

The Freedom to Embrace

Pentecost VI

Hosea 11:1-9; Romans 11:25-36; Luke 23:32-34

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Some two or three years ago, more or less, on a broadcast by Paul Harvey, he read an "Impatient Letter From God." I shared it with you a while back, but it says so well with some humor what I want to say this morning that I'm going to share a few paragraphs again:

From: God
To: My Children on Earth
Re: *Idiotic Religious Rivalries*

My Dear Children (and believe me, that's all of you),

I consider myself a pretty patient guy. I mean, look at the Grand Canyon. It took millions of years to get it right. And about evolution? Boy, nothing is slower than designing that whole Darwinian thing to take place, cell by cell, and gene by gene. I've been patient through your fashions, civilizations, wars and schemes, and the countless ways you take Me for granted until you get yourselves into big trouble again and again. But, I want to let you know about some of the things that are starting to tick Me off.

First of all, your religious rivalries are driving Me up a wall. Enough already! Let's get one thing straight These are Your religions, not Mine. I'm the whole enchilada; I'm beyond them all. Every one of your religions claims there's only one of Me (which, by the way, is absolutely true). But in the very next breath, each religion claims it's My favorite one. And each claims its bible was written personally by Me, and that all the other bibles are man-made. Oh, Me. How do I even begin to put a stop to such complicated nonsense?

Okay, listen up now. I'm your Father AND Mother, and I don't play favorites among My children. Also, I hate to break it to you, but I don't write. My longhand is awful, and I've always been more of a "doer"

anyway. So ALL of your books, including those bibles, were written by men and women. They were inspired, remarkable people, but they also made mistakes here and there. I made sure of that, so that you would never trust a written word more than your own living heart.

You see, one human being to ME – even a bum on the street – is worth more than all the Holy books in the world. That's just the kind of guy I am. My Spirit is not a historical thing; it's alive right here, right now, as fresh as your next breath.

Holy books and religious rites are sacred and powerful, but not more so than the least of you. They were only meant to steer you in the right direction, not to keep you arguing with each other, and certainly not to keep you from trusting your own personal connection with Me.

Which brings Me to My next point about your nonsense. You act like I need you and your religions to stick up for Me or "win souls" for My sake. Please don't do Me any favors. I can stand quite well on My own, thank you. I don't need you to defend Me, and I don't need constant credit. I just want you to be good to each other.

And another thing: I don't get all worked up over money or politics, so stop dragging My name into your dramas. For example, I swear to Me that I never threatened Oral Roberts. I never rode in any of Rajneesh's Rolls Royces. I never told Pat Robertson to run for president, and I've never EVER had a conversation with Jim Baker, Jerry Falwell, or Jimmy Swaggart! Of course, come Judgment Day, I certainly intend to ...

The thing is, I want you to stop thinking of religion as some sort of loyalty pledge to Me. The true purpose of your religions is so that YOU can become more aware of ME, not the other way around. Believe Me, I know you already. I know what's in each of your hearts, and I love you with no strings attached. Lighten up and enjoy Me. That's what religion is best for.

It was on a spring-like Lenten Wednesday evening this past season that the meditation which I offered seemed to connect with a number of people, because in that meditation I explained how I had become such a flaming liberal and arch heretic, that it was really a process over many, many years. There were a number of people who said to me, "You know, you really ought to do that on Sunday morning." I don't generally do that kind of thing and yet, when it continued to surface now and then, I thought finally, "Okay, let's do that."

Last week we talked about the freedom of the nation and the privilege we enjoy as a free people, but today I want to talk about that which personally has given me the greatest freedom of my life: the freedom to embrace the other without qualms, without feeling awkward or clumsy, without defensiveness or tentativeness or distancing or alienation, just simply to open my heart and my

arms to embrace the other. And it didn't come easily because I was nurtured in a very strong tradition, the Protestant tradition, the Reformed tradition, Calvinism as expressed in Dutch Reformed piety that had a pinch of mysticism about it, deeply traditioned in that old Reformed faith that had a very great gulf built between those who were the children of God and those who were not, those who were saved and those who were lost, those who were chosen by God and those who were damned by God. The eternal election of grace is something that I grew up with.

