this is to be ascribed to nothing but the grace of God.”<sup>12</sup>

“No one is righteous. No not one” (3:10). Paul knows that it would have been nothing special if Jesus had died for the righteous, but “God proves his love for us in that while we were sinners Christ died for us.”

- 4) Something achieved by fulfilling the requirements for participation in saving grace. Humanity is not the author of grace. God’s grace is not a tool that can be used by humanity to appropriate grace or spend grace in order to cure oneself. Writes Lang, “In Luther’s anthropology . . . grace cannot be applied to strengthen man’s own powers to save himself. This is the way of death, not the way of life. Man has no chance of coping with wrath and sin successfully. This is exclusively the task of grace and gift.”<sup>13</sup>

If the above clarifies what grace is *not*, how then does Luther explain the fundamental characteristics of grace for the Christian? He defines his theology of grace over and against what he understands grace not to be. Grace is, for Luther:

- 1) An external gift that comes from God, outside of the human soul. “The grace of God is an outward good, God’s favor.”<sup>14</sup>
- 2) Whole and undivided and cannot be parceled out. “He does not divide this grace as gifts are divided, nor does He love the head and hate the foot, nor favor the

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid, 198.

<sup>13</sup> Lang, 82.

<sup>14</sup> LW, vol. 32, 227.

soul and hate the body. . . It is thus in the entirety of the church which stands under the same grace of God.”<sup>15</sup>

- 3) Incapable of uniting with wrath. Luther references Paul’s discussion of his carnality in Romans 7:25 “I serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.”

The gift makes him spiritual and places him under grace – the grace of the one man Jesus Christ. Sin makes him carnal, but does not place him under wrath; for grace and wrath cannot both be present, nor do they fight with one another.<sup>16</sup>

- 4) The greatest good. Grace produces peace and joy in the heart of the one who has received it.

This grace truly produces peace of heart until finally a man is healed from his corruption and feels he has a gracious God. It is what fattens the bones and gives joy, security, and fearlessness to the consciousness so that one dares all, can do all and, in this trust in the grace of God, laughs even at death.<sup>17</sup>

Luther’s understanding of grace informs his understanding of justification and sanctification and vice versa. For Luther, the Christian life (a life of obedience to God) is understood primarily in light of the assertion that we are justified by grace alone through

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 228.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 246.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 227.

faith alone. In his 1521 book *Antilatomus*, Luther discusses in detail two concepts of grace: *gratia* and *donum*.

*Gracia* is the undeserved grace of God towards unworthy people, sinners who are not up to the standards in the severe judgement of God. *Gratia* includes [God's] mercy and compassion, which do not blame people for their sins, but forgive them for the sake of Jesus Christ. . . . *Donum* is the gift from God. It includes *fides Christi*, faith in Christ, and *justitia*, the new righteousness of the person achieved by faith in Christ.<sup>18</sup>

*Gracia* (grace) and *donum* (faith) go together but *gracia* always comes first. Faith is the gift given by God out of grace that allows the sinner to receive God's grace and live a life of obedience. Without grace, faith cannot stand alone before God. Without grace, faith cannot overcome sin. The human soul is not justified by any part of themselves internally (see #1 above), but by God's grace and gift of faith to receive such grace. God's gift of faith is directly connected to and dependent upon God's grace.

Through the gift of faith then, after grace, the Christian becomes a "co-worker" with God, bearing the fruits of the righteousness of God. The Christian, then, joins with God in confronting evil. As God's co-workers, Christians fight against their own sin, bear good fruits, and delight in the law of God. All this is possible through God's reconciling work in the incarnate Christ who has merited God's gifts of grace and faith for our sake through his life, death and resurrection.

### **John Calvin (1509-1564)**

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<sup>18</sup> Lang, 11.

As a Presbyterian pastor, my theology of grace has been formed and shaped by John Calvin. Though I do not align myself with all of his teachings, his understandings of the sovereignty of God and God's grace in Christ as a gift to humanity have profoundly influenced my life and beliefs and have guided the way I do ministry. I do not, however, always see a clear articulation of this understanding of grace in the life, ministry and theology of some Reformed churches today and believe that a re-claiming of this transformative theology could be part of reforming our churches from fearful, dying churches to vital and vibrant communities of grace.

The best place to start with Calvin is exactly where he started. He opens Book One of his *Christian Institutes* with two clear statements on God and humanity and how they are intertwined: "Without the knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God," and "Without the knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self." Calvin firmly believed that the more we know about God as our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer who is above all and through all and in all, the more we will be able to grasp our own creatureliness and our desperate need for God and God's grace in Christ through the Holy Spirit. "God is God," as we say in worship sometimes, "and we are not."<sup>19</sup>

In fact, Calvin argues, we are totally depraved. Sin is a part of our thinking, emotion and will. "[W]e are so vitiated and perverted in every part of our nature that by this great corruption we stand justly condemned and convicted before God, to whom nothing is acceptable but righteousness, innocence and purity." This sin is not our nature: we were not created as sinful. Rather, the sin in humanity is a derangement, a degeneration, from our original nature. While this sounds like bad news to many, the true

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<sup>19</sup> John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.1.1-2.

Calvinist knows that this is good news because of the grace of God in Christ Jesus. This grace comes to the sinful person in need of restoration by way of Jesus Christ and is given not because of any deserving on the part of the sinner (There is nothing individuals can do to earn God's grace in Christ or to deserve it in any way). Grace cannot be earned; faith is not something about which a human can boast. God's grace comes purely as a gift in Christ, through faith, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Let the striving cease! Let the boasting come to an end. God is Sovereign. We are not. We are saved by the righteousness of God in Christ, not because of our own doing but because of God's love for us. This is good news, indeed!<sup>20</sup>

John Calvin's doctrine of grace connects closely to Martin Luther's. As Luther does, Calvin focuses on grace as a part of God's character and being. God's grace is external to the human soul. The human does not need a healing medicine in order to strengthen the weakened grace within (as Augustine would argue). Instead, grace is an external gift that comes to humanity purely as a result of Christ's merit. "Scripture couples God's grace and Christ's merit." Humanity receives the grace of God through faith in Christ, not works.<sup>21</sup>

For Calvin, this grace comes in two forms:

Christ was given to us by God's generosity, to be grasped and possessed by us in faith. By partaking of him, we principally receive a double grace: namely, that being reconciled to God through Christ's blamelessness, we may have in heaven

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 2.1.8, 2.1.10.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 2.17.2.

instead of a Judge a gracious Father; and secondly, that sanctified by Christ's spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life.<sup>22</sup>

In grasping Christ by faith, the elect receive this “double grace”—justification and sanctification. One does not follow from the other; they cannot be separated. Rather, they exist simultaneously as two sides, or dimensions, of one grace. “Now, both repentance [sanctification] and forgiveness of sins [justification] – that is, newness of life and free reconciliation – are conferred on us by Christ, and both are attained by us through faith.”<sup>23</sup>

Sanctification (from the Latin *sanctificatio*, meaning “to be made holy”) is the grace that unites sinful believers with Christ and forms them into holy and righteous people. Union with Christ is the sole requirement for sanctification. “[A]s long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and won for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value to us.” This union with Christ comes as a gift of God's grace nurtured by the power of the Holy Spirit (“faith is the principle work of the Holy Spirit”). It is a process of growth that happens throughout our life as the Holy Spirit moves in us a desire to draw closer in love and obedience to God.<sup>24</sup>

Calvin understands sanctification as the holiness that comes to one who has become aware that the grace of God has been given as a gift, not because of any

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 3.11.1.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 3.3.1.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 3.1.1; 3.1.3.

deserving or any striving for good works, but out of God's abundant and unconditional love for God's people. Once the Holy Spirit has nurtured such an awareness of God's grace, then the Holy Spirit guides the receiver of grace into a loving, obedient and grateful relationship with God through Christ.

Sanctification occurs when the human who has received God's grace responds in repentance, obedience and faith. It happens when individuals recognize their sin and total dependency upon God and respond with life-transforming gratitude upon realizing the gift of grace that takes away sin. "Mortification," as Calvin refers to it, is when one comes face-to-face with the true knowledge of one's sinful nature. This mortification leads directly to "vivification," which is when one sees the goodness of God's mercy, grace, and salvation through Christ and "raises himself up, takes heart, recovers courage, and as it were, returns from death to life." Sanctifying grace brings the sinful person to faith in Christ Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>25</sup>

Justification, the other part of Calvin's double grace, is the righteousness of God bestowed as a gift through the righteousness of Christ. Justification before God cannot be attained by good works but comes only as a gift of grace from God because of the love and obedience of Christ. Jesus Christ, sinless and human, stands in our place and is reckoned as righteous for our sake. We are able to stand before God because of the righteousness of Christ, not as a result of our own righteousness. Larry D. Sharp, in his essay "The Doctrines of Grace in Calvin and Augustine," explains Calvin's thinking:

God in [God's] mercy gives us what we do not have, the righteousness of Christ, and thereby unites us to himself and gives us eternal life. He covers our totally

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 3.3.3.



depraved selves with the absolute purity and righteousness of Christ and by this imputed righteousness of Christ . . . we are saved.<sup>26</sup>

God's grace is given out of pure, generous, unending love for God's elect. It comes as a gift, not because it is desired or sought after, but because God chooses to give it. This gift cannot be resisted. It is irresistible. Those who receive it will come to faith in Christ not because of anything that brought them to it (human beings are incapable of perfect obedience and following the law apart from Christ) but because God acted in them, through Christ, to bring about new life.

### **Karl Barth (1886-1968)**

Barth's theology of grace rests in the sovereignty of God whose triumph of grace comes through Jesus Christ for all people. His doctrine of grace is foundational and directly informs his doctrines of creation, election, reconciliation and eschatology.

Like the Reformers, Barth rested his understanding of grace in God's abundant and unending love which comes as a free gift to God's undeserving people and is a part of God's covenant with God's people in Jesus Christ. This covenant of grace begins in creation. Humanity cannot understand creation apart from Christ and the covenant of grace God has given to humanity which leads to redemption and salvation. Christ is the Mediator between God and humanity from before his incarnation. The power of God's grace in Christ to forgive God's sinful creation and reconcile humanity with God is a central affirmation of Calvin, Luther and Barth alike.

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<sup>26</sup> Sharp, 86.

The biggest difference in the theology of grace of Barth and Calvin is in their understanding of the doctrine of election. Calvin believes that God's sanctifying grace is that which brings about faith (*see above*). Those who are in God's elect will of course be the faithful, having been transformed by God's sanctifying grace. Barth has a more universal understanding of election, which grows out of his understanding of God's grace in Christ who is both "the Elector and the Elected One." Barth asserts that God moves toward all God's people in grace. God is the instigator, the mover and God institutes the covenant relationship in Jesus Christ. The love of God's grace condescends to humanity by taking on human form. It is a love which identifies with human need by taking bodily form and meeting human "plight by making it its own concern."<sup>27</sup>

For Barth, God's election of grace is the sum of the good news of the Gospel. "The love of God is His grace. . . It occurs even when there is no question of claim or merit on the part of the other. It is love which is overflowing, free, unconstrained, unconditioned." Christ acts simultaneously as the elector and the elected one on the behalf of humankind. The transforming power of God's grace exists for all humanity in Christ Jesus and the judgment that came to Jesus was once and for all. God's covenant of grace through Jesus Christ embraces all. No one is excluded. Not only is no one excluded, but not one is outside of the covenant to the extent that faith is not an option. Unbelief has become, according to Barth, "an objective, real, ontological impossibility; faith, however, has become an objective, real, ontological inevitability for all, for every man." When one somehow steps outside of the faith that is a part of grace, they have chosen the "impossible possibility," a result of the chaos of sin. This universality of the

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<sup>27</sup> Donald Bloesch, *Jesus is Victor! Karl Barth's Doctrine of Salvation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 68-69; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, 9-10.

triumph of grace is central to Barth's theology – God's grace is free and cannot be limited. God elects all because God elects Christ. God justified all because God justified Christ. By grace God saves all, not as a result of good works or deserving, but as a free gift.<sup>28</sup>

Justification and sanctification for Barth are two moments in one act of reconciliation by Jesus Christ who is fully human and fully God.

