

“Grace That Leads Nowhere” 2 Corinthians 6: 1-2, 11-13 Rev. Janet Chapman 6/24/18

Imagine if you will a group of young ministers sitting around a table sharing horror stories of balancing work and family life. It was a way to blow off steam as we, all associate ministers of relatively large midwestern churches, sought to hold the youth and children of God in our hearts while at the same time keeping our families in tact. One youth minister shared how when he was first married he and his wife used to have one-sided fights because the talking was all his, the crying all hers. He would beg her to speak, to explain what was wrong, and when she just cried, he would stomp around the house and sigh loudly. Finally, when the tears stopped and she opened her mouth, out came this long list of grievances, too many to count, with times and dates attached to each one. Shocked at the outburst, he was speechless and resorted to that final weapon – he’d storm out slamming the door. But one cold November evening, he did just that and got his coat caught in the door. As mad as he could be, he dug in his pockets for the key only to realize he had left it on the front table. He had 2 options – either he could shed the coat and pace the night unprotected, which did have some merit as he could play the martyr card. It would reflect how truly hurt he was, but the problem was his wife wouldn’t see his pain and suffering being lived out in the below freezing temperature so what good was that? Or else he could ring the doorbell. Ten minutes of shivering convinced him which was the more expedient choice. He rang the bell. He saw his wife through the door’s window coming down the stairs and approaching the door. She peeped out and instantly understood the situation and burst out laughing as she opened the door. He was mortified as she laughed so hard that tears streamed down her face and she had to put her hand on his shoulder to hold her up. The irony could have brought a smile to his face, he could have laughed it off as a gift of God, arranging an armistice, staging a reconciliation between spouses,

a gift more sweet than all the rains in heaven, but what did this dummy do instead? With an indignant “Hmmpff,” he grabbed the key and swished out the door more grandly than before.

This story would be easier to tell if I could just laugh at that dummy, at that fool who would rather stomp off angry than swallow his pride, or his righteousness, or himself. It would be easier to preach if I could just say, “Look at that idiot,” “Look at those dummies in Corinth,” “look at them,” I am so glad I am not like them; letting little things, letting past things, letting petty things get in the way of forgiveness and celebration. Look at those idiots, I want to say, as if I have never been an idiot myself. But when I hear Paul’s words, “We urge you not to accept the grace of God in vain,” I know all too well what he is talking about. And more than likely, the Corinthians do as well. Way off there in Greece, they have heard the news about this Jewish Savior, this gift of God not only to the Jews but also to them, to the Corinthians. They have accepted the grace of God, the love of God, which all by itself gives them life. They know the story, they know Paul, they have received the gift of grace – but they run the risk that it won’t show, that it won’t make a difference, that it won’t lead anywhere. This is what Paul is speaking of when he warns about accepting God’s grace in vain. It is grace without an end, without a purpose. It is empty and doesn’t fill you, doesn’t overflow in your life, doesn’t seep out.

One of Soren Kierkegaard’s great stories comes to mind, especially as we experience dangerous fire conditions. There once was a small town who had a beloved fire chief who led the fire brigade. One day there was a fire and the chief rounded up his brigade and they rushed to the building that had flames pouring out from the windows. Much to his surprise, the fire chief couldn’t get to the fire because interposed between him and the burning building were

several hundred people with water pistols. From time to time, the people would smile at each other and squirt their pistols at the raging inferno. Kierkegaard asks us, "So what does the fire chief say?" He yes, "What are you doing here? Why do you have water pistols? What are you trying to accomplish?" A spokesman for the group answers, "We've all gathered here to support your efforts, good sir. We all believe in the good work you do in this community, and each of us has come to make a humble contribution." With that, they wear pseudo fire jackets, pick up their water pistols, point them at the fire and squeeze the triggers, squirting water at the flames. The spokesman says, "We all could be doing more" (Squirt, squirt) "But the little we do, we gladly do," (Squirt, squirt) "just to show we are with you" (squirt, squirt). The fire chief responds, "Get out of here! Fires like this are not for well-meaning people who just want to wear a jacket, squirt a water pistol, and feel good about themselves. Such situations demand real commitment from those ready to risk their lives in putting out the flames!" And the story asks the question how many of us truly don't care, we just want to be seen as caring. How many of us have received the gift of grace and done nothing of substance with it?

The strange thing about the grace of God is that we can accept it without changing anything about our lives. According to James Van Tholen, the Corinthians are proving that exact reality. They are having trouble reconciling; they are slamming the door and stomping off instead of coming together. And part of their problem is connected to Paul, with whom they are not all that crazy about. It seems Paul's ministry to First Church Corinth hasn't gone as smoothly as everybody planned. For some reason, there are folks, some false teachers, who like to point out things that make Paul look bad, whether they're true or not. So when he said he would come for two short visits to them but instead made it one long one, these people

talked about how Paul couldn't be trusted. They said he wasn't a real apostle and he was pocketing the giving envelopes as well. So Paul writes this long paragraph in chapter 6 about his ministry, defending himself, and then encourages the Corinthians not to let the rumors about him make them different. He reminds them to not close off their hearts, not diminish their whole-hearted, sacrificial commitment to God, don't focus on the petty stuff or you will accept God's grace in vain.

I've been an idiot like in the youth minister's story more than once in my life, but once or twice, I have gratefully realized the boundless grace of God and then have granted grace to another, given forgiveness to someone who wronged me, refused to remind someone of their big mistake who really didn't need to hear all about it again. And those few times I've given grace, the results have amazed me because of that beautiful difference one gracious moment can make in a life. Philip Yancey tells a story from Ernest Hemingway where a Spanish father decides to reconcile with his son who had run away to Madrid. Now remorseful, the father takes out a full page ad in the newspaper which says, "Paco, meet me at Hotel Montana noon Tuesday, all is forgiven, love, Papa." Paco is a common name in Spain and when the father goes to the square, he finds 800 young men named Paco waiting for their fathers. Grace is what will change the world; it already has in Christ, but it is not done doing so. There are so many places still to be changed by grace, not the least of which is our country. If we don't reclaim the role of grace and love in our interactions with one another, we do not stand a chance as a society. I remember the story of my friend and I smile, because our pride and stubbornness are indeed ridiculous. But I also remember it, and realize that when stomping off, shouting, blaming, and holding back forgiveness are our habits, it's not funny at all. When these are our habits, the

grace of God has somehow misfired. And we are missing the day of salvation. And we are missing any real chance to make a difference not just for our country, but for ourselves. And ultimately, we're missing any real chance to know our God. So learn the language of grace, and speak it in every way you can. Because then you will know the grace of God that is in you, and our world will as well. That is how we can make a difference and that is how grace will lead us home.