After seven years of pastoral experience, the first four which were right here, my little system was showing signs of wear; it was beginning to crack, because you know the human situation isn't always clean and neat. It's often very messy. It doesn't fit all the categories. There is not always a rule or a prescription for every human situation. Suddenly we are confronted with something that, "Where do we go to find the answer to *this*?" After seven years of pastoral experience, I really needed a new beginning. I needed to look again. My European experience of four years was an existential quest much more than an academic quest. It was for me to find a Gospel I could preach honestly with authenticity, because I was running into some walls that I couldn't get over. So, I went to Europe and there met my dear Professor Berkhof who had invited me to visit him when I came and see whether or not we might work out something. I went to see him, and on his drape was pinned that little scrap of paper that had the words of Tennyson, "Our little systems have their day, they have their day and cease to be. They are but broken light of Thee, and Thou, O Lord, art more than they." I said to myself, "I think I've found my man." This was exactly what I needed because, if there's anything I had, it was a little system.

If you didn't grow up as I did in Dutch Reformed piety and theology, you're not even going to be able to understand what I'm going to talk about now, because you have to have been born with this thing to have any comprehension of it at all, to take it in at all. But I grew up on that national Dutch flower, the tulip. Now, most of the world, in order to trace its heritage, seeks its roots. Dutch people seek their bulbs, and the bulb blossoms into a tulip, and the five petals of the tulip are five propositions of Christian faith understanding as it was given to me:

TULIP, an acrostic for five significant points of doctrine.

The T stands for *total depravity*, which simply means that being human, you're a dirty rotter. Being human, you're guilty as sin. Being human, you're a fallen creature. Being human, you're lost. So, what is God going to do about it?

God is going to unconditionally choose or elect some. Not all. And it's unconditional. This is something deep in God, deep in eternity. It has nothing to do with a person's righteousness or lack thereof, a person's response or lack thereof. It is an unconditional election. A part of the

human race, only a part. Some are saved, some are lost. The U stands for *unconditional election*.

Those who are totally depraved and unconditionally elected, it is for them that Christ died. *Limited atonement*, the L. Well, there's a sense in which Christ died for the world, but not seriously; Christ died for the elect. Limited atonement.

And, of course, being totally depraved as you are, and unconditionally elected as you are, and having had Christ die for you, then you will be irresistibly drawn by grace. There's no way you can get out of it. You can kick and scream and howl, but God will get you. *Irresistible grace*, the I in TULIP.

And you who are totally depraved and unconditionally elected for whom Christ died as a limited atonement, who have been irresistibly drawn by God's grace, will be preserved unto all eternity. The *preservation of the saints*, the P.

There you have it Once you get in the little scheme, you can't get out of it. It is totally, logically coherent. If you start it, you have to end up where it ends up. TULIP.

"Our little systems have their day, they have their day and cease to be..." My little system was running on fumes. In my study, I began to probe the nature of God's grace, really the nature of God and the extent of that grace. I was nervous about the fact that some people from the foundations of the world were chosen in Christ, and other people simply were damned. They were the reprobates. They didn't have a chance. Of course, we made our own choice to fall in Adam. You were there, weren't you? But, having made that choice in Adam, there was no way to get out of it, and if we were not chosen by God, curtains. That was not sitting easily with me and so, as I came back here in 1971 and in subsequent years, I was dancing all around those subjects. I was probing, testing, preaching and teaching in a time of experimentation, to which most of you were subjected and about which you were very gracious, indeed.