[Justification and sanctification are] two different aspects of the one event of salvation. . . Justification is not sanctification and does not merge into it.

Sanctification is not justification and does not merge into it. Thus, although the two belong indissolubly together, the one cannot be explained by the other. It is one thing that God turns in free grace to sinful man and quite another that in the same free grace He converts man to Himself.<sup>29</sup>

Barth takes great care to make sure that justification and sanctification not be confused, merged, or used to identify the other. And yet he knows that while one cannot take the place of the other, they are necessarily intertwined. After all, he asks:

What is the forgiveness of sins (however we understand it) if it is not directly accompanied by an actual liberation of the committal of sin? What is divine sonship if we are not set in the service of God and the brethren? What is the hope of the universal and definitive revelation of the eternal God without the striving for provisional and concrete lesser ends? What is faith without obedience? And conversely: What is a liberation for new action which does not rest from the very

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<sup>28</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, 9-10; IV/1, 111, 834.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, IV/2, 503.

outset and continually on the forgiveness of sins? Who can and will serve God but the child of God who lives by the promise of His unmerited adoption? How can there be a confident expectation and movement in time without the basis of eternal hope? How can there be any serious obedience which is not the obedience of faith?<sup>30</sup>

Sanctification begins when sinners realize their sin (justification). Believers whose sin has been revealed can no longer be complacent and “happily pursue their course.” They are unable any more to sin boldly because they now recognize their actions as sinful. Sanctification takes place when humanity becomes a “true covenant partner of God,” develops an awareness of sin, and can no longer live as undisturbed sinners. Sanctification is humanity turning back to God.<sup>31</sup>

Justification is the way from sin to righteousness, the way of death to life, the way of humanity to reconciliation with God. Justification is God turning to humanity. It is the forgiveness of sin and the defeat of death and the end of the threat of judgment.

Together, justification and sanctification comprise God’s amazing grace, a free and unmerited universal gift for the world.

Though Barth rejects Calvin’s doctrine of election, even he must come face-to-face with the recognition that not all have experienced God’s grace. He understands those who are saved and those who are lost as those who know of God’s gift of grace in Christ and those who do not know. G. C. Berkouwer, in *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, compares this distinction to the story of an army-occupied city which has

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 505.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 525.

been liberated (They are free! Celebrations abound!) but people in the suburbs and on the outskirts of the city have not yet heard of the liberation. The event has happened, for a fact, and yet all do not know the good news. The “subjective” knowledge (or lack of knowledge) does not change the “objective” event which has taken place.<sup>32</sup>

In the end, Barth cannot really believe that anyone is beyond the reach of God’s grace, beyond the reach of the divine yes in Jesus Christ. Donald G. Bloesch in *Jesus is Victor! Karl Barth’s Doctrine of Salvation*, compares Barth’s ultimate universalism as over and against John Calvin’s limited atonement. He writes:

In Calvin all is of grace, but grace is not for all. . . . In Barth grace is the source of all creaturely being and goes out to all, but every man is set against grace. Yet every man is caught up in the movement of grace even in the case where there is continued opposition to Christ. At the same time those who defy grace are claimed by grace and remain objects of grace despite their contumacy and folly. The act of turning away from grace is for Barth impossible and it would seem an impermanent condition, since no man can escape from or overturn the all-embracing love and grace of a sovereign God.<sup>33</sup>

Barth asserts that no one transcends the justifying and sanctifying grace of God. After all, what human can put limits on God?

### **Paul Tillich (1886-1965)**

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<sup>32</sup> Bloesch, 110; G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), 265; Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 344.

<sup>33</sup> Bloesch, 70.

In his sermon “You Are Accepted” Paul Tillich argues that the words sin and grace have lost their true meaning. He takes on the challenge of reclaiming them as significant theological words which shape our understanding of God, the incarnate Christ, ourselves and the Gospel message. The words, he claims, are so familiar that they no longer carry their intended theological depth and truth. He states:

During the centuries [the words sin and grace] have received distorting connotations, and have lost so much of their genuine power that we must seriously ask ourselves whether we should use them at all, or whether we should discard them as useless tools.<sup>34</sup>

The words are too valuable, he knows, to discard. Acknowledging, however, that no suitable substitutes can take their place, Tillich sets about to uncover or rediscover their meaning in a way that “leads us down into the depth of our human existence.” He posits, “In that depth these words were conceived; and there they gained power for all ages; there they must be found again by each generation, and by each of us.”<sup>35</sup>

In his sermon Tillich offers four examples of distortions of grace. Though he wrote this sermon in the 1940s, the same misunderstandings of grace remain today.

- 1) “For some people, grace is the willingness of a divine king and father to forgive over and over again the foolishness and weakness of his subjects and children.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948), 153.

<sup>35</sup> Tillich, 154.

<sup>36</sup> Tillich, 155.

This understanding of grace is faulty, argues Tillich, in that it is a “childish destruction of a human dignity.” Humans are those who cannot and/or will not seek to change their sinful behavior. The knowledge that they will be forgiven leads them not to gratitude but to abuse of God’s goodness. In this understanding, grace is cheap and is handed out again and again to fools who continue to take it and continue to abuse it.<sup>37</sup>

Those who accuse Roman Catholics of going to confession, receiving absolution, and heading out to commit the same sinful acts again and again, knowing that a priest awaits them, ready to hear their confession and forgive share this perspective on grace. They might accuse Protestants of the same thing when they lay claim to a gracious and merciful God who forgives them of their sin and sends them out to live in sin once again.

As Paul makes clear in his letter to the Romans, this is not grace:

Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life (6:1-4).

Grace does not create in the sinner a desire to continue in sin. Grace comes as a gift based on the merit of Christ Jesus. God’s grace provides forgiveness and newness. It is given once and the sinner begins a new relationship with God through Christ. Such grace must not be understood as a repeated “get-out-of-jail-free card” for the foolish sinner.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 156.

2) “For others, grace is a magic power in the dark places of the soul.”<sup>38</sup>

In some ways, this misunderstanding parallels Augustine’s theology of grace. Augustine argued that sin-sickness engulfed the human soul because of the sin of Adam. God’s grace was the healing balm which healed, strengthened and ultimately cured the “sin-sick” soul. Martin Luther corrects this misunderstanding of grace when he talks about grace as *external* to the human soul. Grace is not that which God dispenses out magically to heal the sinful and dark soul. Grace is with God alone. Were grace *internal* to the human soul, then the means of salvation would be within. Luther, Calvin and other Reformation leaders stood by the claim that the means of salvation is within God alone. Grace is *not* a magic power within; rather, it is God’s external power to forgive sin “so that it no longer exists in [God’s] eyes, even though it still dwells within the Christian.”<sup>39</sup>

3) “For others, grace is the benevolence that we may find beside the cruelty and destructiveness in life.”<sup>40</sup>

Grace is not just goodness. Grace is not just a kind smile from the woman in the check-out line. While these are good things (no one would argue that a ray of sunshine on a rainy day is a bad thing!), grace is so much more.

Scot McKnight, author of *A Fellowship of Differents*, knows that grace as a happy moment makes us feel good, for a bit, but does not sustain. He argues that author and theologian Frederick Buechner might err on the side of telling less than the full story of

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Sharp, 85; Lang, 86.

<sup>40</sup> Tillich, 156.



grace in some of his writings, when he compares grace to general goodness that comes to us in the midst of difficult times. McKnight warns that Buechner

. . . tilts in this direction when he says that “a good sleep is grace and so are good dreams.” “The smell of rain is grace.” I like dreamy sleep and the pitter-patter of rain, but we do the word “grace” a disservice when we reduce it to pleasant life experiences.<sup>41</sup>

As Tillich so eloquently argues in his sermon on grace, “if grace means no more than this, the word should, and will, disappear.”

4) “For other people, grace indicates the gifts that one has received from nature or society, and the power to do good things with the help of those gifts.”

Frequently, people refer to good health, a bright mind, a good job, wealth, and a happy family as “graces.” These are wonderful gifts, to be sure, and should be recognized with gratitude and used to do good things. But, Tillich argues, “grace is more than gifts.”<sup>42</sup>

In grace something is overcome; grace occurs in spite of something; grace occurs in spite of separation and estrangement. Grace is the reunion of life with life, the reconciliation of the self with itself. Grace is the acceptance of that which is rejected. Grace transforms fate into a meaningful destiny; it changes guilt into confidence and courage. There is something triumphant in the word grace: in spite of the abounding of sin grace abounds much more.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Scot McKnight, *A Fellowship of Differents* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 47.

<sup>42</sup> Tillich, 156.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

Tillich knows we cannot understand God's gift of new life and redemption until we first understand that we are captive to sin. On our own we are locked in a fruitless attempt to save ourselves from being separated and estranged from God. God's grace comes to us in spite of our sin, in spite of our rejection of God, and in spite of our endless and fruitless striving after goodness. Yes, sin abounds in us. However, in Christ, we who are dead to sin are made alive through God's grace, which is powerful and life-changing. Grace brings life out of death, light out of darkness, hope out of despair, love out of abandonment, joy out of sorrow, freedom out of imprisonment, and fullness out of emptiness. The self that was lost to sin is now made whole by the power of God's grace, which strikes us when we least expect it and transforms us in ways we never could have imagined.

Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual . . . It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!" If that happens to us, we experience grace. After such an experience

we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed. In that moment, grace conquers sin, and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement. And nothing is demanded of this experience, no religious or moral or intellectual presupposition, nothing but acceptance.<sup>44</sup>

For Tillich, acceptance is the response of the sinner to God's gift of grace. God gives. We accept God's gift.<sup>45</sup> We are transformed.

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<sup>44</sup> Paul Tillich, 161-162.

<sup>45</sup> In his *Systematic Theology*, Tillich writes, "Indeed, there is nothing in man which enables God to accept him. But man must accept just this. He must accept that he is accepted; he must accept acceptance . . . . Accepting that one is accepted is the paradox of salvation without which there would be no salvation but only despair." *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 179.

## **PART TWO – THE CHURCH ENACTING GRACE**

### ***Introduction***

What does all this talk about grace mean for the church? If we are a people transformed by the message of God's grace, how does this translate into our behaviors and actions as a Christian people? How does our understanding of grace inform the way we live in community with one another? How does grace so transform us that our attitudes and practices reflect that grace in the way we relate to our sisters and brothers? Based on the Scriptural and theological overview of grace presented above, pastors and church members may invite one another into a deeper way of understanding how God calls us to live together. Our understanding of God's grace invites us to express attitudes of gratitude and joy, and to practice forgiveness, reconciliation, and hospitality toward one another. The following chapters will explore ways I have seen these attitudes and practices of grace enacted in the Christian community.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Forgiveness*

To forgive the truly horrible is to kiss the robe of God, to emulate no less a figure than the dying Jesus Christ. *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.* Those words leapt into Colleen Kelly's mind when she realized her brother was gone forever, buried in the smoldering graveyard that had once been the World Trade Center. The architectural pride of Wall Street, an icon of America's power and beauty, was now a symbol of incomprehensible horror, an unlikely resting place for Bill. . . .

