

Amazing Grace

Romans 8:31-39

Reverend Laurie DeMott

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On the bookshelf in my living room, taking up nearly an entire shelf, is my twelve-volume set of the New Interpreter's Bible, commentaries on all 66 books of the Bible containing biblical analysis and suggestions for preaching themes and reflections. Right next to those 12 volumes taking up the rest of the space on that shelf is a three-volume set of the Complete Calvin and Hobbes, all of the comics that Bill Watterson wrote over the ten-year run of his strip about six-year-old Calvin and his toy tiger Hobbes. Frankly, I have gotten more sermon help from those three volumes of comic strips than from the 12 volume Interpreter's Bible because Watterson is adept at capturing the human dilemma through Calvin's experiences such as this strip about our desperate need for a word of grace:

One day, Calvin and Hobbes decide that they want a clubhouse and Calvin suggests that the garage would be a perfect place to hold their meetings. There is only one small problem: the family car is taking up all of the space in the garage, so Calvin convinces Hobbes to help him roll the car into the driveway to give them room for their club. Unfortunately, the driveway slopes downward and as they begin to push the car, the car gets away from them, rolling down the driveway and across the road where it bounces over the shoulder and ends up nose first in a deep ditch. Calvin is horrified, and afraid of the wrath of his parents he decides to run away. He and Hobbes flee for the woods and hide in a tree. Soon, they hear Calvin's mother calling and when she sees them, she says, "There you are. Come down so I can talk to you."

Calvin says, "No, you'll kill us. We are running away."

"I'm not going to kill you," his mother says, "I just want to find out what happened. Are you OK? Was anyone hurt?"

"No one was hurt," Calvin answers. "We were pushing the car into the drive and it kept rolling."

"Well," Calvin's mother tells him, "The tow truck pulled the car out of the ditch and there's no damage so you can come home now."

Calvin looks down from the tree and says, "First, let's hear you say you love me."¹

First, let's hear you say you love me. Calvin recognizes how badly he has messed up and so before he hears words of retribution from his mother, he needs first to hear assurance of her continuing love. He needs to know that no matter what he has done, he has not fundamentally broken the relationship he has with her. While she may be angry, while she may discipline him, while she may have any number of things to say to him about the choices he has made, he wants to be assured that all of that will take place within the circle of their loving bond and not outside of it. This is grace. Grace is more than just a word of love; grace is the assurance of a love that comes first before all else and remains after all is finished. Grace is a love so steadfast that within that love we have the space to learn and grow and change and fall down and stand up again without fear that our flawed humanness will cast us out of that love and leave us alone and bereft. Some people may have the rare good fortune to find that kind of

love in their human relationships but Christ proclaimed the good news that every single one of us can know that unquenchable love in God. No matter how irredeemable we may think we are, the first word God says is, “I love you.” Our relationship with God always begins with God’s grace and it ends in grace — God’s love that remains after all else is finished.

This is the grace that Paul experienced on the road to Damascus when he encountered the risen Christ. Now, in spite of how we paint him in our Sunday School stories, Paul was not some sort of murderous villain who harbored a hatred in his heart that few of us have ever experienced. In fact, his sin was all too familiar: Paul’s sin was that he was self-righteous and arrogant. Paul had convinced himself that he was doing God’s will by weeding out what Paul considered to be a heretical movement. He saw himself as God’s loyal servant stamping out Christ-followers before they sullied the land with their alien thinking. Paul’s sin was the all-too-common sin of human bigotry and oppression that rises from our certainty that we, and only we, know the right way to live. When the risen Christ appeared to Paul on his way to Damascus, however, Paul suddenly realized that he had gotten things completely backwards and that it was not the Christians working against God but he himself who had been in the wrong. Paul was mired in remorse, horrified at how terribly his own certainty had made him not a friend of God, but an enemy of the God he so loved and, in that moment—in his profound recognition of his sin—Paul was a man deeply in need of grace. He needed to know that his own failings, his pride and arrogance, his short-sightedness, impulsiveness, and even his good intentions that had led him so badly astray would not cast him out of the presence of the God to whom he had dedicated his life. He thought he was about to lose it all.

“First,” he must have thought as he lay on the ground before the risen Christ trembling in self-mortification, “First, let’s hear you say you love me.” And amazingly, Paul did hear that word. Christ’s word to him was a word of grace. He was received graciously into the household of the Christian Ananias who cared for him even though Paul had been an enemy of the church. And to his utter amazement, Paul also discovered that God not only loved him still but believed that he, Paul—sinner and screw up that he was—could still be of service to the God he so loved.

And so, when Paul, years later, wrote his letter to the churches in Rome, he was speaking from direct experience when he said, “Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” Paul after his conversion had gone through all those things in his service to Christ: he had been thrown in prison for preaching the gospel. He had been shipwrecked, stoned, flogged, and driven out of towns. He had been mocked by foe and friend alike for persisting in preaching God’s embrace of the Gentiles. And he had learned that none of it—especially not even his own worst self—could separate him from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

This is the totality of the gospel given to us in Christ’s death on the cross and the testimony of the empty tomb: that our God is a God of unquenchable grace. God’s love for us comes before all else and it will remain with us after all is finished. Nothing, not even our worst selves, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

And such deep grace has the power to free us.

In the 1990s, Bill Moyers did a documentary about the song “Amazing Grace,” which, thanks to the internet, you can now watch on Youtube. In one clip, Johnny Cash gives a moving rendition of “Amazing Grace” in a performance at Huntsville State Penitentiary in Texas. Afterwards, Moyers interviews some of the prisoners about what the song means to them. One prisoner says, “[The line in the song that

means the most to me is the line that says] grace caused you to fear, and at first you think that doesn't make sense, but when you come in here and you start taking a look, you do fear. Man, I mean, you get so afraid, you know, that you're not going to get your life in order in time. It's a fear that is hard to put into words, of being alone, of being locked in when you're used to being free.

Moyers says, "[But] In those circumstances 'Amazing Grace' is no way out. It's not going to unlock those bars."

The prisoner says, "No, but that's your only chance in here. This is it. The only way out is up."

We worry about the consequences of God's unquenchable grace: we worry that it's not fair, that people will take advantage of it and think of it as a free pass to continue in their sinful ways; we worry that in the end grace can't change the reality of disease and suffering, that it cannot, as Bill Moyers says, literally open the bars of a prison cell, but Paul knew that the most inexorable jailer is often ourselves. We burden our hearts with guilt, flog ourselves with remorse, imprison our spirits with the false belief that we are unlovable and can be no better than we are and so are doomed before we even start. Our doubts and self-condemnation lock the doors of our souls better than any prison warden. And then we hear the remarkable good news that God's grace has freed us. God says, "The way out is up into my arms of mercy where you will find rest for your weary soul and healing for your heart, because my love for you came before all else and it will remain with you after all is finished. Nothing, neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation — not even your own worst self — will be able to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Or as the great writer Frederick Buechner expresses it:

"Grace is something you can never get but can only be given. There's no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth....

"The grace of God means something like: 'Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are, because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you.'

"There's only one catch," Buechner adds. "Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it. "Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too."²

Reach out and take the gift that God has offered, the gift of unquenchable grace. God's love for you came before all else and it will remain with you after all is finished, and nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Footnotes:

1. from June 9, 1989
2. From *Wishful Thinking*