

The Grace to Embrace the Future

Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 2:25-35

Richard A. Rhem
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I've been looking forward to this last Lord's Day of the year, this Christmastide Sunday. I knew a couple of months ago when I was trying to decide what the preaching would be that I would want to conclude the season with the story of Simeon, an old man with whom I can identify. I identify with him not because the description fits me. He was righteous and devout. But, I can identify with him in the sense that for all of his life he had been engaged in waiting and watching and praying and yearning for the realization of that realm of God, that rule of peace and shalom.

It is a beautiful story that Luke relates to us. He begins his Gospel with a preface that parades before us some of the beautiful old saints who, in their quiet way, had been praying and watching and waiting for God's big move, and Simeon is one of those beautiful examples who comes in old age, nudged by the Holy Spirit, into the temple to find there a child. He takes the child in his arms and he sees the future, and he praises God, saying, "I'm ready for my discharge. Now let your servant depart in peace." The literal language is that Simeon had been in the role of a sentinel watching for the kingdom. Now as his eyes beheld this child, the intuition of the Holy Spirit said, "The future is now in your arms in this little one," and Simeon blessed God and with great grace, embraced the future.

Grace is a word that we've used here over all these many years, thinking particularly of God's disposition to all people, that disposition of favor and kindness and mercy to all. But, I use grace with just a nuance of difference this morning in terms of the *style* of grace. Simeon manifests the style of grace in his ability to let go and to embrace the future in the child. Simeon is an example of the kind of style of grace that I think exemplifies the best in the religious life. He was one of those watching and waiting, had served faithfully, and finally was ready as the time came for his release and, casting his eyes upon the child, could embrace a future that he could not see, but in which he trusted because he believed in the God who was coming to expression in that child.

Another example of the style of grace would be the Apostle Paul who wasn't always such a gracious fellow but, in his relationship with the congregation at

Philippi, he had a special affectional relationship. Writing the letter from the prison in Rome as he was about himself to be executed anytime, knowing not just exactly what lie before him, he writes this affectional letter to them saying, "I thank God on every remembrance of you, praying for you constantly, convinced, confident that the God who has begun a good work in you will bring it to completion in the day of Jesus Christ." And on this last Sunday of the year 2003, in the midst of the Christmas season, I want to suggest to you that we are in the process of embracing the future, and it is my sense that, characteristically, we are embracing the future with the style of grace. The year before us is certainly a year of transition and that transition is a major kind of transition for any community. It reminds me of the fact that in that transition there is going to be both continuity and change.

It was a few years ago, remember, when we had that beautiful New Testament scholar, Bishop Stendahl here who made such an impact in his visit, who taught me that tradition was not simply something that shaped us out of the past, but that tradition was actually an instrument for both continuity and change, continuity in the sense that tradition as a living tradition has shaped us, has given us a sense of identity, has enabled us to know who we are and what we are about. It has given us a life map; it has given us direction.

But, that very tradition is also the instrument of change. If it is a living tradition, then it can never be frozen. It can never be set. It can never be absolutized. It is always in motion and those who have been shaped by a living tradition have found the grace and the freedom to continue to move, to continue to follow the whim and the wind of the spirit, mapping out uncharted ground and sailing into uncharted seas without fear, confident that the God of our past will be the God who will accompany us in the future. So, there is continuity and there is change.

I'll never forget Krister Stendahl's example of the boa constrictor. He himself, having come from Sweden and having served ten years as Bishop of Stockholm, was very much in the native Swedish mode where life continues to move, but sometimes he would visit relatives in Minnesota, and there an immigrant Swedish population had tended to freeze the tradition at the point at which they had immigrated. That's a characteristic of every immigrant people (except the Dutch, I think.) But he told about going to Minnesota, and it was like going back to Sweden many years before. He used the example of the boa constrictor who slithers out of its skin and the taxidermist grabs that skin and stuffs it and puts it in a glass case and says, "There's the snake." But, as Krister says, that's not the snake. The snake has slithered off into the future. That's a museum piece. Part of the tension within the Church historically has been to find that proper balance between continuity and change. The temptation is always to freeze, to absolutize, to remain secure and safe with that which is known and that which is familiar.

Perhaps you are aware of a current controversy in the country over the forthcoming film, *The Passion of Jesus Christ*, which has been bought and paid

for by Mel Gibson. There was an article in the *Grand Haven Tribune* yesterday, a pretty good article for the *Tribune*, as a matter of fact. Actually I have a paper on this whole controversy. Some scholars have looked at this film and have despaired of the nature of this film because it has all of the old passion story as, for example, the old Oberammergau Passion stories which were instruments by which feelings were aroused and anti-Semitism arose causing, as James Carroll in his *Constantine's Sword* has pointed out, causing people over the years in many instances to go out of Good Friday services and to abuse and persecute Jewish people. This film, apparently, has that kind of feel about it and there have been those who have been trying to negotiate with Mel Gibson.

But it turns out that Mel Gibson is a part of a traditional Catholic movement. His father is an outspoken advocate of that. This is a movement that rejects Vatican II, that very significant Council, which had been called by Pope John XXIII from 62 to 65, in which the Catholic Church said there is salvation beyond the Catholic Church and in which they specifically said the Jews collectively are not guilty of the death of Jesus. Very significant moves for that Church at that time. This traditionalist Catholic movement rejects Vatican II, rejects subsequent popes, is very suspicious of the Vatican, and they continue to say their mass in Latin; the priest continues to face the altar and all of that. That in itself is harmless enough. Let that be done and let that kind of mystery and aura flow over the people. But, when it becomes an aggressive movement that can create violence and discord, then that kind of traditionalism becomes a very bad thing.