Colleen learned that Bill had been attending a conference at Windows on the World, a restaurant on the 107<sup>th</sup> floor of the World Trade Center. And that September day it fell on her . . . to make the trek into Manhattan. Sustained by the hope, the dream, that Bill had somehow made it out, she wandered from hospital to hospital, inquiring about her brother. Eventually she grew cognizant of an ominous fact: though doctors and nurses abounded, there was no one for them to treat – no one, at any rate, from the World Trade Center. “That’s when I knew Bill was dead.” And that’s when the words of Jesus Christ flashed through her mind. *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*<sup>1</sup>

This is, of course, where we have to start when we talk about forgiveness. Jesus’ words from the cross. Jesus’ redemptive act on the cross. We start with what God has

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<sup>1</sup> Ellis Cose, *Bone to Pick: Of Forgiveness, Reconciliation, Reparation and Revenge* (New York: Atria Books, 2004), 21-22.

done for us and how God has forgiven us. This is also where we start when we talk about grace.

Forgiveness, however, is not always an easy place to start. When our lives have been torn apart by the actions or inactions of another, forgiveness is often not the first place we turn. When we have been betrayed by someone we love, our hearts are left broken and weak. When we have lost a loved one because of another's violence or neglect, the emerging emotions we feel are often anger, rage, fear, confusion, hatred, and a desire for revenge. To hear that Colleen Kelly chose forgiveness after losing her brother to a violent act of hatred is to recognize that she somehow moved beyond her initial reactions of grief and pain and into a place of forgiveness where she knew God, who had forgiven her, wanted her to be.

God has always been a forgiving God, even from the time of creation when Adam and Eve, who were told they would die if they ate of the fruit of the tree in the center of the garden, did not die, though they did eat of that fruit. The prophet Micah knew it as he spoke the words, "Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression? . . . He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea . . ." (Micah 7:18-20 selections).

God has always been a forgiving God, so Jesus' words on the cross - *Father forgive them for they know not what they do* (Luke 23:34) - should not come as a surprise, even when they come after Jesus' betrayal by Judas, after his denial by Peter, after his abandonment by his disciples as well as the masses that had once so hopefully followed him, even after his brutal beating and cruel torture, even after he was crucified by those

he had come to love and teach how to love. *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*

God has always been a forgiving God. God has always been full of grace and abounding in steadfast love. God has always wanted a full and whole relationship with God's people first and foremost.

The writer of Colossians knows this and begins by giving thanks for God's work in and among the people of Colossae. "[God] has rescued us from the power of darkness and has transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (1:13-14). The Colossians "from the day [they] heard [the gospel] and truly comprehended the grace of God" (1:6c) lived in love, peace, patience, hope, strength and thanksgiving.

Paul recognizes that it was only after (or "from the day") they heard the gospel of Christ that they truly comprehended the grace of God. With such comprehension, with such understanding of what God had done for them and the extent, power and sacrifice of forgiveness given in Christ Jesus, their lives then began to reflect the life of Christ in love and grace toward one another.

How then does the church live as people who, like the Colossians, truly comprehend the grace of God? How does the church, the Body of Christ, become the embodiment of grace to the world? How does the Christian community live as people who have experienced grace so profoundly that transformation occurs within the community itself?

Because every Christian community consists of human beings who will inevitably, no matter how strong their faith or how good their intentions, hurt one another

in some way. In the Christian community, this often happens without thought or intent, as when one person forgets to include another person, or when one dismisses another's thoughts or ideas, or when one makes incorrect or hurtful assumptions about another. In my ministry, I have discovered that the deepest rifts between congregation members (or between a staff person and member, or between two staff members) often begins with something very small – a slight, or a thoughtless comment, or even inconsiderate body language. What starts as a small hurt, however, can become an open, gaping wound if not addressed early. Members of the Christian community must be willing to give and receive forgiveness. We must be honest about what we have done to hurt others and we must be ready to forgive one who has hurt us. Scripture provides an important guide for the Christian community as we seek to live in harmony and grace with one another.

In Matthew 18:21, for example, Jesus' disciple Peter asks the question, "How shall I live in relation to others when it comes to forgiveness? How often should I forgive?"

Jesus responds by telling Peter a parable that reminds him that his forgiveness of others depends entirely on his awareness and comprehension of the extent to which he has been forgiven. In other words, our living in grace toward one another is a result of the understanding of God's gift of grace to us.

In this parable, Jesus tells of a king who wants to settle accounts with those who work for him. As he sets about to do this, a servant-man is brought to him who owes him a ridiculously high sum of money - ten thousand talents. A low-wage servant would earn a single talent in about fifteen years of working. Thomas G. Long, Bandy Professor of



Preaching at Chandler School of Theology compares this to a lowly mailroom clerk owing IBM or Microsoft a bazillion dollars! Restitution is not possible!<sup>2</sup>

In order to make the scale a little more balanced, the king orders that the man, along with his wife, children, and possessions be sold to pay off part of their debt. The indebted man falls to his knees and begs for mercy and promises that he will repay everything. This line should have brought a laugh from Jesus' listeners, for they know how impossible that promise will be to keep, and they know the king knows it, too. But the king caves, has pity on him, and forgives the man his whole debt. This is UNBELIEVABLE! The man is free. He owes nothing. How is this possible?

Upon hearing this news, the debt-free man runs out of the castle, not believing his good fortune, or the King's gullibility, and practically trips over a man who owes him 100 denarii, or about a day-laborer's wages for three months. He seizes him by the throat and demands his money. The man cannot pay, so he too begs for mercy. But the debt-free man has no mercy and in his arrogance, throws his fellow slave into prison until he pays his debt.

Everyone listening to that parable feels utter disgust by now. How preposterous that such a travesty should take place! How unbelievable that a man forgiven so much would even consider *not* forgiving so little.

When the other servants hear about this, they immediately tattle to the king. This time the man gets what he deserves as the king throws him in jail for life. Jesus ends the story by saying that the same will happen to those who do not forgive their brothers and sisters from their hearts.

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion Series (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 211.

But this ending has a problem. It is not consistent with gospel Jesus presents to us overall. Episcopal priest, author and theologian Barbara Brown Taylor argues that the ending makes it seem like Christians are to “Do unto others or the king will do unto us.” But the real message of the parable is that followers of Jesus are to do unto others because we know what God has done for us. Christians forgive others not because they fear punishment. Rather, Christians forgive others because they understand the full extent to which God has already forgiven them. Taylor writes:

If I am able to forgive at all, it is because I have been forgiven, because thanks to someone else, I know how it feels to have my debts cancelled, my credit restored, my relationship renewed. When it has happened to me, it’s like someone has taken a big pink eraser and scrubbed my record clean, or better yet, has retired the ledger with my name on it and refused to keep score anymore. It is an incredible experience, but it is never one of my own doing. All I have ever been able to do is ask for it – to ask for forgiveness – but when it has been granted it has come to me from outside myself, a free gift from someone whom I have hurt, whom I have owed, but who has decided that what is more important than getting even is to remain in relationship with me. That is, as best I can say it, what real forgiveness is all about: pure, unadulterated grace.<sup>3</sup>

Somehow the forgiven servant did not get it. He did not get what had happened to him and what the king had done for him. If he *had* gotten it, he would have forgiven his fellow servant.

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 95.

This parable asks if Christians then and now get it or not – whether the church gets what God has done – how God has forgiven us such a tremendous debt as could never be repaid. If Christians get it, even seventy-times seven is not too many times to forgive someone else.

Does this mean forgiveness will always be automatic and easy for Christians? Of course not, and I can speak to this first-hand. In my own life, I have been wounded deeply by another I loved. I felt the pain of betrayal intensely. It was as if my chest had been torn apart and my heart split open. I was angry, hurt, confused, and desperately sad. All that had been sure was in doubt. I could not see straight or think clearly. I was so hurt that forgiveness was inconceivable.

As time passed, I began to consider, and immediately to reject, the prospect of forgiveness. I knew it was the right thing to do, but how could I forgive the one who had brought such pain to my life? I could not do it. I knew all about God's forgiveness and God's call for us to forgive. But it was easier said than done.

God knows the difficulty we humans have with forgiveness. Jesus came to teach us a better way to live – a better way than holding a grudge, living in hatred, or seeking vengeance. Jesus came to help us understand how much we had been forgiven, so that we might have the strength to forgive. Will such forgiveness be easy? Absolutely not. Is it possible? Yes. Thanks be to God, I can vouch for that.

When Coleen Kelly learned of her brother's death in the World Trade Center attacks, she kept remembering Jesus' words *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do?* With these words searing her heart and mind Colleen helped start, not long after her brother's death, an organization called September Eleventh Families for Peaceful

Tomorrows. The organization supports peacemaking initiatives that include visiting Iraq during the war and meeting with the mother of Zacharias Moussaoui, who pleaded guilty to involvement in the attacks on 9-11.

A year ago, on the anniversary of the attacks, she wrote:

My brother, Bill Kelly Jr. died in Tower 1. He wasn't supposed to be there. He did not work at the Trade Center. . . . Who knew that the one-day conference Bill was attending on September 11<sup>th</sup>, the conference he cajoled his boss into letting him attend, would be an event from which he would never return.

Moral outrage – certainly. At the fanatics that murdered my brother. At the twist of fate that led him to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. At a humanity that allows for violence as a way to make a point, state your case, right perceived wrongs. At anyone who dared rejoice in the agonizing smoke and fire.

Then confusion – at my country, now planning to bomb others a world away. Did not we ... yes we .... just live through this? And how could we ... yes we ... be the cause of similar harm to others? Confusion also with my church. What is a just war exactly? And how does one truly live out the gospels; or are they just a collection of beautiful stories?<sup>4</sup>

Jesus answered Peter's question about how often he should forgive by telling a beautiful story reminding Peter of how much he had been forgiven, maybe even foreshadowing how much he *would* be forgiven. As people of faith we know this: when God puts no limit on grace and forgiveness to us, we cannot limit grace and forgiveness

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<sup>4</sup> Colleen Kelly, *Peaceful Tomorrows*, August 30, 2011, Accessed on September 18, 2015, <http://peacefultomorrows.org/members/colleen-kelly/>

to others. This does not mean that forgiveness will be automatic for those who live in God's grace, as if granted without a second thought. However, to live with a knowledge of grace and not to forgive is to live in confusion and chaos, where nothing seems quite right. The discord can survive for a while, but ultimately life lived in grace leads to a time when the final answer will be forgiveness.

## CHAPTER SIX

### *Forgiveness and Gratitude*

The scene from Luke 7:36-50 might have looked something like this:

An extravagant table has been set at the home of a VIP – with silver candlesticks and a large bouquet of flowers, a bright white table cloth and damask napkins, with sparkling crystal wine glasses and gold-rimmed plates – or whatever items would similarly adorn a fancy table at an important man's house at a dinner party back in first century Judea. This is, after all, the house of a wealthy man who holds a place of honor in the synagogue. This dinner has probably been planned for weeks by this church leader, Simon, and includes a guest list of prominent and respectable folk in the community. Maybe Simon has heard about this young new prophet and healer on the streets. Maybe he has heard rumors of Jesus' healing a centurion's servant in Capernaum, or of Jesus' raising the widow of Nain's son from the dead. We do not know, but Simon has heard something about Jesus and so he invites Jesus to eat with him. Jesus comes and takes his place at the table.

