**Grace**

I have never been to seminary. I'm not sure if that's more of a plus or a minus. Seminaries have a way of establishing a rigidity of thinking that isn't particularly conducive to exploring faith. I have read between 500 to 1000 books on faith and religion, ranging from the very conservative to the very liberal, and ranging from Christianity to Buddhism. What bothers me tremendously is that the most visible face of Christianity in the US is a Christianity that appears to be judgmental, intolerant, and divisive. This is inconsistent with the authentic teachings of Jesus as seen in the Christian Gospels. The need that people seem to have to condemn and criticize and divide people into good and evil contradicts the God of grace that Jesus brought into the world. Let us explore this concept of grace that Jesus taught and modeled.

Grace is one of those “churchy” words that many people use, but cannot define. The way I define grace is God's unconditional, undeserved, and unearned love and forgiveness. Grace means that there is nothing you can do to make God love you more, and there is nothing you can do to make God love you less. This is a very difficult concept for humankind to accept. It contradicts every sense of justice that we have accepted from growing up in the secular world. We feel that if we work hard, live a moral life, and go to church regularly, that this should earn us special favor in the eyes of God. We feel that people who live an immoral life or participate in criminal enterprises should be punished by God. However, these feelings that we have are not supported by the teachings of Jesus. In fact, the people who were least able to accept Jesus' concept of grace were the Pharisees, the most religious people of his day. I would propose that this is still true today, that the people who consider themselves most religious, or righteous if you will, tend to be least accepting of the God of grace.

Let's first go back to the time of Jesus and see how Jesus brought this concept of grace into the world. There are many parables in which Jesus teaches us about grace. The one of which you are most familiar, the Story of the Prodigal Son, is perhaps the clearest example. The prodigal son is welcomed back unconditionally by his father. Surely if we were this child's father, there would be conditions placed upon his return. We would tell him that his return was conditional upon good behavior, that he would have to rebuild trust that was no longer there. We would make him apologize, not just to us but also to his older brother who worked twice as hard in his absence. We would in all likelihood demand retribution for his wasting of his inheritance. But we see none of these conditions within the story as Jesus tells it. The son is welcomed back with great joy, and given immediate, unconditional love and forgiveness. The only requirement for the prodigal son to receive this was for him to get to a place in his life where he was willing to open his heart and receive it.

Jesus doesn’t just teach grace, he models it, over and over again. The most religious people of Jesus’ day were the Pharisees. They were the descendents of the "holy ones" who rebelled against the Greek occupation of Israel more than 300 years prior to Jesus’ birth. In Jewish society at that time, the Pharisees were seen as righteous, holy and favored by God. The Pharisees thought they knew how one established a connectedness to God. It was clear in their minds. You obeyed Mosaic Law as established in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. In addition to following these 613 laws, one observed additional holiness codes and rituals that were established through tradition. Anyone who could not adhere to the rigorous standards established by the Pharisees was labeled "unclean" and placed in a "sinner" class. It is into this society that Jesus arrives. This upstart carpenter from Nazareth proceeds to rebel against all barriers, whether they are religious, political, or established through social convention, that divide people into worthy and unworthy, acceptable and unacceptable, clean and unclean, righteous and sinner. Jesus proclaims that God is not about holiness codes and rituals, but rather about love, forgiveness, and compassion. He brings God's grace into the world by showing love and compassion to category after category of individuals who were shunned by the religious leaders of the day.

Prostitutes and adulteresses were shunned by Jewish society in Jesus’ day. According to Mosaic Law they could be stoned. However, Jesus approaches these individuals with love and forgiveness. Does this mean that he condones their behavior? No, but he realizes that nobody is brought closer to God through condemnation. Not once do we hear Jesus criticize or condemn people of low moral standards. Time after time we see him offer them unconditional love, because he knows that love transforms in ways that condemnation cannot. We see this transformative power in the Samaritan woman at the well who is so overwhelmed by Jesus’ love that she races back to her community to tell everyone about this man who accepted her unconditionally. She becomes his first apostle. We see this transformative power again in the prostitute who breaks into a dinner party at the home of Simon the Pharisee. She is so overwhelmed by Jesus' unconditional acceptance of her that she anoints him with her most expensive possession, perfume and washes his feet with her tears and hair.

