

# ***The Need for Grace***

**Exodus 32:7-14**

When I stood in the pulpit last Sunday, I wasn't certain how the world would look come this time the following week. As you recall, President Obama was still lobbying Congress to support him in his plan to strike Syria militarily, even though a majority of Americans opposed it. At the time, many of us were concerned that, even without prior authorization from Congress, missiles would be launched toward Damascus and other strategic points in Syria, likely setting off a series of events that would quickly escalate, unraveling out of control toward catastrophe. The American public was deeply concerned about another protracted U.S.-led war in the Middle East. Coming during the week of 9-11, with shadows of the World Trade Center to Benghazi, a military strike against yet another Muslim country (the seventh since 2001!) seemed destined to produce more harm than good.

Now the week has passed and, fortunately, our worst fears were unrealized. Like Saul on the road to Damascus, a light has dawned upon our President. The prospects this morning on how this crisis will be resolved seem much less bleak, largely due to the agreement reached yesterday by the Russian foreign minister and our Secretary of State, John Kerry, outlining a process where Syria would become a signatory of the U.N. chemical weapons ban and then turn over their stockpile to an international authority for accountability, removal, and ultimate disposal. With Russia's credibility on the line to keep Assad in compliance, it has become enough for President Obama to stand down and see if they meet the test. That will be determined

over the coming weeks and months. If it works out, then instead of the escalation of war, a diplomatic process will have a chance to diminish hostilities—something that would have seemed dubious even just a few days ago.

As I see it, what we witnessed and experienced was nothing less than a measure of *grace*—a needed mercy that transformed a stubbornly hopeless situation, interrupting a pattern of hostility and confrontation and turning things around to prevent a worse, if not fatal, outcome. A crisis was averted using a little wisdom. For President Obama, it has given him another option to military force; for President Putin, it has suddenly catapulted him to international relevancy; for the Syrian people, it has saved the lives that would have been lost; for the American public, it has delivered us from the burden of yet another war. For many, this reprieve has been an answer to prayer and for everyone, it was a grace desperately needed.

I recognize it takes a theologian or preacher to characterize it as “grace,” perhaps because people normally employ the word, not in the realpolitik of life, but in personal ways and circumstances. Grace is something viewed as virtuous, charitable, undeserved, and, in many cases, unwarranted in human relations. Grace is an act of tolerance or clemency—a gift offered by one who has the power to hold another accountable, but instead offers pardon, instead of punishment, to encourage a changing of ways. We use it in reference to the fortunes of life (“by the grace of God”) or misfortune (“This person fell from grace”). Grace is a belief that everyone benefits when an offender, when caught in the wrong, is given another chance to do right.

Grace doesn't just pardon the offender from punishment; it also is something that protects those who stand in judgment from making rash errors that result in more harm than good. A merciful pause helps the one who is upset over an incident to calm down and look for better options; it allows the leader who is caught up in righteous indignation to not overreact or inappropriately condemn an offender before considering all the facts or listening to other perspectives. Grace is a mercy that recognizes that taking no action is preferable to foolish or harmful actions that only compound problems and extend pain. Grace is a healthy way to get out of a messy situation.

You and I are acquainted with this in personal terms, particularly in many households. When a child acts out and, as an adult, all your emotional buttons have been pushed, it's easy to react in ways that do more harm than good. We lash out in anger. People do what comes naturally—they use whatever force at their disposal to try to control and put into their place the one who has upset them. They scold, they scream, sometimes they hit; they react in aggressive ways to intimidate the other. However, it often works against them in the long run. Overreaction and especially the use of violence usually build resentment in the other, not trust and respect.

In all fairness, most people who are abusive verbally or physically aren't inherently evil, they just haven't learned how to control their rage or reactions to provocation, often because they, too, were treated in a similar way by someone else, perhaps a parent. Things have a way of repeating themselves, don't they? Trying to manipulate or control another by force may vent the emotions, but it rarely results in cooperation that lasts; instead, it sows the seeds of

rebellion—from a household to a society. We have to remember that. The violence and human rights abuses in international conflicts is not just due to retaliation and retribution; it may very well be rooted in some way to the manner in which people have been treated in personal and individual circumstances. Violence begets violence. Grace, then, is a moral power that intervenes and interrupts the cycle of anger and violence haunting generation after generation, providing perspective and a better option in times of stress and rage.

Now this is the lesson we're to take from our lectionary story from Exodus, except we may arrive there not in the way the storyteller and traditional interpretations have intended. I'll explain in a moment. The story tells of when Moses confronted the Israelites who have grown increasingly upset with their circumstances and skeptical over Moses' leadership. They rebel by turning to other forms of guidance reflected in the creation of the golden idol (which, incidentally, was likely an attempt by the Israelites to reach God through the focal point of some glorious image—not unlike icons, statues, and other ornaments—which are not intended to be worshipped as such, but to serve as a window to the divine being, who is otherwise unseen. That is different than idol worship, which is a belief that the physical object itself has power and authority in one's life, e.g., money!). In any case, the central problem facing Moses was the expression of distrust people had for his leadership, which was absent in their time of crisis and waiting.