After he sits down, a woman appears behind him. In this day, people do not sit in chairs to dine, rather they sit on the floor, likely on mats, around the lower table, knees curled under them and feet behind them. As they sit to eat, a woman enters and interrupts the dinner. At first she stands behind Jesus and weeps, making quite a scene. Then she starts bathing Jesus' feet with her tears, kissing them and wiping his feet with her hair. Then she anoints his feet with oil while the rest of the dinner party stares in shock and total embarrassment on her behalf and on Jesus' behalf and even, perhaps especially, on their host Simon's behalf. This woman makes a fool of herself, but it is more than that

and Luke's readers know why the guests stare at her. Luke has already revealed this in the text. This woman is a known sinner.

Some readers will assume she is a prostitute, but the text is not clear. Whatever she has done, it seems that everyone around the table knows.

And so, no doubt, does Jesus. In fact, her actions indicate that she has met Jesus before, that she has been forgiven by him, that she has been set free by him, and that her life has been transformed by him. She makes a scene at his feet at this dinner party, boldly and audaciously demonstrating her gratitude to Jesus with her tears, her hair, and a precious ointment for his feet, showing welcome and hospitality far beyond anything the host has shown.

Luke invites his readers into Simon's head at this point in the passage and we hear Simon doubting that Jesus really is a prophet – for if he were a true prophet, he would know that this woman was a sinner and he would not have let her touch his feet. Simon mentally checks Jesus off his invitation list for the next dinner party. The rumors unquestionably have been false. This Jesus is no prophet.

Jesus must have read his mind though, and must have known what everyone else at the table was thinking, because he redirects their thinking by telling a parable to explain the woman's extravagant display of devotion and hospitality. He tells of a creditor with two debtors. One debtor owed him fifty denarii and the other five hundred denarii – ten times the amount of the first. Neither could pay. The creditor forgave both debts. "Which," Jesus asks Simon, "will love him more?"

"I suppose," replies Simon, "the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt."

"Exactly," responds Jesus.

Then Jesus continues to make sure everyone present knows precisely how the parable corresponds to real life, in case they are too dense to understand the analogy:

Then turning toward the woman, [Jesus] said to Simon, “Do you see this woman?

I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little” (Luke 7:44-47).

Forgiveness, for this woman, has made a huge difference in her life. Forgiveness for her, forgiveness for all of us, changes and heals broken, indebted relationships.

Forgiveness is at the heart of the restoration of relationships.<sup>1</sup>

Forgiveness, writes David Lose, President of Luther Theological Seminary in Philadelphia:

gives you back yourself. You see, after a while, being indebted, owing others, knowing yourself first and foremost as a sinner – these realities come to dominate and define you. You are no more and no less than what you have done, the mistakes you have made, the debt you owe. When you are forgiven, all those limitations disappear and you are restored, renewed, set free. So, yes, forgiveness is everything.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Lose, “Forgiveness and Gratitude,” *Working Preacher*, Sunday, June 9, 2013, Accessed on January 21, 2017, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2601>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



At some point, Jesus has forgiven this woman and invited her into a restored relationship with God and with herself. Free from guilt, she finds the gift of God's grace. She is no longer defined by her past but has a fresh, new life ahead of her. Jesus tells her, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

Her love, her gratitude, her peace flow all over Jesus' feet in the form of tears and ointment, kisses and her own hair.

All around the rest of the table, however, Simon and his dinner guests are not at peace. They have not recognized God's forgiveness and grace for them. "Their inner lives are a bubbling, foul smelling stew of judgment of others and reluctant faith," writes Alyce McKenzie, Professor of Preaching and Worship at Perkins School of Theology. In their self-assuredness, they have no need for Jesus. They have no need for forgiveness. They have no need for God's grace. They also have no need for such ostentatious displays of love and gratitude.<sup>3</sup>

The contrast between the woman at Jesus' feet and the guests around the table is stark. Simon and his guests are there to see what Jesus can do for them. Jesus, after all, is a celebrity and known throughout Judea and is the subject of many conversations. Their status in the community will be elevated because they dined with him. They want to know what Jesus can do for them.

In contrast, the woman at Jesus' feet comes in deep gratitude and humility, wanting only to shower on Jesus love, attention, and hospitality - all that she has to give. For her, it is all about Jesus and his gift of grace.

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<sup>3</sup>Alyce McKenzie, "A Piece of Jesus' Mind: Reflections on Luke 7:36-50," *Patheos*, June 16, 2003, Accessed on January 21, 2017, <http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Piece-Jesus-Mind-Alyce-McKenzie-06-10-2013>

Presbyterian pastor Bill Buchanan notices the difference:

[The woman's] sole intention, is to show honor and devotion to Jesus, to humble herself in full admission of her own sinfulness. She does not have much with her, no water, no towel, but she uses what little she has to do what a good host should do to honor a guest – the kiss, the washing, the anointing and healing.<sup>4</sup>

The contrast is clear.

The Pharisee bases his encounter with Jesus in his own pride. The woman bases her encounter with Jesus through her humility. The Pharisee seems to have given the invitation to get something from Jesus. The woman offers herself and wants to give something to Jesus. By the end of the story, the Pharisee is put back in his place, the woman is rewarded, forgiven, restored.<sup>5</sup>

Peace comes to the one who has received grace, who knows her sin and seeks forgiveness, embracing it with overflowing gratitude when it comes. Internal discord comes to the one who does not acknowledge his sin, or believes it to be tremendously less than the sin of the woman, and does not seek forgiveness, or when it comes, does not think it means much, since his sin was so small to begin with. The one who is forgiven much, loves much. The one freely given extravagant forgiveness responds with extravagant love. The one who is forgiven little, who believes he has no need, even, for forgiveness, loves little.

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<sup>4</sup> Bill Buchanan, "Hospitality," Accessed Preached on June 17, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Luke's readers rejoice in the actions of the faithful, forgiven, grateful, loving woman and shake their heads at the judging, ungrateful, inhospitable Simon who seeks no forgiveness, who finds no peace, who knows no love, who recognizes no grace.

Sadly, the Christian community often behaves as Simon does, judging others for their sin while not acknowledging its own. Too often the Christian community misses out on God's amazing grace at work in our midst because we do not recognize our own need.

David Lose writes:

Here's the thing: most of us, while we're reading, pick up pretty quickly that Simon is the bad guy here, the one who is judgmental and isn't really into Jesus' forgiveness. And so, quite naturally, we find ourselves judging Simon. And then, all of the sudden – BAM – we realize we are Simon, with the same penchant to go searching for splinters in our neighbor's eye rather than pull out the plank in our own.

And once that happens, we have to decide. I mean, up to this point, there's not a whole lot we can do: we are who we are – sinners . . . like this woman. . . and like Simon. But once that sin has been revealed yet again, then the choice is before us: rejoice or resent. Embrace our identity as sinner and as those beloved by God and forgiven all things, or reject our failings and with it God's tender embrace. Which will it be?<sup>6</sup>

The late Fred Craddock, beloved teacher and preacher at Chandler School of Theology notes that at the end of this passage Jesus sends the woman out, saying, "Go in

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<sup>6</sup> Lose.

peace.” He asks the question, “Where is she supposed to go?” Where will she go where she can find the kind of peace and forgiveness offered by Jesus? Where will she go??”<sup>7</sup>

Craddock suggests that she, and others like her, go to church because church is the place where forgiven sinners go to be accepted and to live into their lives as forgiven, restored, and freed people of God. The community of faith should be where sinners are greeted with a kiss, the dirt of our difficult journey is washed off, and where the bumps and bruises of the stony road of our past can be anointed and healed.<sup>8</sup>

The Christian community should be a place where all God’s people come together and fall at Jesus’ feet in endless gratitude for God’s gift of grace as shown in forgiveness, restored relationships, transforming love, and abundant life. The Christian community should be a place of grace, where welcome, forgiveness, and love abound.

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<sup>7</sup> Fred Craddock, *Luke* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 106.

<sup>8</sup> Buchanan.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *Joy*

I sometimes wonder if mainline Protestantism has declined because it forgot what it means to be the joyful people of God. Far too many have experienced the church across the years as joyless – no laughter, no celebration, and no dancing – a fairly empty life. Church of Christ pastor David Padfield describes his own experience with this absence of joy:

Recently one of the children at this congregation showed me a piece of sour candy he had just purchased (the candy even had a warning label on it). When that little boy put the candy in his mouth he made a terrible face that reminded me of some Christians I have known over the years. They sit in the pew as if they are at a funeral and when they leave they stick out their hand and you are not sure whether you should shake it or pray for it. This lack of joy is easy to spot and the "Christianity" they offer no one in their right mind would want.<sup>1</sup>

For my own part, I knew all too well the joyless members of my congregation growing up:

It was a normal Sunday, as far as I can remember. I was not yet a teenager, so I had not taken my place in the balcony where I could snicker with my friends and play tic-tac-toe and connect the dots on the white space of our bulletins. I was around nine or ten, young enough to be free of teenage angst and the desire to rebel, but old enough to begin to question the behavior of some of the adults around me.

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<sup>1</sup>David Padfield, "Why Churches Die," *Padfield.com*, 2016, Accessed on January 27, 2017, <http://www.padfield.com/1998/whydie.html>

My dad played the piano and my mom sang in the choir, so my sister Elizabeth and I shared a pew about halfway down on the right. On this Sunday we were both thrilled to see that the first hymn we would be singing that day was “I Danced in the Morning” from the blue worship book. We had sung this relatively new, upbeat, happy song in Montreat at the Worship and Music Conference for several summers in a row, so we knew it well and really liked it. We seldom had the opportunity to sing it at Pickens Presbyterian Church, so we were thrilled when we heard the first notes begin to dance through the air, as if responding to the command of the words of the hymn.

Not everyone in church that day was as thrilled as we were, though. In fact, an older couple (I will call them the Martins), stalwart members of the church, he an elder, she the president of the women of the church, heard those first dancing notes and they immediately packed up their belongings, exited their second-row-on-the-left pew (which everyone knew was theirs) and walked defiantly down the center aisle and out the doors of the sanctuary. The congregation watched with wide eyes and sang a lot less wholeheartedly than we had started singing.

As soon as I could drag my parents out of the church and into our car, I let loose a stream of questions. “What happened?” “Why did the Martins leave?” “What is wrong with that song?” “It’s a great song!” “How could they be so angry about a *song*?”

My mother calmly explained that the Martins did not like the song because it was about dancing. They did not believe that Christians should be dancing at all, much less singing about Jesus dancing. They were especially offended by the theology of the cross presented by the hymn. They did not understand how the crucifixion could be thought of as a celebration of dancing and joy. They had made their feelings clear to the pastor, and

had told him in no uncertain terms that they would leave the church if he ever sang it. From that Sunday on we only sang that hymn when the Martins were out of town.

We talked a lot in our house that day and in the week ahead about dancing, about joy, about celebrations in general and why these things did not theologically contradict the Old Testament or the New Testament or even against Jesus' death and resurrection (my mom was in seminary at the time, so we talked theologically about a lot of things). We talked about how King David and the whole house of Israel danced and sang and played instruments of celebration (lyres, harps, tambourines, castanets and cymbals) when the Ark of Covenant came into Jerusalem. We talked about psalms of celebration, song, music and dance. We talked of the joy promised by God to God's people through the prophets.

We talked of Paul's exhortation to the Philippians to "Rejoice in the Lord always! Again, I say, rejoice!" and his listing of joy as one of the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians.

Most of all, we talked of the joy the women and disciples experienced when they found the empty tomb and realized that Jesus had been raised from the dead. He was risen! He was alive! What abundant joy!

In addition, we talked about how joy and dancing and celebration had lost their place of prominence as proper Christian responses to the gospel. The Martins had been taught that dancing was evil and would lead inevitably to a life of sin and licentiousness. They understood the crucifixion as a solemn event, full of sorrow and despair.

