



April 1, 2007

Philippians 2:5-11
Luke 19:28-40

“Grace on a Donkey”

One of my favorite authors is Philip Yancy, and my favorite of his books is titled: **What’s So Amazing about Grace?** I understand that some of you have read the book in an adult study group here at Baker. It’s a great book to read during Lent and the Easter season, because it is about GRACE: the undeserved, unearned, unchanging, constant and unconditional love of God--- the love he has for each one of us.

Why is Lent a good time to think about grace?

- Because Lent prepares us for Easter..... and Easter is all about grace.
- Jesus’ whole life was about grace; his teachings are all about grace.
- God is all about grace and grace is all about God.
- And our greatest temptation is “ungrace”—as individuals and even as the church.

I’d like to share a few passages with you.

Yancey writes:

Grace did not come to me initially in the forms or the words of faith. I grew up in a church that often used the word but meant something else. Grace, like so many religious words, had been leached of meaning so that I could no longer trust it. (p. 41)

I came out of a Southern fundamentalist culture that frowned on coed swimming, wearing shorts, jewelry or makeup, dancing, bowling, and reading the Sunday newspaper.....

...I attended a Bible college where, in an era of miniskirts, deans legislated a skirt length below the knee. If a student wore a skirt of dubious length, the Dean of Women would require her to kneel on the floor. Slacks on women were forbidden except during hayrides, when they must be worn under skirts for modesty's sake. A rival Christian college went so far as to ban polka-dot dresses, since the dots might draw attention to a "suggestive" part of the body. Male students at our school had their own rules, including a restriction against hair covering the ears and a ban on facial hair. Dating was strictly regulated: although I got engaged before my senior year, I could see my fiancée only during the dinner hour and could not kiss her or even hold hands.

Some students dropped out of school, some gladly kept the rules, and some learned to fake it, leading a double life. I survived in part because of the insights I gained in reading Erving Goffman's classic work, Asylums. The great sociologist examined a series of what he termed "total institutions", including monasteries, private boarding schools, insane asylums, prisons and military academies. Each of these had a long list of arbitrary, depersonalizing rules which they used as a means to break down individuality and enforce conformity. Each was a finely tuned system of ungrace. (pp. 193-4)

I first experienced grace through music. At the Bible college...I was viewed as a deviant. People would publicly pray for me and ask me if I needed exorcism. ... Doors to the dormitory were locked at night, but fortunately I lived on the first floor. I would climb out the window of my room and sneak into the chapel, which contained a nine-foot Steinway grand piano.I would sit for an hour or so each night and play Beethoven's sonatas, Chopin's preludes, and Schubert's impromptus... My mind was confused, my body was confused, the world was confused--- but here I sensed a hidden world of beauty, grace, and wonder light as a cloud and startling as a butterfly wing. (p.41)

I hesitate to write about the dangers of legalism at a time when both church and society seem to be careening in the opposite direction. At the same time I know nothing that represents a greater threat to grace. Legalism may "work" in an institution such as a Bible college or the Marine Corps.... But there is a cost.....:ungrace does not work in a relationship with God. (p. 195)

Grace is everywhere, like lenses that go unnoticed because you are looking through them. Eventually God gave me eyes to notice the grace around me. I became a writer... in an attempt to reclaim words that had been tarnished by graceless Christians.....I came to see that the image of God I had been raised with was woefully incomplete. I came to know a God who is, in the words of the

psalmist, “a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.” (p. 42)

That free, spontaneous love of God became flesh and dwelt among us in Jesus of Nazareth. The source of grace is God. He brought it to us himself, so we might “catch it” firsthand. Then, WE must LIVE GRACE (not perfectly—never perfectly, but enough! Enough!) so that others can catch it.

Christ’s Spirit is with us, within us, among us--- always offering grace and encouraging us to do the same. **THIS ALONE CAN SAVE THE WORLD. ONLY GRACE MELTS UNGRACE.**

Let’s think a moment about Jesus and how he brought grace to us. The group that made Jesus angriest was the group that he was most like, at least externally. Jesus was a lot like the Pharisees. He obeyed the Torah (first 5 books of our Bible), he quoted leading Pharisees and often supported their views in public arguments. But he often used his harshest words to confront the Pharisees: snakes! Brood of vipers! Hypocrites! Fools! Blind guides! Whitewashed tombs!