The Church is always in that tension, moving between continuity and change, and we have made that journey. We have been on that journey and I have such confidence for us in the future because we have come to know and to experience that our passage together is, indeed, a passage, and it is a journey. We know from whence we have come and we know that we are moving into a future which is uncharted but in which we are confident, because the eternal God continues with us in the future as in the past. And so, as I think about Christ Community, as I think about a story that will be written, I realize that when that story is written I will have been a transition figure. I will have been a bridge person between that wonderful congregation that invited me back in 1971 which was quite traditional, conservative, and evangelical. That congregation and that posture to this present congregation that has moved from the kind of traditional, conservative, supernaturalism moving toward a religious naturalism in which we see God coming to expression in the whole cosmic tapestry and particularly in the word made flesh, the infinite becoming finite, in the human, understanding ourselves as the voice of God and the consciousness of God and the awareness of God, the awareness of that splendid, grand drama of 13.7 billion years. We've made a radical move. It has been gradual. It has been slow. It has been cautious. It has been persistent. But, we have moved a long way as a community.

But, *there is continuity* because in that new understanding of reality as we have come to understand it, we continue to find the clue to the mystery of the cosmos

in the face of Jesus Christ. We continue to find our road map in that life of Jesus. Simeon said, holding the child, "My eyes have seen God's salvation," and we continue in continuity with that Christian understanding of Jesus as the way and the truth and the life. But, there is change, as well, because we have quite a different conception of reality. We have been trying to find a way to say God, to re-imagine faith, to translate it into ways that resonate with our common human experience in the contemporary situation, and that means that I am simply a bridge, a transition person.

That also means that we haven't arrived. That means that we continue on a journey and we move into uncharted seas, but unafraid because we are confident, as Paul said, that the one who has begun a good work in our midst will bring it to completion in the day of Jesus Christ, because Paul expected at any day the curtain of history to come down. I would say we are confident because we believe the one who is at work within us will continue to be at work within us, moving us into the ongoing, unfolding of this cosmic journey, the contour of which we can not begin yet to conceive of, but with Simeon, our confidence is in God. With Paul, our confidence is in God. This congregation, having wallowed in grace, has learned the style of grace. I hope I'll hear you repeating back to me again and again and again - *What would be the style of grace at this next juncture*, and this juncture, and this juncture, unafraid, confident, positive, moving with a style of grace.

Growing old is wonderful and it is really a lucky person who can say that. The down side of old age has been hugely exaggerated. I find that each decade of my life has been richer and more exciting than the one before and there are such advantages. On Thanksgiving we had all the kids over and I said to Nancy, "Do you think they would help me get that Christmas tree at least upstairs?" Well, no more said than done. The boys put the branches up and there were the granddaughters winding the lights around and when they all left, the tree was a *fait accompli*. Wonderful! Never had it so good. Then they were all over for Christmas and they said, "Bumpa, Grammy, do you think we should take the tree down?" And we said, "Oh, no, we can do that." Well, Saturday the phone rang and Lynn said, "We're coming over to take the tree down." I said, "Wonderful." And within an hour the whole thing was done and Christmas was over. It was just so beautiful.

I hang out on Tuesdays at Duba's with Duncan Littlefair, age 91, and Lester DeKoster, age 88, and I'm always impressed with the perspective of many years, the wisdom, the equanimity with which the ongoing crises of the world are encompassed. I've seen in Duncan Littlefair, particularly, that zest for life that doesn't abate, that passion, that passionate engagement, and he often speaks of the grand privilege of such a long perspective in the human story. Wonderful! And I want to say with old Simeon, "Dear God, I've seen the future and it's good."

Do you know that in 1971 when you invited me back I was 35 years old? In February I turned 36 and began in March. Do you know that Ian Lawton is 35 years old, in February he will turn 36 and will begin in March? Do you suspect that the miracle will happen all over again? I do. I can't hold that boy in my arms and look at him, but my eyes will see the future. And we've not arrived. You will find that I've only been a person of transition, moving into a future that even I cannot conceive of, but a future into which I, with you, will move with confidence and joy.

I know that transition has its wrenching dimensions, which is normal, natural and healthy. I learned personally something of that a few weeks ago with John and Brenda Fuchs. John was on the Operations Council and the Board of Trustees. He's been a dear friend; I've come to love him dearly. They moved to Florida. In the narthex before they left, I said, "John, I'm really going to miss you," and he said, "Oh, we're coming back. We're coming back." And from that moment I knew that he was putting me off. He wasn't allowing me to say, "I'm sad. I'm going to miss you here every week." And I learned something. And so, you can say, "I'm sad." You can say, "It's going to be different." You can say anything you want to. It's okay. And I won't say to you what I have been saying over and over again. "We're going to be here. We're not going anywhere."

No, we have not-arrived, and with all of the continuity that will accompany us, there will be change and that is the way of life. This community will engage it with a style of grace. Say it after me - *The Style of Grace*. Once more - *The Style of Grace*.

Aah, may we never betray it; may we never deny it; may we always embody it.

Christmas Eve - wasn't it beautiful? It was so magical, mystical, meaningful, and I decided that what we needed was just a moment of silence with the lights down and only the candlelight as the Christ Candle was lighted. The silence was eloquent. The silence caused us to be awash with the presence of God. It was so magnificent.

Yesterday, Lynn said to me, "Dad, did you stay down so long because you couldn't get up?" I said, "I was worried about getting up, but I stayed down so long because I didn't want the moment to end." It was so beautiful, so magical, so mystical, the presence of God was tangible, and it will continue to be as we find ever new ways to express it and experience it and, in it all, move into that future with the style of grace.