The Martins were not alone in their views. Most of the Baptists and Church of God congregations in South Carolina had clear restriction against dancing. In high school, I played in the youth symphony next to a student from Bob Jones University. His

school, as well as other Christian private schools in our area, had very strict rules about dancing – as in, there would be none of it. I desperately wanted to ask him how he could go to a school like that. In my view, dancing was an expression of joy and freedom. I could not imagine life without it, much less worship a God who did not allow it. The Bob Jones way of thinking did not fit with the joy of the gospel. The gospel of Jesus Christ – that God has redeemed us in an act of grace, not because we have done anything to deserve such a gift, lest we should boast in our own goodness, but because God is that good, and that loving – can only lead to joy. Who, having been caught up in such joy, could keep from dancing (if not *physically* dancing, at least *spiritually*, in a way that allows one's heart, one's spirit, to soar high above the clouds in pure delight and unbridled freedom)?

I am less naïve now than I was as a teenager, and I have been through more of life's painful and inexplicable losses. I have walked with friends who watched their infant child die while they stood at her hospital bed and prayed for her suffering to end. I have sat with the widower after his wife of 60 years had died and he knew not how to live without her. I wept as my dear friend died seven months after a diagnosis of lung cancer, leaving her husband and three young children behind. I have spent time daily with another dear friend who cared for her 27-year-old beloved daughter until her body was consumed by mesothelioma and could live no more. I have conducted memorial services for those who have taken their own lives. Over the years, I have known deep sorrow, in my own life and in the lives of others I care for. No one is protected from the sorrow that comes from loss. I have grown in my understanding of this since those days as a teenager who loved to dance. I still love to dance, but my understanding of the intricacies of joy



and sorrow is much more advanced and complex than it was back then. As every year passes, I understand more and more the way that true joy is blended with deep sorrow and that the one who laughs and dances after knowing such sorrow is the one who has grasped the joyful gift of God's grace in Christ to us all and the promises of God that extend to all.

The prophet Jeremiah (31:1-14) brings a word from the Lord that is full of promise, celebration and joy, even in the midst of trial, sorrow, and tribulation. He speaks to those Israelites who had found "grace in the wilderness" and who were "loved with an everlasting love." "Again," promises God, "you shall take your tambourines and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers. Again you shall plant your vineyards . . . and enjoy the fruit. . . Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy . . . and give them gladness for sorrow" (31:2-5, 13). Says Clinton McCann, "In short, what God wills for God's people is life. . . . And life as God intends it should be received with joyful praise (31:7, 13)."<sup>2</sup>

Twentieth century theologian C.S. Lewis, writer of the beloved *Narnia* series as well as numerous books on the Christian life, was a reluctant convert to the Christian faith. He was a devout atheist, as he shares in his autobiography, until the day he found himself "surprised by joy" while riding along in the sidecar of his brother's motorcycle on the way to the zoo. "At the end of the trip he found himself believing what he thought he never could."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> J. Clinton McCann, "Commentary on John 1:(1-9), 10-18," *Working Preacher*, January 4, 2009, Accessed October 23, 2015, [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=214](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=214)

<sup>3</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Joyful Christian: 127 Readings* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), xii-xiii.

If there is one word to describe Lewis's life [writes his publisher], it would be joy.

The harmonizing of himself with the rest of the world, the process that led him from atheism through theism and pantheism to Christianity, he has described as joy.<sup>4</sup>

Lewis realized what Christian theologians across the centuries have realized, that by God's grace in Christ humanity and all creation have been *redeemed*, freed to live lives in love with the God who loves us, freed to *live* – and laugh and dance and sing and celebrate and know joy – the joy of Christ - in the depths of our beings.

Clearly this kind of joy is not the same thing as *happiness*, a word (an emotional state) with which our world is obsessed. Joy is deeper, much deeper. Happiness is great, but it is fleeting. Joy and happiness are not the same things. Frederick Buechner writes:

Happiness comes when things are going our way, which makes it only a forerunner to the unhappiness that inevitably follows when things stop going our way, as in the end they will stop for all of us. Joy on the other hand, does not come because something is happening or not happening but every once in a while rises up out of simply being alive, of being part of the terror as well as the fathomless richness of the world that God has made. When Jesus was eating his last meal with his friends, knowing that his death was only a few hours away, he was in no sense happy, nor did he offer his friends happiness any more than he offers happiness to you and me. What he offers is more precious than happiness because it is beyond the world's power either to give or take away. "These things

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

I have spoken to you,” he said, “that my joy may be in you” – joy, as poignant as grief, that brings tears to the eyes . . . .”<sup>5</sup>

Joy brings peace to the heart. Joy comes through the experience of grace.

I believe a strong argument can be made that mainline Protestantism is in decline because it has forgotten what it means to be the joyful people of God. Though life certainly brings us deep sorrows as we age, grace gives to us a joy that is also deep and that abides side-by-side with our sorrows and brings light to our darkness. How many people in our world today need to know this kind of grace and this kind of joy?

At the end of Luke’s gospel, Jesus leads his disciples out to Bethany, outside of Jerusalem. He lifts his hands and blesses them and then ascends into heaven. The disciples responded in worship and returned to Jerusalem “with great joy.” Having experienced the risen Christ, having experienced the presence of grace in their midst, they return to Jerusalem in joy, worshiping God and giving thanks along the way.

Chances are, those disciples came into Jerusalem in the same way King David and the people of Israel did centuries earlier – dancing, celebrating, singing, clapping – joyfully witnessing to the world the gift of life that was theirs by the grace of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

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<sup>5</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Longing for Home: Recollections and Reflections* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1996), 128.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### *Reconciliation*

It is bold to talk about reconciliation in a world of brokenness. It is bold to talk about forgiveness in a world so willing to harbor hatred and hostility against those who have wronged them. It may even be bold, I suppose, to talk about *grace* in a world that seems overcome by judgment, jealousy, anger, self-doubt, and feelings of unworthiness.

If conversations about grace, forgiveness and reconciliation are *bold* moves, we should also be bold enough to acknowledge that these conversations are but shadows of what Jesus taught and lived in his life and what God calls the Christian community to teach and live.

The Apostle Paul makes our vocational imperative clear with his words to the church in Corinth (2 Cor. 5:16-21), reminding us that Christ has transformed our vision of the world. We no longer look at the world from a human point of view; rather, we see the world and one another clothed in newness and grace by the power of God's gift in Christ Jesus. Through Christ, explains Paul, God reconciles us to himself. That which has been broken is now restored, renewed, and re-enlivened. As a result of our reconciliation with God, we are now entrusted with the message of reconciliation to the world.

Richard Lischer writes in *The End of Words*:

The mystery of God, captured in a message about what God has done, is now entrusted to us. And what God has done, on both a macro- and a microcosmic scale, is reconciliation.

At the heart of the universe lies a mysterious, hidden Being whose very self is moved by love for all that he has created. In the ministry, death and resurrection

of Jesus of Nazareth, that being has been revealed as one who is perpetually turning toward us as if to welcome us home, the way a mother and father open their arms to a wayward child.<sup>1</sup>

The story of our faith (salvation history) begins with God's unmerited love for the world in the moments of creation. Out of nothing God forms the world and makes humanity to live in it, not because the world deserves to be created, not because God receives a mandate from above, but because God is the highest level of being, thought, wisdom and truth. God alone, out of love and a desire to be in relationship with those made in God's image, creates humanity from dust – beautiful, perfect creatures of God's expansive imagination. God gives these creatures the ability to choose love, but they turn away. They turn from God. We continue to turn away from God in distrust, fear, anger, despair, confusion, doubt, and insecurity. We find ourselves, having turned away, in the darkness of our own creation, alone and lost.

The power of the gospel message is that God in Christ reconciles the world to Godself. God does not count our trespasses against us. Instead, God pulls us out of the darkness and into the light! God, in Christ's act upon the cross, turns us back to God. When we look upon God's grace, our sin, doubt, and darkness disappears and we become new creations. As people of God's grace, we turn to God, enabled to receive and offer forgiveness and to begin the ministry of reconciliation to the world.

Theologian and author Frederick Buechner, recognizing the brokenness of the world around us, knows that this charge to be reconcilers in the world can be an overwhelming one. He writes:

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Lischer, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 133.

[W]e live in a broken world, a world shattered by wars, famine, political upheaval. We are citizens of a nation that in all its history has perhaps never been so dramatically confronted as it is now by its brokenness – a nation whose streets are littered by the bodies of the homeless and where the gap between the rich and the poor widens every year, a nation that continues to spend billions on defense when what we need most to defend ourselves against are poverty, [racism, I would add], illiteracy, and the despair that breeds crime and addiction. As for the church of Christ, no one knows better than the church itself all the ways it too is broken, just as no one knows better than you and I the brokenness of our own lives. In other words it is easy enough to see the world as a horror show. . . . [But] for all its horrors, the world is not ultimately a horror show because, as Jesus tells us, the world has the Kingdom buried in it like a treasure buried in the earth, like whatever it was in the heart of the Prodigal Son that finally brought him home. The question is: how is it possible not just to glimpse that buried kingdom but to unbury and become it? How is it possible in a broken world to become whole? Is wholeness something that we reach by taking pains, taking thought? Is it something that is given to us by grace alone? Is wholeness a human possibility at all?<sup>2</sup>

The naysayers will say wholeness is not possible. The cynics will cite the brokenness of the world, the pain all around and say, “There is no God. There is only despair and brokenness. There can be no wholeness. There is no reconciliation and there is no grace.”

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<sup>2</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Longing for Home: Recollections and Reflections* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1996), 113-114.

Some might even agree with them – if wholeness and reconciliation is dependent entirely upon our own efforts. Thankfully, God’s grace reminds us that it is not! God’s work of reconciliation in the saving death of our risen Lord makes wholeness and peace between individuals and communities possible. When we acknowledge ourselves as God’s forgiven people, embrace our full humanity, and embrace the full humanity of those around us, we discover wholeness and reconciliation beyond imagination. This will not be easy, but it is possible. Through God’s grace and with our own eyes open to the newness of the world around us in Christ and the image of God in ourselves and one another, such peace and reconciliation is not only possible, it is inevitable.

On June 23, 2016, the 222<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) adopted the Belhar Confession and added it to their *Book of Confessions*,<sup>3</sup> 30 years after the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) in South Africa adopted it. Church leaders of the DRMC, including Alan Boesak, first drafted this confession in 1982 as a response to apartheid which had held South Africa in its grasp since 1948. The primary thrust of this document is reconciliation and the confession became a guide to help unite black and white denominations in the fight for racial justice and unity in South Africa, paving the way for the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1995. The confession states clearly the Christian belief in the Scriptural call to work for reconciliation:

We believe

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<sup>3</sup> *The Belhar Confession*, Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. Accessed 1-28-17, [https://www.pcusa.org/site\\_media/media/uploads/theologyandworship/pdfs/belhar.pdf](https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/theologyandworship/pdfs/belhar.pdf)

- that Christ's work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another (Eph. 2:11-22);
- that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God's Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain (Eph. 4:1-16);
- that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted (John 17:20-23);
- that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we love one another; that we experience, practice and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another; that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptized with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope; together come to know the height and the breadth and the depth of the love of Christ; together are built up to the stature of Christ, to the new



humanity; together know and bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ that we need one another and upbuild one another, admonishing and comforting one another; that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together; together serve God in this world; and together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity (Phil. 2:1-5; 1 Cor. 12:4-31; John 13:1-17; 1 Cor. 1:10-13; Eph. 4:1-6; Eph. 3:14-20; 1 Cor. 10:16-17; 1 Cor. 11:17-34; Gal. 6:2; 2 Cor. 1:3-4);<sup>4</sup>

In adopting this confession, the PC(USA) affirmed their desire to work for the reconciliation of the world. This came at a time when the PC(USA) had recently approved gay marriage and was seeking to be reconciled to those LGBTQ members who had been excluded from this holy celebration (and before 2010, from ordination to offices of ministry in the church). This also came at a time when the church had been split apart over differences in theology related to LGBTQ ordination and marriage. Most significantly, perhaps, this adoption of the Belhar Confession came at a time when racial violence and injustice dominated many headlines and racial discord was a reality in arguably every city, school, and community in the nation. The Assembly invited Presbyterian (USA) churches across the nation to study this document and to discern the ways to work for reconciliation in their churches, communities and cities.