Why was Jesus so angry with them? They were a lot like committed Christians in many ways: They devoted their lives to God, offered a precise tenth or tithe of their income to God, obeyed every minute law of their Scriptures, and sent out missionaries to gain new converts. They held firm to traditional values and were usually model citizens.

What was the problem? Philip Yancey puts it this way:

Jesus’ fierce denunciations of the Pharisees show how seriously he viewed the toxic threat of legalism. It’s dangers are elusive, slippery, hard to pin down, and I have scoured the New Testament in search of them- especially in Luke 11 and Matthew 23, where Jesus morally dissects the Pharisees....I believe these dangers represent as great a threat (now) as they did (then). Legalism takes different forms now than it did in my childhood, but by no means has it gone away.

Overall, Jesus condemned the legalist’s emphasis on externals..... Leo Tolstoy, who battled legalism all his life, understood the weaknesses of a religion based on externals.... According to Tolstoy, all religious systems tend to promote external rules, or moralism. In contrast, Jesus refused to define a set of rules that his followers could then fulfill with a sense of satisfaction. One can never “arrive” in light of such sweeping commands as “Love the Lord your God

with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind..... Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (pp. 196-7)

This is Palm Sunday. This is when we remember Jesus entering Jerusalem just before his arrest, betrayal, and death on the cross.

What does this Palm Sunday event have to do with all this grace business? Everything! Who was it who rode into Jerusalem on that donkey?

THE BRINGER OF GRACE

THE SOURCE OF GRACE

GRACE INCARNATE... GRACE IN THE FLESH

THE ONE WHO NEVER ABANDONED GRACE

-not when arrested

-not when betrayed

-not when denied

-not when whipped

-not when humiliated and spat on

-not when stripped, not when bleeding,

-not when stumbling along a rocky road with a heavy cross on his back

-not when nails were pounded into his hands, his feet

-not when parched and dying on the cross.

HE NEVER TURNED AWAY FROM GRACE.

And what was OUR response to this Bringer of Grace? This One who WAS grace?

We killed him.

We might want to say, “You know, it was just the bad guys who killed him. The good people who were praising him and shouting “Hosanna”, they were just scared, hiding in their homes. If THEY had their way, he’d have been KING.”

Imagine for a moment, **what if** THAT had happened. How long would he have pleased them? HOW would Jesus have been their king? Well, GRACE would have been the king. Let’s play with that idea a bit. From what the Bible teaches, I picture things like this:

-Jesus inviting Herod’s sons to the palace for a banquet, seating them in places of higher honor than his disciples;

-Jesus instructing his royal advisors to meet the guests for another banquet with basins and towels ready to wash the guests' feet;

-those same advisors recoiling as these guests turn out to be lepers from the ragged shanty community outside town;

-Jesus appointing the once demon-possessed Mary Magdalene as his second in command.....

You see what I mean? Even the good guys might not be pleased for very long—not with this king they'd thought was so great. Because he was GRACE, you see. And grace never plays by the world's rules.

The Good News in all this is EASTER. Because Easter tells us we can't do it. We can't kill Grace. Grace is even stronger than our homicidal actions. Grace wins.

But for this Holy Week ahead of us, let's do some soul searching. Grace wins. We can't kill it. But we can deal it some heavy blows on the way to Easter Resurrection. And we can cause suffering. We break God's heart, you know. And still he loves us. With his grace. It really is amazing, isn't it?

God's grace is yours. Receive it. Drink it in. Let God help you triumph over the UNGRACE that tempts you at every turn. Walk soberly and walk carefully. God will help you. God help us all. Amen.

(Give Journey to Jerusalem results. Explain Holy Week booklets- invite all to participate in ALL the services, for they will bring alive the grace of God as we journey with Christ through his last days.)