

“Back to Basics: What is Grace?”

Ephesians 2:1-10

January 10, 2021

Will you pray with me? O God, you alone have the words we need to hear. You alone have the power to speak light into darkness, clarity into chaos, hope into fear, life into the valley of death. So speak, O God, for we your servants are listening. Amen.

A sermon manuscript sat on the desk in my office Friday morning—completely written and ready to go as the weekend approached. It was the first sermon in a new year’s series focused on some of the basic questions of our faith, the building blocks of Christian belief and practice. Who is Jesus? Where is the Holy Spirit? How do we read scripture? Why church?

As I read the sermon aloud in my office, words that seemed meaningful a few days earlier turned to ash in my mouth. I prayed for wisdom, and then I began cutting sentences and paragraphs asking the Spirit’s guidance about what to put in their place. The more I cut, the clearer my vision became. Finally, the only thing left on the page was the title I had given the sermon, the question that I intended to take up this Sunday morning.

What is grace? The words stared back at me for a long time. I took a walk. I sat in this quiet and empty sanctuary. How do we speak of grace today? Is it appropriate? Is it even possible?

The burden and privilege of preaching are that words matter. The language we choose, the way we speak, the consideration we give before we open our mouths—it all matters. Words shape our lives. Words form our identity as individuals and as a community. Words give rise to actions. As the Epistle of James teaches us, the tongue is a fire—setting the world ablaze with just a spark. Blessing and cursing come from the same place. Building up and tearing down. Our words matter.

And, for those of us who confess the lordship of Jesus Christ and seek to live fully into the impact of that confession, there are words that are always appropriate, words that must define who we are in every time and place. And so, we speak of grace today, not because of its abundance among us but because of its scarcity. We speak of grace not because we understand it, but because we know we need it. We speak of grace not as a testament to our piety or purity but as a witness to God’s sovereignty despite our brokenness. We speak of grace, today, because God’s grace compels us, corrects us, commands us, and encourages us when we have reached the limits of human capacity, understanding, optimism, or energy.

I know that I am not alone in confessing that I’ve reached those limits more than once in recent days. Like all of you, I’ve been shocked and saddened by the images and narratives coming from our nation’s capital. The destruction and desecration, the bigotry and hatred, the anger and violence, the shedding of blood, and the loss of life. Among those images, I was and am most deeply shaken by the prominent presence of Christian symbols, signs, and banners—impossible to ignore and nauseating to witness. In those moments, it was clear to me that the path ahead for communities of Christian faith like ours *must* offer a renewed commitment to clarity in both word and action. We who bear the name of Jesus Christ and seek to be his disciples *must* speak clearly about what it means to belong to him without compromise or distortion—words matter.

One of the sentences that I’ve heard most often from well-meaning people, people like me, is “this is not who we are.” I want to believe those words, but my reading of the Bible keeps getting in the way. Those who read and study scripture will quickly

discover an honest depiction of who we humans are and of that which we are capable. Our theological tradition describes humankind as totally depraved. Sinful. Broken. Capable of all manner of hatred and wickedness. This, sadly, is who we are. But it's not the last chapter in our story. There is another word, more powerful than our brokenness and greater than our sinfulness. Grace.

God's grace is a gift. We do not need to work for it, earn it, deserve it, or create it. Grace is offered to us because of who God is, not who we are. Still, God's grace is not cheap. It is costly. It asks something of us. It demands transformation. We cannot claim to have received the gift of God's grace and live as captives to another Lord, a divided allegiance, a different god. Grace means that we can change who we are. That's the very essence of the Gospel—we can change. As individuals, as communities, as institutions, as nations, as a people—we can change. Grace means we can change.

This morning's text from the letter to the Ephesians offers this truth in narrative form. The apostle reminds the Ephesian Christians who they were and does so in stark and straightforward terms. You were dead through the sins in which you once lived. You followed the course of this world, the spirit at work among the disobedient. You were children of wrath and worldly passion. We have seen it—case in point. We have witnessed the hostility and wrath begotten of fearful idolatry. We have felt it in ourselves.