Then in 1985, the church constituted a theological journal and I was invited to be on the Board of Editors and, becoming one of the editors, I had to begin to write. For me, that was a great opportunity, because I had to begin to put down clearly some of the stuff I had been thinking about. You know, in preaching one can be fuzzy. Old Dr. Harry Jellema years ago came one summer Sunday and, as he left, he winked at me. He always would say something in Dutch to me and light up his pipe. But this time he winked at me and said, "Studied ambiguity is the secret of success." He knew where I was fussing around. Most people didn't. They just sang, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" and went out of here happy as a bird.

But, now I had to begin to write, and that's in black and white and that's public. The Board of Editors said to me, because we were talking about these things together, "Why don't you write on the extent of grace, the covenant of grace?" I said I would and I began to do some research for that, and one of the great aids that came to me was from that wonderful house organ of the Christian Reformed Church known for its piety and its orthodoxy and its ecclesiastical, political analysis, *The Banner*, in a guest editorial which is entitled, "Who is Saved?"

I said, "Ah, this is it. Now I'll know. Who is saved?"

The writer is a brilliant mind who writes exceedingly well and, with great lucidity, he set forth the wonders of a universal grace - all saved. He made it so appealing, but then he said, but it won't wash. No, he said, God must decide who is saved and God must save them. In Calvinist orthodoxy, God wants to save everybody: I Timothy 2:4, "And God can save everybody." God arranged for the death of Christ to radiate sufficient power for the salvation of all. God also orders the Gospel preached to all. But, at the end of the day, God abandons some. God wants everybody saved, but never intends to save all. God wants everybody saved, but doesn't plan on it. The reprobate are heartbreakingly, finally, disastrously lost. God could save them, but he doesn't, and nobody knows why. Probably none of us needs reminding that this is a painful scheme. The awfulness of it comes home to us when we look at the spiritual rebellion of a son or daughter. Could it possibly be that God has never intended to save this precious person?

Well, I put the magazine down and read no further, because that was a scheme painful, indeed. It was too painful for me. It was one of those moments, one of those transforming moments when suddenly you see everything. You see something differently. You know. You know that that is not true. You know that system has a terrible distortion in it, and so suddenly it is like shackles fall off and one begins to think again.

Now, imagine it. This is a very lucid, clear, unambiguous presentation of Reformed Calvinism, and if you are consistent with that system, you might have a son or a daughter who's kicking over the traces, sowing their wild oats in a state of rebellion, turning their back on you, heedless of your pleas, and you would have to contemplate the possibility that God never intended to save them. I had to say I don't believe that. I cannot believe that. That is not any God that I could worship.

Of course, being deeply imbedded in the tradition which claimed to find its source in the scriptures, I had to go back to the scriptures. It's really interesting. It is the same old book, but when one puts on different glasses, one sees things one never saw before. For example, that beautiful passage in Hosea, chapter 11, where God talks about how tenderly he tended to Israel as a child and Israel rebelled, and God says, "Okay. My wrath is on you. You're going to be destroyed." And then God says, "How can I give you up? My compassion warms within me. I

will not destroy Ephraim, for I am God, not human.” That God, you see, a God of passionate, fierce love and grace and mercy that would not give up.

Or, Paul struggling with that question of Israel, “Why, Why did Israel reject Jesus?” Paul had seen it – Paul, this Jewish Pharisee, this blue blood rabbi – he saw in Jesus this one whose grace had broken the bounds of Israel and flown to the whole world and he wanted to take it to the whole world, but his own brothers and sisters didn't see it. He said, “I would that I could be accursed if only they would see it. They have a zeal for God, but not according to righteousness. What's going on?” Well, I [Paul] think what's going on is that Israel's rejection is so that the Gospel goes to the Gentiles. And then eventually the Gentiles, receiving the grace of God, will cause envy in Israel and then – then all of Israel will be saved. God has consigned all to disobedience according that God may have mercy on all. Hosea 11:32.

I said, “Oh, Paul? You're getting close to a universal conception of grace. Or a conception of universal grace.”

