

Freedom's Gift: Grace

From the Lent sermon series: Freedom: Costly and Conflicted

Text: Isaiah 42:3; Luke 23:34

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Spring Lake, Michigan

Lent V, March 12, 1989

Transcription of the spoken sermon

He will not break a bruised reed, or snuff out a smoldering wick. Isaiah 42:3

Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing. Luke 23:34

Of all the remembrances of Jesus recorded in the Gospels, none is more startling than the prayer of Jesus on the cross,

Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.

There is perhaps no other word or action of Jesus that so embodies his understanding of God, of himself, of humankind. There is no clearer expression of his freedom, freedom to live out his own truth, freedom for God and freedom for others, than this prayer for the forgiveness of those who were crucifying him. *Father, forgive them...* With these words, we are shocked into awareness of how little we have learned the gospel and how poorly we have mediated the radical grace of God. *Father, forgive them...* Words that contradict every natural impulse of our being.

Jesus modeled out a magnificent freedom, a freedom that transcended outward circumstances, enabling him to live a life of active love and grace rather than anxious and hostile reaction. Impaled on a cruel Roman cross, he was yet free. Taunted and spat upon and held in derision, he responded with grace, absorbing the evil and not responding in kind, thus breaking the vicious cycle of vengeance.

Well, you say, but Jesus was different. Was he really? Is not the mystery of the incarnation, of God-with-us-in-Jesus, the story of God present in a genuinely human life? The freedom Jesus lived which issued in such grace was not some "given" of divine nature. No, it was a freedom won, a freedom costly and conflicted. To be sure, it was the result of his rootedness in God. Remember the scene at his baptism -the voice from heaven claims him, the Spirit descends upon

him. This was, to be sure, God's beloved Son. But, for all that, there was nothing magic about the process of Jesus gaining a sense of identity and vision for ministry.

In the Wilderness he struggled with the Tempter – what kind of ministry would he carry out and how would he do it?

John the Baptist had designs for him. John hoped he would fulfill Malachi's prediction of the return of Elijah who would bring fire, the judgment of refining fire, to the earth, signaling the end of the world, the damnation of the wicked and the vindication of the righteous.

Jesus had to overcome the obstacle of John's expectation.

Coming from the struggle in the wilderness, Jesus announced a ministry patterned after the Servant of Isaiah - a ministry of healing and liberation and Good News.

John was concerned and confused. He sent his disciples with the question, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?"

Without argument or offense, Jesus simply pointed to his work. He went on to affirm John and John's ministry but it was also clear that he was saying, "John, I am the one you were hoping for, but my mission is one of grace, not judgment."

He announced his ministry of grace and healing in his hometown synagogue and the radical grace far transcending the narrow exclusiveness of Jewish religion was an offense to the hometown crowd. If John was confused, they were angry, ready to lynch him on the spot.

But again, his inner strength and calm assurance rooted in God's call enabled him to move through the hostile crowd unharmed.

When the religious leaders called him mad, beside himself, his mother and brothers set out to seize him and bring him home. But, once again, without anger or breaking of relationship, he simply lived out of his own vision and truth and said, "My mother and my brothers and my sisters are those who do the will of God."

The masterful freedom with which Jesus lived was costly and conflicted. He lived out of an inner vision and thus was able to embody the grace of God in all circumstances of his life.

The grace of God Jesus mediated is the only power for human transformation. There are other ways and means of controlling and coercing human behavior, but only grace as the active outflowing of God's love really changes persons from the inside out. This was what Jesus' whole ministry was about - the promiscuous

proclamation of the prodigal love and grace of God. The portrait of Jesus' ministry in the Gospels makes that clear.

The Gospel portraits of Jesus portray the radical grace which was his hallmark. Just after reporting the question of the imprisoned John and Jesus' response, Luke tells the story of the dinner party given by Simon, the Pharisee. Without questioning Simon's motivation in inviting Jesus, it is clear that he wanted to see firsthand this teacher who was causing such a stir with his gracious ministry and who seemed to have so little regard for the punctilious religious observances which securely bound the sect of the Pharisees. Could Jesus really be a prophet? Was he someone that must be taken seriously or was he just another upstart itinerant preacher? He got his answer, but not as he expected. During dinner a prostitute came in off the street because she learned Jesus was there. She intended to anoint his feet with oil of myrrh, but her emotions overtook her and she began to weep, her tears falling on Jesus' feet. She wiped the tears with her hair, kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment – a scene of great tenderness and deep emotion, but a scene hardly in place in Simon's house or on such an occasion.

Embarrassed though he was, the rules of hospitality must prevail. Simon endured the scene. But at least his question about Jesus was answered. This was no prophet for, if he were, he would have known the immoral character of this woman and would hardly have tolerated such a display of bad taste. Jesus surmised Simon's surmisings and proceeded to tell a story of two debtors, one owing a small amount and the other a large amount. They were alike, however, in that neither one had anything with which to pay. The creditor therefore freely forgave them both their debts. Jesus' question to Simon, "Which one will love him most," was given the obvious response by Simon: "I should think the one that was let off most." Jesus said, "You are right," and then proceeded to apply the story to the present situation. Simon, Jesus pointed out, had been proper in his behaviour but had failed to offer the kind of courtesy and care that bespoke deep kindness and love.

The woman, however, had been a veritable gusher of emotion, revealing the deepest level of love. The application was obvious: Simon had little sense of gracious forgiveness; he loved little. But the woman whose sins were many had experienced grace and, consequently, loved deeply.