At First Presbyterian Church in Durham, North Carolina, portions of the Belhar Confession appear regularly in worship as a statement of faith. This confession played an important liturgical role following the June 2016 massacre at Pulse, a gay night-club in

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Orlando, Florida, and after several incidents in which police officers shot and killed unarmed black men. This act of hatred toward LGBTQ individuals and the racial bias evident in the police force spurred the congregation to respond by seeking reconciliation, loving one another, and working together toward the unity of all.

The congregation also responded to the police shootings by forming a racial justice task force. This task force started as a large conversation group during the summer of 2016 and evolved into a smaller group committed to guiding the church toward opportunities to work toward racial equity and reconciliation in our community. The task force encouraged members to attend the Racial Equity Institution (REI) two-day workshop, sponsored by Organizing Against Racism in Durham. Before long, the church became a host church for the REI workshops, bringing three separate trainings to downtown Durham in early 2017. Each training included 50-60 participants who learned about the history of race in the United States and the many ways systemic racism affects people of color, especially African Americans. After going through this training, participants look at the world differently and are inspired to teach, preach, and live with a different understanding of the way racism has torn apart our communities and institutions. This is a good beginning for reconciliation between the races.

Reconciliation requires an honest acknowledgement of wrongdoing, whether intentional or not, whether known or unknown. It requires a willingness for the injured party to forgive. It requires a way forward that sets both parties on equal footing, in a relationship where power is balanced and God's love holds and heals that which was broken and lost.

Reconciliation was also possible in Burundi:

Burundi, one of the most beautiful countries in Africa, with soaring mountains, rolling hills, and gentle valleys, is also one of the world's poorest, with an average annual income in 2014 of \$270.<sup>5</sup> In this nation just south of Rwanda, Hutus and Tutsis live in constant conflict with one another and brokenness is a way of life. One Christian woman, Maggy Barankitse, decided to introduce another way of life and started Shalom House for orphaned and abandoned children as a place of refuge, peace, healing and reconciliation.

Even though ethnic hatred is deeply entrenched in the imagination of Burundi, Maggy's work is driven by the conviction that hatred will never have the last word. A new future of love is still possible even to those who have killed. . . . The gift of forgiveness allows one to rediscover one's true identity and one's true calling, which is love.<sup>6</sup>

Maggy encouraged the children who came to live in her home to live with forgiveness, though many had seen their families murdered in front of them. The children embraced such forgiveness and often demonstrated to Maggy and one another what forgiveness and even reconciliation looked like. In one story, a nine-year-old girl named Justine came to Maggy shortly after a neighbor killed her parents and her sister and used a machete on her head. Maggy writes:

I decided to rebuild the house of the parents and to trust them to retake their original village. Justine told me, "No, ma'am. I think we will call the man who killed my parents and show him the burned house to make reconciliation." I said,

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<sup>5</sup> "Data for Burundi: Low Income," *The World Bank*, 2016, Accessed on December 16, 2016, <http://data.worldbank.org/?locations=BI-XM>

<sup>6</sup> Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), 181.

“We call this killer?” She said “Yes, of course. Because I want to rebuild first the heart, not the house. Because I will tell him what he must do for us.” [Maggy] said, “But it’s very dangerous for you, Justine.” She said, “No, I want to live. Because if I hate him, I cannot live. Because the hatred stops me from continuing to live.” And I accompanied her and then she said to this killer, “I want to ask you to ask me for forgiveness. I am able to forgive you.” And the man began to [redden]. He said, “You forgive me? You forgive me child?” She said, “I forgive you. I accept. Because you cannot give me back my father, my mom, my sister, I ask you to become my father.” And he said, “Yes. I accept.” They became friends. They rebuilt the house together. They were neighbors.”<sup>7</sup>

Many years later, the man became ill and Justine was the one who cared for him. Before he died, Maggy visited him and he told her:

“Thank you, Maggy. Because now I am dying like a human person, not like a killer. Your forgiveness gave me back hope, love, life.” And this is what the children taught me [Maggy said] - “it’s new life.”<sup>8</sup>

Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Cor. 5:17).

Some will argue that reconciliation is between two individuals or two groups or even two nations. Christians would argue that there is a third party involved. True

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<sup>7</sup> Katongole, 181-182. This quote is from an interview with Maggy Barankitse carried out by Katongole and his colleague Stephanie Wheatley during the Duke Center for Reconciliation Gatherings of the Great Lakes initiative at Ruyigi (January 17-19, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

reconciliation is possible only when we understand fully what it means to be a people already reconciled to God – by means of grace.

What we have in this life is the gift of being reconciled to God through Christ. A broken relationship healed. A darkness bathed now in light. This is grace. What we also have in this life is the gift of being reconcilers in the world and bearing the message of God's reconciling love.

God's arms of grace are opened to all, desiring, awaiting and yes, longing for embrace. As those who embody and enact God's grace, members of the Christian community will fall into those arms of grace and find strength to open their arms of grace to those they encounter along the way.

## CHAPTER NINE

### *Hospitality*

On one late summer two monks, Father Noel and Father Dan, took a walk in front of their monastery, surrounded by lush fields of green grass and the glow of the evening. As they talked and walked together they startled at the appearance of two hay wagons, driven by young men (probably in their late teens), and full of some rather boisterous-looking eleven or twelve-year-olds. The drivers stopped only a few yards from them for a few moments. Father Dan remembers the scene, “I was stopped in my tracks. Right there on the yard in front of us, the two wagon drivers were passing a joint back and forth, looking completely at home, as if this was the most natural thing to do at a monastery. In case you are wondering, it isn’t.”

Father Dan, a street-smart guy from Detroit, knew exactly what was happening and was just about to demand an explanation when his companion Father Noel, an Italian who had never seen marijuana before, beat him to the punch and offered his normative words of welcome to guests on the monastery lawn:

“Young men,” he exclaimed with wide-armed relish, “we are so glad that you are with us today to enjoy the grass!”<sup>1</sup>

Father Noel was simply, though perhaps ignorantly in this case, doing what his heart told him to do, and what as a Benedictine monk he had been trained to do – offer words and actions of hospitality to those he encountered along the way.

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<sup>1</sup> Father Danial Homan, O.S.B., and Lonni Collins Pratt, *Radical Hospitality: Benedict’s Way of Love* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2002), xv.

Most mainline Protestant church members around the country consider their church to be a welcoming church. In a recent survey, when asked whether they attended a “friendly” church, an incredibly high percentage of people responded in the highest affirmative.<sup>2</sup> This makes sense if you think about it. No one wants to believe that they are a part of an exclusive congregation that keeps people on the outside out. But when the question is reversed an equally high number of people claim to have been to a church where they were *not* welcomed and people were *not* friendly. How could this be? How can our perceptions of ourselves be so vastly different from the way others perceive us? Truthfully, it is not as difficult as it seems. Why? Because most of the time church members do not even realize they are not being welcoming.

Years ago, when I lived in a large southern city, I visited several different Presbyterian churches. In my visits, I had many different experiences, but I remember one visit to a church where I distinctly felt *unwelcomed*. The people were friendly. They were as friendly as can be . . . to each other. They were all talking and laughing and reporting on what a wonderful retreat they had just had and how great their fellowship together was. And not a person greeted me. Not a person spoke to me. Not a person even looked me in the eye, as far as I remember, even as we passed communion to one another. I might as well have been invisible.

In a recent newsletter from a presbytery in South Carolina a woman tells about her similar experience. She begins with a question: “Are the doors of your church warmly open? I ask this after visiting a more established church’s worship service . . . I opened

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<sup>2</sup> Thom S. Rainer, “Six Reasons Why your Church Members May Not Be Friendly To Guests,” *Thom S. Rainer*, September 19, 2016, Accessed on January 21, 2017, <http://thomrainer.com/2016/09/six-reasons-church-members-may-not-friendly-guests/>

the entrance door to the church, stood in the narthex and got blocked by the usher who was too busy talking to other ushers to offer us a bulletin or allow us to enter. Sometimes a simple gesture like blocking the entrance of a sanctuary can be enough during the early moments of a visit to turn off an unchurched person.”<sup>3</sup> These are two examples of churches that would consider themselves friendly, welcoming churches, but to outsiders they are not.

Often in the church, when Christians think of being welcoming, they think of a smile and a handshake at the front door. Often *outside* of the church, when these same folks think of the word welcome, they think of hospitality. Hospitality often translates into the “hostess with the mostest” as the phrase goes, or perhaps they think of a home, warm and comfortable and full of good food and drink, and a smiling couple waiting to do their bidding. Church members may also think of the “hospitality room” in a fancy hotel or conference center, guaranteed to be filled with soft music, appetizers, and cocktails.

If we look closely at the gospel, however, we see none of this. Rather we Christians hear story after story of how God calls us to open our homes and also to open our *hearts* to others. Take the story of the Good Samaritan, for example. Jesus uses this story to define for the inquiring lawyer who his “neighbor” is. The story reveals that we are *neighborly* when we care for those in need, when we show mercy. Our *neighbor*, therefore, is anyone in need.

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<sup>3</sup> Foothills Presbytery newsletter, 2006 article.



Jesus expands this understanding in Matthew 25 to show that the way we treat people in need is the way we treat Jesus. In his story of the judgment of the sheep and the goats, he says to the sheep, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me. . . Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:35, 40).

Earlier in the gospel Jesus pointed to hospitality as the way to God. Jesus says, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me” (Matthew 10:40).

In the Gospels we understand welcoming hospitality to be more than just open doors. True hospitality, true welcoming, involves open hearts. It involves acceptance and love at the deepest level, at the level of Jesus Christ.

Father Danial Homan and Lonni Collins Pratt, in *Radical Hospitality: Benedict’s Way of Love*, write:

It is the door of my heart that these strangers are knocking on. . . When I let a stranger into my heart, I let a new possibility approach me. When I reach past my own ideas, I begin to stretch myself open to the world, and this opening of my heart could change everything. That’s pretty frightening stuff. You cannot ever be the same if you start doing that kind of thing.<sup>4</sup>

Those who have come to know Jesus have been transformed by God’s grace in their lives and in their living and will never be the same. Followers of Christ are given the

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<sup>4</sup> Homan and Pratt, 16.

strength and the courage to open their hearts to others in welcoming grace because they know that they have been welcomed into the gracious and loving heart of God.

Hospitality happens when a heart is overflowing and wants to share what it has received.

In order to welcome others at every step of our lives, we must be willing to understand ourselves as loved and welcomed by God through the person of Jesus Christ.