This dramatic description sets up the text's two most important words—“But God...” The Ephesians are reminded that God's mercy in Jesus Christ is the source of their life. By grace, you have been saved. You no longer belong to that world that once claimed you. You belong to God. This is good news—the good news of the Gospel. *And* it is transforming news. If we take it seriously, it changes everything. If we truly believe it, we must rearrange all our priorities in light of its truth. We must reflect deeply on those places where we have failed to embrace the new life offered in Christ. We must confess. We must repent. We must begin, again.

And, thanks be to God, we can begin again this very moment. There is a path, but it is not easy. There is a way, but it is costly. It requires that we tell the truth even when it is difficult and hear the truth even when it challenges our assumptions. It requires that we turn from sin, renounce the evil that lurks within and beyond us, and seek to live another way. On our own, it's not possible. We are selfish, idolatrous, fearful, and proud. We eagerly point to the speck in another's eye while ignoring the log in our own.

But God. With God, all things are still possible for us. We can change. We can search our hearts, examine our souls, repent of our hard-heartedness and our silence in the face of injustice, and do it differently. As followers of Jesus Christ, we can reject the idolatrous and sinful conflation of Christian faith with political ideology, acts of violence, and demonization of others. And we must.

In 2004, when I visited the Christian community in Iona, Scotland, I heard for the first time a confession of faith that I've kept close ever since. It includes this phrase, “We affirm God's goodness at the heart of humanity, planted more deeply than all that is wrong.” This, I think, is what we mean by the grace of God—that there is something sacred and good about us that is somehow truer than what is broken and wrong in us. I have staked my life on this conviction. I have committed my vocational gifts to the belief that communities of Christian faith can have a profound impact on the world—bringing hope to those in despair, justice to the oppressed, compassion to the hurting, the gifts of abundance to places of scarcity. Despite what we have seen, I continue to be persuaded of the essential truth of these convictions.

In the midst of my sermon re-write, I received much-needed wisdom from a teacher, mentor, and dear friend, David Bartlett. Now, David died three years ago, so I did not hear him speak these words. But for Christmas, I received an incredible gift of words in a collection of David's sermons. In one, David reflects on grace: “Here is what I have come to

understand through the years. We are accepted, but we are also responsible. We are saved by God's grace but what we do in the light of that grace makes a huge difference."ⁱ A charge for the church in 2021. We are accepted and we are responsible. Responsible for our words. Responsible for our actions. Responsible for representing the truth of the Gospel to the world and for saying clearly and without equivocation what it means to belong to Jesus. Compassion. Courage. Christlike love for all. The capacity to be changed.

Dinnertime with two young children is sometimes a bit chaotic. Okay, to be honest—it's often a mess. By the time we're all four seated and a meal is on the table, patience is wearing thin. And we also know that we'll be lucky to be in that state for more than five minutes. So, we move quickly. I tend to be the pacesetter. Recently, on a typically frantic evening, I was about to have my first bite when Benjamin, who is almost four, stopped us all with a loud shout. What is the problem son? Daddy—you forgot grace. Ben meant, of course, that we had forgotten to pray before the meal. But as is often the case, the words he chose held more wisdom than he perhaps intended. *Daddy—you forgot grace.* The grace of family gathered around a table in a time of isolation. The grace of abundance as lines at food pantries stretch. The grace of time—precious time—to cherish the gift of children and the chaos and joy they bring. He was right. I forgot grace.

My friends, there is no simple remedy for the societal sickness that has seized us. So much must be rebuilt and repaired. The Church must reclaim its prophetic voice from those who incite anger, commit violence, sow division, and seek power while carrying symbols of the Prince of Peace and incarnation of God's sacrificial love. This is the work of a generation. But perhaps it can begin with a simple act of remembering what we have forgotten. The truth we proclaim at baptism. Before and beyond anything else, we belong to God. By grace, this is who we are. You are God's beloved. Remember this. Live in the light of this truth.

Let me be clear. Grace, in word and deed, is our message to the world and we must deliver it now. Only grace is sufficient for followers of Jesus Christ. Only grace has redeemed us. Only grace can make us courageous disciples. Only grace will lead us home. Amen.

ⁱ *The Collected Sermons of David Bartlett*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2020.