And, of course, it has to do with the nature of God, and where do we see the nature of God more clearly than in the face of Jesus? And when you see him on the cross, the victim of the violence and the bigotry and the prejudice, the hatred of the human family, what does he do? Does he respond in kind? No. He says, “Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing.” He sees through, he penetrates through their ignorance, through their defensiveness, through their hostility; he sees through them to something deeper. He says, “Father, forgive them. They just don't understand.” That's a picture of God, that kind of grace, that kind of mercy.

Now, you see, God didn't drop those words out of heaven, but this was the deepest intuition of Hosea's heart, this is what Hosea sensed God must be like. This is Paul's insight. He was wrong about the timetable of God's redemptive scheme. He was wrong about a lot of things, but he saw something about the grace of God and that to which he witnessed. This word of Jesus - there wasn't any court recorder there. There wasn't any microphone on the cross. What Jesus had been, what he had embodied, how he had impacted them caused them to write this word, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do,” because that is reflective of who Jesus was. And Jesus is reflective of who God is.

So, little by little, I became more and more certain. I knew, not only that that theological system was broken and that I had to free myself of it while continuing to listen to it and respect it, but I knew that the news was better than ever I had dreamed and I found a freedom within, a freedom to embrace. I found a new joy. I found that I could open up to people. I found that I wasn't awkward anymore. My body language didn't reflect the fact that I had to keep you at arm's length until you step over this line and become one with me. I didn't have to get anybody to step over any line. All I had to do was to be the embodiment and the witness of

a grace of God that embraces us before ever anyone heard our barking cry. What a relief. What a freedom. What a joy.

As I was preparing that Lenten message, there was on my desk an article from *Sports Illustrated* which I never read, but somebody had found an article that they thought was probably good for me to read, and I thought to myself I don't have time to read this today. It's a long article. But, I made the mistake to read the first page, and then it was page two and three and four, and this amazing story of a black basketball coach who was a Catholic, in Berlin, Ohio, in the very midst of this Mennonite Amish country. The Amish are the conservative ones; they have horse and buggy. The Mennonites are the liberal ones; they have trucks. But, they're all very much of a piece. Wonderful people, strong community. Into that community comes a black Catholic basketball coach. I can't go into the whole story, but they resisted; he turned the other cheek. His presence was transforming. It's a wonderful, amazing story of how one individual, embodying a marvelous kind of grace and charisma, became a transforming angel in the midst of a whole community. Best of all, he brought trophies and big championships to Berlin, Ohio. Then, at age 48, a malignant brain tumor was found, and he died.

In his death vigil they came, surrounding his bed day and night. They came, past alumni who had gone across the country; the whole community was there day and night at his side. The whole community was thrown into a terrible grief at its loss. This black Catholic in Mennonite country was buried in St. Peter's Catholic Church in Millersburg, a few miles away, because, of course, there were no Catholic churches in Mennonite country, just like there are no black people. No Catholics, no blacks. A black Catholic now is being buried in a village far away and everybody goes, former players, present players, Mennonites, Amish, black Baptists who were his relatives, white Catholics who were part of his congregation - the whole congregation was full for his funeral. The article concludes that at the funeral, just before Communion, Father Ron Aubrey gazed across St. Peter's, Coach's Catholic church. The priest knew that what he wanted to do wasn't allowed and that he could get into trouble. But, he knew Coach, too, so he did it. Invited everyone to come up to receive the holy wafer. Steve Mullet glanced at his wife in her simple clothing and veil. "Why not?" she whispered. After all, the service wasn't the bizarre ritual they had been led to believe it was. Wasn't all that different from their own. Still, Steve hesitated. He glanced at Willy Mast. "Would Coach want us to?" "You got it, Bubs," said Willy. So, they rose and joined all the black Baptists and white Catholics pouring toward the altar. All the basketball players, all the Mennonites, young and old, busting laws left and right, busting straight into the kingdom of heaven.

Isn't that wonderful? I know about that. I know about that freedom to embrace, no longer having to worry that it's up to me to do God's work. Just to be able to witness to an amazing grace that is broad enough to cover the whole human

family and that will finally bring us all home. Ah, that's really to live - by grace, by George.