Both Pratt and Father Homan follow *The Rule of St. Benedict*, a simple, short, seventy-three page guide to being hospitable to the other. Pratt is a layperson (writer, retreat-leader and journalist) and Father Homan is a Benedictine Monk who serves as prior of St. Benedict Monastery in Oxford, Michigan. St. Benedict followed the teachings of Jesus and knew that Christians were called to welcome the outsider, stranger, poor, pilgrim, and refugee. He believed that the Divine was in every stranger and therefore every stranger should be welcomed as if they were Jesus himself. Those who offer the welcome with love as their guiding force are transformed by God's grace that comes through the act of connecting with another. Opening doors opens hearts. Feeding hunger feeds souls.

It is possible to serve meals in a nursing home, to cook in a homeless shelter, or read stories to children at an inner-city library and never let others into your heart.

It is possible to do the good thing and end up feeling satisfied with yourself and even just a bit superior. It is possible to do the good thing and not be changed for the better by it. Hospitality includes cooking the meal, and reading to the kid, but it demands that you let the people you are serving into your heart. Only in opening yourself wide to another are you transformed by the power of love. . .

Merely being nice to people [*will not do it*]. We must let the person stir us; we must connect.<sup>5</sup>

The story of Mary and Martha in Luke's gospel (10:38-42) is a story of such connecting. The sisters welcome Jesus into their home. Martha attends to the meal in the kitchen and Mary sits with Jesus, listening to him. Martha, unhappy with the fact that she has been left to do all the work, complains to Jesus. To the dismay of many readers, Jesus defends Mary's actions when he says to Martha, "She has chosen the better way."

Jesus' words are disturbing. When examined through the lens of a traditional American view of hospitality, Martha is the ideal hostess. She cares for the culinary needs of those gathered. She ensures through her efforts that basic needs are met. Jesus, however, turns the traditional understanding of hospitality on its head by redefining it. According to Jesus, hospitality is not the food served or the cleanliness and comfort of the home. Rather hospitality is the listening ear, the attentive soul, the act of connecting with another person in a deep and meaningful way. This is exactly what Mary was doing. She was giving her heart to Jesus. She was giving Jesus herself.

In *Radical Hospitality*, Homan and Pratt share a story of just such hospitality. The story begins with a woman at the end of her rope. She is the mother of two sets of twin boys under the age of six. She had had "one of those days" when the phone rings. Her husband's voice can barely be heard over the cacophony of her children as he asks if he could bring home a guest for dinner, a woman from South Africa. The mother is

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 20-21.

exasperated. “Absolutely not” she replies. “No way.” She had a long list of reasons why tonight was not the night to welcome a guest into their home.

The washing machine had busted and she was out of diapers, so the babies had dishtowels pinned to their bottoms. There were no clean towels and the beds were stripped and all she had were soggy sheets. She explained that she had planned to serve boxed macaroni and cheese and hot dogs on paper plates for dinner. She told him that she had not had time for a shower and did not see any break in her schedule for that particular luxury before midnight. What’s more, when the dishtowels on the babies’ bottoms became soiled she would be stripping them down to naked.<sup>6</sup>

No, she told him. Do *not* bring anyone home, not today. He persisted. He argued that their crazy family was exactly what his South African friend wanted to see, a normal American family. When his wife countered that not many American families had a lunatic for a mother, and two sets of twins, he laughed lovingly. He said their guest would love hot dogs and the twins and paper plates and even his lunatic wife. She gave in.

That night over paper plates and boxed macaroni, the woman from South Africa sat down with this slightly out-of-control family and told her story. She told the story of apartheid, hatred, and deep, deep pain. She had once had two sons of her own. They had both been killed in the violence of her country. Over the chaos of the household, around it and through it perhaps, or maybe because of it, she told her story. The crazy little family

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 222-223.

listened. After dinner, the guest helped clean up, helped get the children to bed and then sat on their front porch with them and cried.

“She was a child of God who had lost her way,” said the mother who had been so overwhelmed at the prospect of having a stranger in their home.

She did not know if she would ever go home again. She told me weeks later, she opened her heart to a white woman for the first time in years. She wasn’t the only one who was changed that night, though. I learned the stranger comes to me with the message of an angel, a gift to me that will change my life.<sup>7</sup>

The writer of Hebrews has been here before. “Let mutual love continue,” begins the thirteenth chapter, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that, some have entertained angels without knowing it” (13:1-2).

This is how the people of God respond to God’s grace to them in Christ. By living out that grace to other. As people transformed by grace, we show the hospitality that God has called us to show to *all* people, seeing God in the face of our neighbor in need, entertaining and connecting with angels without knowing it, whoever they are and wherever they might be, just as God has so graciously connected with us by the power of the cross of Jesus Christ.

It is a courageous thing to keep getting up every day, and it is a much more courageous thing to rouse your heart and incline it to love. To care for each other, to open the door to the stranger, to open your heart to the stranger, lifts you up into the great dance of life.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 224.

What matters is that we stretch our hearts open and draw near to each other. It is the way of hospitality, the way of life, and it is, in the remote place where we have awakened to find ourselves, the only way home.<sup>8</sup>

Such is grace.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 233.

## CHAPTER TEN

### *The Scandal of Grace in Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32*

The Christian community knows this “Prodigal Son” story. Christians know it from Jesus’ version or from the version that is their own life. Anyone who has ever read this story finds him/herself inside this story. We are the younger brother who has had enough of expectations and responsibility, and who wants to get away from it all. We are the older brother who works hard to please, to be responsible and trust-worthy, and deserving of reward. We are the father, rejected by the one we deeply love and would do anything for. No matter where we look, we find ourselves in this story.

Writer Anne Lamott sees herself in the younger son, the one known as the “prodigal.” Her life had gotten off course. She had run away from God, run away from life, gotten caught up in addiction, indulgence and self-loathing and had reached the bottom. She had nowhere to go, no handhold to pull her up from the muck of her self-created, self-centered, foolish pig-sty. No one should help her, she believed. She deserved every bit of the misery she was in, she knew. But in the midst of her darkness, the grace of God led her randomly into a little African American Presbyterian church one Sunday. The grace of God surrounded her with the love of some amazing women who saw her as a child of God, not as a messed up, alcoholic, crack-head. The grace of God lifted her out of her muck and out of her darkness and into the light. As a writer, she uses words, similes and metaphors to describe it:

“Sometimes grace works like water wings when you feel you are sinking.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Lamott, *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2007), 50.

“Sometimes grace is a ribbon of mountain air that gets in through the cracks.”<sup>2</sup>

[Grace is] the force that infuses our lives and keeps letting us off the hook. It is unearned love - the love that goes before, that greets us on the way. It's the help you receive when you have no bright ideas left, when you are empty and desperate and have discovered that your best thinking and most charming charm have failed you.<sup>3</sup>

Many in the Christian community, like Anne Lamott, have experienced such grace in their lives. We have experienced times when we have received more forgiveness than we deserved, more love than we could wrap our heads around. We've been let off the hook when we should have been punished. We've had those who love us pull us out of the nasty muck that we got into completely on our own. If there are those who think they have not experienced such grace in their lives, then they have not been paying much attention.

The older son might argue that he had not experienced such grace because he had never been so selfish as to leave his father and brother with all the responsibility of the land and work, had never been so greedy as to run off with his part of the inheritance, and had never been so reckless as to get himself stuck in a pig-sty eating leftovers! The older son is the responsible one, voted Most Dependable in his class superlatives, President of the Rotary Club, coach of his son's basketball team, troop leader for the local Boy

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 139.



Scouts, volunteer at the food pantry. He knew what was expected of him and he did not disappoint. He was the older son.

Presbyterian pastor Michael Lindvall sees himself in this older son who did all the things he was expected to do when he was expected to do them. A model child, he followed all the rules, did all the right things.

Lindvall, in claiming his older brother status, rewrote the parable and called it “The Parable of the Older Brother and the Irresponsible Younger Brother.” The first part of the parable is basically the same with a few word-choice embellishments reminding the reader of how truly selfish, scandalous, irresponsible, and undeserving the younger brother really was. The big change comes when the younger son decides to come home. Lindvall continues the story as retold by the older brother:

While he was yet at a distance, his father saw him through the window of the house. He did not get up and run to him; rather, he remained at his writing table until his son was brought into him. When he saw this wastrel son of his, he greeted his son with grim countenance. He did not embrace him, but crossed his arms before his breast and waited for the boy to speak. And the son said to him, “Father I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called you son.” And the father said to his servants, “Quickly, take this boy into the fields and there he shall toil side by side with his faithful brother for forty days until he proves himself worthy to be a son of mine.”<sup>4</sup>

Lindvall’s new parable goes on with the *elder* brother being the one to whom the father runs and who gets embraces and kisses. He is also the one who gets to determine

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<sup>4</sup> Michael A. Lindvall, “Pausing on the Road to Jerusalem, Session 4,” *The Thoughtful Christian*, 2007, Accessed on January 21, 2017, <https://firstpresashland.files.wordpress.com/2012/01/session-4.pdf>

how long his wandering and lost brother has to work to be considered truly repentant and to deserve to be officially brought into the family again.

Now this makes sense to all the older-brother types. No one is getting off the hook in this story. No one is getting something they do not deserve. It's not that reparations cannot be made. They can be and they will be, but only after the younger son puts in his time, pays his debt, proves his worth. This is justice. This is doing what is right. This kind of reparations for wrong-doing keeps our world running smoothly and everything done decently and in order.

Parties are not given for wrong-doers. They made their beds and need to lie in them.

This, however, is not grace.

Alan Culpepper knows that the older brother "represents all of us who think we can make it on our own, all of us who might be proud of the kind of lives we live. Here is the contrast between those who want to live by justice and merit and those who must ask for grace."<sup>5</sup>

At some point in life we come to realize, or maybe we do not, that we are all in need of God's grace. But if we do not realize it, we do not experience it, and the party is never for us, because we are doing fine on our own.

These are the first two characters in Jesus' parable – the younger son, desperate for grace, desperate for forgiveness, desperate to return home, and the older son, in no need of grace, too good to need forgiveness, and already faithfully at home.

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<sup>5</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 305.

Then there is this third character – the father. Through this parable Jesus tries to get his followers to understand who they are and who God is. God is the one who waits for God's children, who waits and hopes that they will return home, return to God's embrace, return to God's forgiving love and never-ending grace.

T. S. Eliot puts it this way: "The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."<sup>6</sup>

The place where all people started was in God's love and God's embrace as all were created and called into being. The place where God's children will end up, where God's children will call home, is back in those arms of grace and love.

All are wanderers away from the heart of God, *even the ones who stay*. All stray far from where God wants them to be, in his arms of grace and love, living as people of grace and love. All, younger sons and older sons and daughters too, wander away from God in their hearts, wander away from God when they put their trust in themselves, when they live lives concerned only about themselves, when they live lives in resentment, judgment, fear, envy, pride or self-pity. The Christian community becomes absent from the heart of God when it lives in those places far away from where it was created to be.

God, who feels the absence of God's children intimately, waits for them, waits for them to come and call God's name – "Father" "Mother" "Abba" "Yahweh" "My Lord" and not only does God let God's people come back home, God runs to them, embraces them, kisses them, puts a ring on their fingers and shoes on their feet and they who thought they would be lucky if they could shovel their father's pig pen are suddenly

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<sup>6</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1943), 39.

treated like royalty and a huge party is thrown in their honor. Grace. Grace. For all God's children, grace.