Though we only read a portion of the full narrative as our lectionary text for the day, the larger context demonstrates quite well the human struggle with anger and righteous indignation and the

need for grace. This isn't as clear in the portion we read, since it states explicitly that it was God who was incensed over the people's rebellion and who had to be calmed down by Moses' intervention. I grant you, the traditional interpretation, based on the reading of the text, is that Moses is the one who makes the plea for mercy, who seeks to avert a disaster by providing God perspective, and intervening on behalf of the people so they would not be subject to divine wrath. This line of thinking presents an interesting theological idea that God interacts with human beings in such a way that a human can change the mind and perspective of God which, though very personal and quaint, seems rather odd, especially if God is omniscient and omnipotent—all-knowing and all-powerful! It doesn't make sense that God is the one who lacks perspective and seeks to overreact with righteous indignation. That, to me, is a human trait—a weakness in human character, not the divine character.

That's why I think this story may have more to do with Moses' own struggle and reaction to rebellion, than a change in heart in God. This isn't divine anger that is being abated, not God's attitude needing an adjustment; but rather this is Moses' own internal narrative expressing his struggle with how to respond to such annoying defiance—a struggle he must have had as he came off his mountaintop experience and returned to the valley. Why? If you read beyond our text for today, Moses ended up betraying his own sound wisdom and counsel to God:

Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and [Jacob], your servants...

Take the high road; gain perspective; remember your overall objectives; don't destroy everything right now, just because you're upset that your warnings weren't taken seriously!

For what did Moses do? Though he saw the need for grace, once he left the mountain, he reacted with fierce anger, smashing the stone tablets to the ground out of frustration and grinding the golden image into dust—the symbol of their rebellion. Moses was justified in his anger to be sure, out of frustration at the very least. But instead of figuring out why they were upset with him, why they were rebelling against his leadership, why they didn't trust his moral authority and relationship with God, he allowed his righteous anger to fly uncontrollably, eventually resulting in a brutal slaughter, employing the Levites to purge those who rebelled against him—an act of terrible violence which revealed that Moses not only acted like the tyrants of history, but that he hadn't absorbed the meaning of the very commandments he had seen carved into the tablets he had broken! Why wouldn't the sixth commandment, "Thou shall not kill," not apply here?

In my opinion, the ancient storyteller did a great disservice by equating Moses' own moral weakness with the mind and heart of God, blessing this angry reaction as religiously righteous and morally justified, even by God who would then have acted with less integrity to the divine word than the Israelites, themselves, were called to express!

You see, I think this story has more to do with the human inability to extend grace, than God's. In fact, I think God's will and word were exactly what were thwarted and destroyed—symbolized by

the broken tablets—when Moses didn't even listen to his own better judgment and allowed his righteous rage to determine his actions. How otherwise can we square this reaction with Jesus Sermon on the Mount insight into how anger lies at the heart of violence?

If Moses had listened to his own counsel to God (or as I take it, that it was God's counsel to Moses' conscience!), there would have been less blood on his hands and likely, less trouble for him and Israel down the road. The need for grace was called for and apparent, and in my estimation, to assume otherwise, is exactly the type of reasoning and posturing that keeps human civilization from learning the lessons it should from its own bloody and brutal past (and often justifying violence with religious texts!).

Perhaps that's why "grace" is such a central component to and characteristic of the proclamation of Hebrew prophets and of the Gospel itself. It's that later word—the wise and needed guidance from on high, yet forged out of human experience—that critiques the past and tells the present generation to think before they act—to read into the consequences of their behavior and choices—to be merciful and not let their anger haunt the spirit of their children or add to the sorrows of their elders.

It is grace born out of divine love that embraces the entirety of humankind and judges truth in ways uncharacteristic of so many human beings. It is grace that embodies the deepest desire for redemption and second chances. It is grace that leads people to love their enemies, to do good to those who harm them, and who will not allow those who are victimized by another's power and authority to remain silent, voiceless, and without hope. It is grace that saves the

wretches that we all can be at times, in order that we may appeal to our better selves, our nobler values, our more virtuous characteristics, so that we will act in ways appropriate and wise, taking actions that heal instead of harm. It is the grace we all need to make it through life as best as we can, from the greatest power on earth to the humblest soul among us.

When you and I need such grace to give us pause in times of anger to gain perspective and to cultivate a heart of mercy, compassion, and wisdom, may we pray the prayer that speaks so well to the depths of our human need:

God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.<sup>1</sup>

And if we so act, we will, then, live in the hope for which we yearn.

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<sup>1</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Serenity Prayer."