Certainly Luke used this incident to illustrate Jesus' ministry of grace and he set it against the background of John's question, "Are you the one or should we look for another?" The story illustrates the vision of ministry Jesus was living out, a ministry not of judgment but of grace, a ministry not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. Luke is the evangelist who recorded Jesus' inaugural message in his hometown – a Good News message. Here he shows that ministry in action, a ministry that offers grace and thus transforms human life. Jesus knew that only grace transforms; only grace changes persons.

Breathing the heady atmosphere of freedom that comes from surrender to the gracious God, Jesus was able to mediate grace that transformed persons. Whoever the woman was that wept over his feet, this was not the first time she encountered him. Somewhere, sometime his words of grace had found their mark in her soul. Perhaps he caught her eye or mediated grace in a touch that healed. She knew the forgiveness of sins and her outburst of love was the consequence. Jesus' freedom in God enabled him to mediate grace.

But what is at stake is bigger than the transformation of persons; grace mediated out of freedom alone can save the world. How tragic that the Church has never been able to live by radical grace for very long. Throughout the history of the Christian tradition there have appeared those who have glimpsed that grace, experienced the freedom grace bestows and out of that freedom proclaimed the grace of God in all its radicality. We think of Paul - the Pharisee who lived blamelessly according to the legal prescriptions of Jewish religion until grace broke upon him with all its liberating power, setting him free to announce the Kingdom's Good News. And Martin Luther's experience of grace gave him the inward strength and freedom to stand against the whole establishment of the Christian Church much as Jesus did in his day.

Still, for the most part, the Church has fallen back into the bondage of religious observance, legal prescription and self-righteous performance. There has been all too little joyous celebration of Good News, all too much gloomy demand and threatening coercion. The Church has not been a haven for the broken and battered, the fearful, the guilty, the crippled and the captive. Too often, it has crippled and cramped and burdened and broken. Rather than letting grace flow in a mighty tide, the impression the religious community has made on the world at large is one of self-righteousness, judgmental disgust and militant condemnation.

Religion has bad press in the world and it has richly deserved it, for it has been characterized by binding and breaking rather than by the commission of the Servant of the Lord in whom Jesus found his identity and vocation. Isaiah speaks of the Servant anointed with God's Spirit who

... will not break a bruised reed, or snuff out a smouldering wick.

Rather, the Servant is called,

*To open eyes that are blind,
to bring captives out of prison,
out of the dungeons where they lie in darkness.*

Reflect for a moment on religion in these waning years of the twentieth century. What a surprising phenomenon it is. With what resurgence it has stormed into center stage. As the century opened, one might have thought that the classic Protestant liberalism would alone survive, accommodated as it was to the

dominant culture; there seemed only a narrow gap between enlightened Western civilization and the Kingdom of God. Then the terrible disruption of violence and war shattered the easy optimism of the liberal vision. Yet, near mid-century, Dietrich Bonhoeffer could speak out of the chaos of a Nazi concentration camp of "a world come of age." But what do we see? An angry, militant fundamentalism under various names, yet one in spirit, whether Christian, Jewish or Islamic.

In my mind it is not at all clear that the world is more endangered by the threat of nuclear war than by the threat of zealous religion. It even seems more likely to me that the next great human catastrophe will evolve from some form of religious fanaticism than from a nuclear confrontation.

Let me remind you of the recent book by Charles Colson, *Kingdom in Conflict*, where he imagines a scenario in which a fundamentalist Christian is elected president and, because of his literal reading of certain Old Testament prophecies, fails to act to stave off an attack by a fanatical right-wing group of Jews on the Dome of the Rock - the sacred shrine of Islam in Jerusalem. It is an imagined scenario, but highly conceivable.

Of course, the most obvious representative of the religion of coercion and legal prescription is the Ayatollah Khomeini. I confessed in a previous message the anger that rises in my being when I see the totalitarian grip he holds on the masses and the vile hatred he breathes into their hearts. But the Ayatollah is only a radical example of what religion always tends to be - controlling, coercing, prescriptive, demanding, burdensome and binding. The Ayatollah has a book from the prophet who got the word straight from God. In that sense he differs little from the fundamentalist Jew or Christian. The book binds. Thus, when the book says he who defames the prophet must be killed, Khomeini without qualm of conscience says Salman Rushdie must die because his novel *Satanic Verses* defames the prophet of Islam.

Is it any different than the established Judaism of Jesus' day, which said we have a law and according to that law, he must die?

It is all of a piece - all cut from the same cloth.

But, Jesus was free of the bondage of religion, free of the coercive legalism and ritualism of the religious institution. Jesus was rooted in God and therefore free from every human bondage and, in that freedom, mediated God's grace to all without condition - the grace alone that can bring redemption to a broken world torn by ideological strife and religious hatred.

Rushdie must die, demands the Ayatollah. He defamed the prophet; kill him. Protect your religion; protect your prophet; protect your God.

See Jesus on the cross in anguish experiencing the very worst hell that humankind can create. As they mock him, taunt him, jeer and spit upon him, he

prays. He prays out of the freedom of his own truth. He prays out of the vision of his calling; he prays consistent with his whole ministry; he prays,

Father, forgive them...

For Jesus knows that it is grace alone that transforms persons; he knows it is only grace lived out in freedom that can save the world from its own destruction.

Father, forgive them, he prays.

Father, forgive us.

Set us free to forgive – to be the agents of such grace in our world.