The good news for *all* creation is that "grace lies at the heart of this parable – scandalous grace, grace that defies all earthly rules and conventions."<sup>7</sup> Daniel Deffenbaugh writes about the actions of this third character, our God:

The economy of such love and grace surprises . . . us in its extravagance. . . . This is the amazing thing about grace, that while we remain bound in both body and soul to Adam's sin, the Spirit of God enables us to utter the word of salvation – "Father" – and God runs out to meet us in the person of his Son. As we once perceived that being lost was a fate worse than death, we can now proclaim in faith that greater than life itself is living with the knowledge that we have been found. The response of God to all of this is unbridled rejoicing.<sup>8</sup>

Thomas G. Long shares the story about a woman who had been very close to her father in her younger years. Her favorite memory was of the family dances they had when everyone got together for holidays and gatherings. The aunts, uncles and cousins would all be there and pretty soon someone would open up the old record player, put on the polka record and start to dance.

Eventually, someone would put on the "Beer Barrel Polka;" and when the music of the "Beer Barrel Polka" played, her father would come up to her, tap her on the shoulder and say, "I believe this is our dance," and they would dance. One time, though, when she was a teenager and in one of those teenaged moods and the

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<sup>7</sup> Daniel Deffenbaugh, *Feasting on the Word, Year C., Vol 2.* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 120.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 118.

"Beer Barrel Polka" began to play and when her father tapped her on the shoulder and said, "I believe this is our dance," she snapped at him, "Do not touch me! Leave me alone!" And her father turned away and never asked her to dance again.

"Our relationship was difficult all through my teen years," she wrote. "When I would come home late from a date, my father would be sitting there in his chair, half asleep, wearing an old bathrobe, and I would snarl at him, "What do you think you're doing?" He would look at me with sad eyes and say, "I was just waiting on you."

"When I went away to college," the woman wrote, "I was so glad to get out of his house and away from him and for years I never communicated with him, but as I grew older, I began to miss him."

One day I decided to go to the next family gathering, and when I was there, somebody put on the "Beer Barrel Polka." I drew a deep breath, walked over to my father, tapped him on the shoulder and said, "I believe this is our dance." He turned toward me and said, "I've been waiting on you."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas G. Long, "Is There Joy in God's House?" *Day 1*, March 21, 2004, Accessed on January 21, 2017, [http://day1.org/471-is there joy in gods house](http://day1.org/471-is-there-joy-in-gods-house)



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### *Gratitude (revisited)*

Over the past few years, mainstream culture embraced a gratitude movement. The movement did not start in the church. The movement started with a few people who realized that they were living their lives as a constant lament about how awful things were and how they never had enough. Nicola Jane Hobbs, a yoga teacher, lifestyle coach and secular blogger writes,

Sometimes I wake up and my first thought is *I didn't get enough sleep*. I get to the fridge to find that I don't have enough fruit to make my smoothie. And then I look at my to-do list and realize I don't have enough time to get even half way through it.

I get in my car and discover that I don't have enough gas to get to the yoga studio. Later, I come home to a letter from my bank manager telling me I don't earn enough for a mortgage.

And I spend the rest of the day feeling like I'm just not good enough.

We spend our lives calculating how much we have, how much we want, and how much we don't have. And we compare this to what everyone else has (or to the visions of perfection we get from the media) – a self-defeating cycle that will always ends with the same conclusion: *We are lacking. We never have enough. We never are enough.*

But there is an answer to the Never Enough Problem: Gratitude.

Gratitude . . . reminds you that you have enough and that you are enough.<sup>1</sup>

Hobbs goes on to encourage people to start a “gratitude jar.” A gratitude jar is a jar or container in which one places, preferably each day, small notes about daily moments of gratitude. By focusing on gratitude, the user of the jar begins to recognize the abundance in life which we take for granted. At the end of the year, preferably on New Year’s Eve, the jar owner takes out the very full jar and read the notes.

I have a friend who created her own beautifully decorated gratitude jar to recognize God’s activity and grace in her daily life. She writes me regularly to share some of the things for which she is grateful – a warm bed, a kind word from a stranger, a beautiful sunset, the ability to take a walk, a good book, a good friend, a full gratitude jar. Her jar is a bearer of grace to her, a reminder of the many ways God is present in her life.

Gratitude can be seen in other arenas as well. On Facebook, often during the Thanksgiving season (but at other times as well) many people record daily the things that make them grateful and encourage others to do the same. Some people keep a gratitude journal, making regular entries about the things in life which bring them joy and peace. Others buy books about gratitude and the health and wealth benefits that come from living a grateful life. Gratitude has gone mainstream in these and many other ways.

Gratitude, embraced by secular culture in recent years, has been a Christian practice for centuries. It is a natural response to our understanding of God’s grace and all that God has given us. The Psalmists wrote their liturgies of praise and thanksgiving to God, many of which were used in worship in the Temple. The Israelites gave thank

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<sup>1</sup> Nicole Jane Hobbs, “How to Create a Gratitude Jar,” *Mind Body Green*, September 26, 2013, Accessed on October 9, 2015, <http://www.mindbodygreen.com/0-11062/how-to-create-a-gratitude-jar.html>



offerings of 10% of their best crops and livestock back to God, acknowledging that everything they had had come from God. Jesus told stories of gratitude – most familiar perhaps is the story of the ten lepers who were healed and the one who returned to give thanks to Jesus for the gracious, undeserved gift of healing they received. The story of the widow who gave her last two copper coins is also a story of gratitude (Luke 21:1-4).

This discussion reminds me of the previously-mentioned story of the woman whose gratitude for Jesus' grace is overflowing, radical, and even out-of-bounds (7:36-50). In this story, a leader in the synagogue invites Jesus (and others) to dine with him. As they sit at dinner, a "woman in the city" enters the house with a jar of alabaster ointment. She stands behind Jesus' feet and weeps. As she weeps, Luke tells his readers, she bathes Jesus' feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, and anoints them with the costly ointment.

The unnamed woman recognizes the magnitude of Jesus' gift of forgiveness to her – the opportunity to have a new life and a second chance – and she offers her gratitude in extravagant and excessive ways, embarrassing the host with her demonstrative actions and tears. The Pharisee, in so many words, rebukes Jesus for even considering that he might be worthy of such a ridiculous display of gratitude. But the unnamed woman recognized Jesus as her Savior, her Redeemer, the bearer of the gift of grace. The Pharisee did not. Jesus makes clear that true gratitude such as hers showed an awareness of the power of forgiveness and a faith much deeper than that of the Pharisee who had invited Jesus to dinner.

The starting point for gratitude is the recognition and acknowledgement of what God has done for us in Christ. Those transformed by God in Christ recognize God's

redemptive, powerful, unconditional and overflowing love which comes as a gift, despite the human tendency to turn away from God and toward self. To claim this love is to recognize God's grace. Once such grace is recognized, the transformed Christian cannot help but be grateful. Grace prompts gratitude. Gratitude yields grace.

This is a beautiful cycle of grace and gratitude. The Christian community, transformed by grace, understands (at least in part) the overflowing, beneficent love of God and recognizes the grace of God that gives us life and makes us whole. Who, in glimpsing such grace even only in part, could be anything but grateful?

Likewise, such gratitude inflames in us the desire to share grace with one another, as a thank-offering to God. We, who are overwhelmed with gratitude, share grace with one another that manifests itself as forgiveness, understanding, empathy, generosity, kindness and deep relationships with one another in an albeit imperfect community.

The words grace and gratitude have the same root in Latin and in Greek. We cannot talk about the grace of God for us all without discussing how the acknowledgement of that grace changes our lives and moves our hearts and spirits as we live together in gratitude as the Body of Christ. Grace leads to gratitude which leads to grace which leads to gratitude. What a wonderful cycle in which to be caught up!

Karl Barth said it this way: "Grace and gratitude go together like Heaven and Earth; grace evokes gratitude like the voice an echo. Gratitude follows grace like thunder [follows] lightning." He also wrote, "To believe in Jesus Christ means to become thankful."

In her book *Living into Community* Christine Pohl writes:

When our lives are shaped by gratitude, we're more likely to notice the goodness and beauty in everyday things. We are content; we feel blessed and are eager to confer blessing. We are able to delight in the very existence of another human being. In a grateful community, individuals and their contributions are acknowledged and honored, and there is regular testimony to God's faithfulness, through which the community experiences the joys of its members. Expressions of gratitude help make the community alive to the Word, the Spirit, and God's work.<sup>2</sup>

Fred Craddock tells the story of the year both his children had graduations – his son from high school and his daughter from college. He wanted to give them both the same gift – something meaningful – a poem. He had two copies of the poem prepared by a calligrapher on parchment paper and framed for his children.

The poem he chose for their gifts was a Yiddish poem called, “Der Ikker” or, “the Main Thing.” Craddock wrapped the gifts and left them to be opened at their graduations. His children, optimistically, chose to open his gift last. As they tore open the packages, he saw their disappointment.

“Go ahead and read it,” he said. His son read it. His daughter read it. Craddock said, “You get it?” But they did not get it. He said, “Well, just think about it. It will come to you.” So they took their framed poems along with them into their lives.

Last time I was in [my daughter's] house in Oklahoma [Craddock writes], it was on the wall in the den. I said, “Do you read that?” And she said, “Every once in a while I read it.” I said, “Do you get it?” She said, “I do not get it.” And I recently

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<sup>2</sup> Christine Pohl, *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices that Sustain Us* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 22.

saw it hanging in the kitchen at [my son's]. I said, "John, do you read that?" And he said, "Yeah. What does that mean?" Ah, they'll get it. It's the secret. It's the secret.

If your outlook on things has changed –

this is not the main thing.

If you feel like laughing at old dreams –

this is not the main thing.

If you recall errors of which you are now ashamed –

this is not the main thing.

Even if you know what you're doing now

you'll regret some other time –

this is not the main thing.

But beware, light-heartedly, to conclude from this

that there is no such thing as the main thing.

This is the main thing.<sup>3</sup>

His children asked, "What is the main thing?" He responded:

I've never told them. I'm going to tell you. I hope you will not tell them. I want

them to figure it out.

But as far as I'm concerned, in all seriousness, to be initiated into the secret of the

fundamental relationship with God that sets you free is gratitude. I have never

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<sup>3</sup> Craddock names Hirsch Oscherovitch (also spelled Hirsh Osherovitch) as the author of this poem. For more information, see Dov-Ber Kerler, "Hirsch Oscherovitch," *The Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, Accessed on January 25, 2017, [http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Osherovitch\\_Hirsh](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Osherovitch_Hirsh)

know a person grateful who was at the same time small, or mean, or bitter, or greedy, or selfish, or took any pleasure in anybody else's pain. Never.

. . . You can call it "grace." You can call it "gift." You can call it "gratitude." But that is the heart of the matter.<sup>4</sup>

That is the main thing.

Ultimately, God's grace for God's creation *is* the main thing. As the Body of Christ, the community of faith lives into its awareness and understanding of God's grace through the embodiment of that grace in our own lives. When we live lives of gratitude, generosity, forgiveness, reconciliation, joy, and hospitality, we enact and embody God's grace to the world and in doing so, invite others to fall into the arms of such grace and to begin to live as people transformed by grace. If mainline Protestants do not accept God's gift of grace, then our churches and our communities of faith will themselves be devoid of grace. We, as a Christian people, will be unable to follow Jesus in this world with love for God and one another. Reinhold Niebuhr's words from over fifty years ago remain true today, that "a full ministry of Christ's grace to tortured and anxious and harassed souls, which give contemporary relevance to the age-old Gospel, is the best way of giving vitality to the Church and guaranteeing its life."<sup>5</sup>

When transformed by God's gift of grace in Christ, the mainline Protestant Church will embody and enact this grace in such a way that the world will experience the

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<sup>4</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 256-7.

<sup>5</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Church as a Community of Grace," *Reinhold Niebuhr Papers* (United States: Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, 1956).

good news of the Gospel, rejoice in God's abundant love for all, and live lives of faithful communion with our Triune God and with one another.



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