

I'm so glad we're doing this 7 part sermon series based on the book "Tasting Grace" by Melissa d'Arabian, Melissa is a member of St. Paul's and is a Food Network/Cooking Channel host and author of other bestselling cookbooks.

Today's sermon is the third in the series, based on the third chapter of Tasting Grade - "Invitation into Creation". Melissa's style of writing is so easy and it's so personal. Not only that, but I've been listening to her book on Audible as I commute my half hour drive from home to church and Melissa is the narrator on the Audible version, so I get to hear her thoughts from her own voice and it just feels like she's speaking just to me in a personal conversation as we drive together.

I don't know about you, but it's taking much more these days, as we move through this pandemic and continued stay at home order, to find hope, to not be depressed, to feel connected to God. For me, as I listen to Melissa's book, I experience a shift in my heart and hope filling me so I can take cleansing breaths and stand up straighter against any fear. In one word, I've felt INSPIRED.

The one who seeks and follows Christ is a radically transformed individual. This is the witness Melissa makes in Tasting Grace and, it is who I desire to be - a radically transformed individual.

I've also been reading Romans in my personal devotion time this past month and as I read through chapters 5 & 6 while preparing to preach today, I found there's a lot in these chapters of Romans and Melissa's book that overlap.

For instance, Melissa talks about her first days on the set of the cooking competition called "The Next Food Network Star" - she mentions the stress, the unnatural rhythms of traveling, of waiting, then rushing rushing in a cooking challenge, of feeling less than adequate compared to the impressive chefs around her, and the fear of being judged by the cameras and how she might look. We're not TV stars, but we can definitely relate to stress, to having unnatural rhythms of life right now, of feeling less than adequate - of being judged by all those who look on into our lives.

Did you know, according to a study by the University of Washington, children by age 5 have a sense of self-esteem comparable in strength to adults and that it tends to remain at that level across one's life span. Our own Bishop Grant Hagiya taught in a class I had

with him this past week, that by age 8 children have learned a negative self view. Age 8! No wonder we deal with self-doubt and negativity so often!

It's interesting what our passage in Romans says about this. I encourage you to grab your Bible - I'm gonna give you a minute to do that - go ahead. I'm using my Wesley Study Bible - it's a Wesleyan perspective on scripture and also has notes from one of the founders of the Methodist Church - John Wesley. It's a New Revised Standard version. Today we're looking at

Romans 6:5-13, 17&18

It's possible, as you read or heard this passage, that one or two words stuck out to you. I'm wondering if "sin" was one of those words? It came up 9 times, so I wouldn't be surprised if so. Sin is a hard word to hear and to talk about. In Greek the word for sin here is "hamartia," which I've taught before is an archery term meaning "to miss the mark" or "fear of failure". When I think about sin as missing the mark or fear of failure, I think of Melissa's words describing her fear of inadequacy and the fear of being found a failure by judges in front of and BEHIND the camera. But verse 6 reminds us "We know that our old self was crucified with Christ so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin." If we just replace that word sin with "fear of failure" hear how it changes - "We know that our old self was crucified with Christ so that fear of failure might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to fear of failure." Hmmm - that sounds a lot like what Melissa says in this chapter - she writes:

"Would I worry about the cameras, the competition, how I looked on television, and potential elimination, and try to control the uncontrollable? OR would I focus deep and hard on God and on who GOD made me to be? I found peace and stability in the latter. God is always the right place for me to fix my eyes.... my real win: finding my center in God."

We are no longer enslaved to fear of failure or missing the mark. Jesus' death, in which we participate with Him, cancelled fear of failure once for all. Now we are a new creation - having been also resurrected with Christ and free to live fully.

Melissa says it well:

"As I learned to trust that God would fill my creator's well abundantly, the fear of running out of

ideas subsided. Trusting the creator in me was one of the greatest gifts I received....”

I said I felt inspired as I’ve been listening to the book and one of the most inspiring passages for me this week was about a dish Melissa used to make a lot that has very opposite flavors. I was really intrigued by it and decided to try to make it myself. Here is a short video of my experience.

[watch worship service to view video - also on FB]

In just a few minutes I’ll show another shorter video of how it turned out. That passage in Melissa’s book describing the perfect marriage of so many opposite things - sweet, bitter, salty and acidic - also made me think of verse 17 in our Romans passage.

“But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient FROM THE HEART to the FORM of teaching to which you were entrusted.”

The emphasis added in the slide is mine - what part of our body does God entrust His teaching to? Does it say our minds? Does it say our gut? No - not those places in our bodies where our reactivity originates - the lower part of the brain - and not the place where fear seems to manifest as stomach aches and ulcers - our gut. The place in our body where God does God’s best work is our heart.

Our hearts are FORMED by God’s teaching. That word is helpful too - in Greek it’s “tupos” meaning a pattern or model. John Wesley says in his commentary on Romans it’s like a mould that liquid metal is poured into. Since we’re talking about cooking, maybe think of a jello mould. Once we believe and receive Christ, we are re-formed, re-created, we are not the same as we once were, not enslaved to fears, but we are new in Christ and free to create.

In Christ, our differences - like the bitterness of herbs, the acidity of vinegar, the sweetness of prunes and the saltiness of capers or olives - are all re-created to become a beautiful tapestry of flavors working together to bring delight.

Are you curious if these flavors I tried in my cooking did bring delight or not? Here’s how the chicken marbella turned out.

[watch worship service or go to church Facebook page]

My family was very happy with this tasty recipe and they were happy I didn’t let fear of failure get in my way of trying something I was really inspired to create. Are you feeling inspired to try something or do something you’ve been a little afraid of? Well - thanks be to God, you having once been slaves to fear of failure are now set free. Live to God instead!!

Now, here’s Melissa d’Arabian herself letting us know how WE can RSVP to this invitation to creation & creativity.

[watch worship service to view video - Creation]

Thank you Melissa, for your creation and creativity. Please get in touch and let us know how God is calling you to create.

I think the best way to end today is by saying together the Serenity Prayer. It’s a beautiful prayer with unclear origins, but great to have in your back pocket for anytime, but especially for morning devotions or a bedtime ritual. So let’s pray it together - will you join with me?

“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Living one day at a time, accepting hardship as a pathway to peace; taking as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; trusting that You will make all things right if I surrender to Your will; so that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with You forever in the next. Amen”