Tax collectors are another group shunned by the religious establishment. Taxpayers were basically state sanctioned thieves. We may think the same way about the IRS now, but in the case of tax collectors in Jesus' day the sentiment was actually true. Tax collectors were allowed to overcharge and collect for themselves, as long as Rome received its required share of tax revenue. Tax collectors were seen as despicable. The vast majority of people in Jewish society at that time were peasants, barely subsiding. The collection of these taxes would have destroyed the lives of many people. One would expect, that Jesus would likewise condemn and criticize tax collectors and demand that they pay retribution in order to be acceptable in the eyes of God, but this is not what Jesus does. Once again, we see him accept them with immediate, undeserved love and forgiveness. "Matthew, come over here. Let's get together at your house tonight. Invite your friends." "Zacchaeus, come down out of that tree. We’re having dinner at your house tonight." Either Jesus really liked to party, or he knew that they could be transformed by establishing a relationship with them and showing them acceptance, not condemnation.

A third group of people shunned by the religious elite of Jesus' day would have included a diverse group, basically anybody who did not believe in God the way the Jews believed in God. This would include the Romans and other pagan nations surrounding Israel, the

Canaanite, non-Jewish population within Israel, and the Samaritans. These groups did not maintain the traditional beliefs and practices of authentic Judaism, as practiced by proper Jews. Surely God would rebuke these people. However, time and again we see Jesus accept these outsiders based solely on their willingness to have an open heart to receiving his love. Any upstanding Jew would hold a Samaritan in contempt. They were half- breeds, intermarrying Assyrians when they were conquered. They did not practice Orthodox Judaism. They even worshiped at the wrong Temple. However, Jesus makes it clear that he cares little about what you believe. He embraces the Samaritan woman at the well simply because she has a willingness to accept his love. He tells the Story of the Good Samaritan in order to demonstrate that God's kingdom is all about compassion, not religious practice. At one point he heals 10 lepers and points out to his disciples that only the Samaritan leper returned to thank him. He heals the Roman Centurion's servant, the Canaanite woman's daughter, and the demon possessed (or psychiatrically disturbed) man in the Gentile region of Decapolis. When he does so he usually makes a point of saying that it is their faith which has made them well but it should be clear that this is not faith in terms of believing certain things about God but rather simply a willingness in their heart to receive God.

The last category of people that I want to look at is a group that surely deserved God's wrath in the eyes of every Jew, the Romans. The Jews had a long history of empires conquering them. In succession they were conquered by the Assyrian's, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and then finally the Romans. In each case cities were ransacked and destroyed and slaves were taken. Only a few years before Jesus’ birth the Romans destroyed the capital of Galilee, a city called Seppharis located only 4 miles from Nazareth. Jesus would have been intimately attuned to that recent history. It would have been etched in his mind as he was growing up. Yes, the Romans were certainly the "evildoers" of Jesus’ day. Surely they deserved God's wrath, his vengeance. In fact there was a group of Jews who felt that way, the Zealots, who believed that a military solution was in order, that Israel could only regain its former glory through violent retribution. However, Jesus makes it clear that this is not the nature of God. His teachings include statements such as "Blessed be the peacemakers." and "It has been said an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth but I say you must love your enemies." Not once does he seek justice by rising up in violent revolt against Rome. Jesus understands that violence only begets more violence, a lesson that humankind never seems to learn. We see Jesus continue his pattern of transformation through love and compassion in his encounter with the Roman Centurion. The Roman Centurion was a career military officer in charge of approximately 100 men. A Roman Centurion comes to Jesus to ask him to heal his ailing servant. Remembering the childhood stories of the horrors of Seppharis, we would expect Jesus to refuse, but he does not. Jesus sees an opportunity for transformation in this man's willingness to trust Jesus, and Jesus heals his servant.

We should see these many examples of how love and compassion transformed people who Jesus encountered, and trust that unconditional love and forgiveness, this concept we call grace is the way to live our lives. Unfortunately, I can't say that we've done a very good job of it. What Christians have done for the most part is accept Jesus, but not his ways or his theology of grace. We have created a new religion, Christianity, supposedly based upon him, but have created a whole new set of laws to regulate who belongs, a whole new set of barriers that define who is worthy or not worthy of God's love. Philip Yancey tells a story about a sex worker he encountered. Not only was she selling herself, but she was selling her daughter’s sexual services in order to make money for a drug addiction. Philip, sensing her anguish, asked her, "Have you thought about going to a church." The woman answered, "I feel horrible enough already. Why in the world would I ever go to a church?" I am afraid that for the most part she is right. Most churches would probably condemn her before they would embrace her. Women who have had an abortion and men and women with a same sex orientation are often likewise rejected. Church after church claim to be exclusive owners of the truth and if you don't practice Christianity in the form that they profess, you are not acceptable in the eyes of God. If you do not believe certain things about Jesus you are not "saved". You are somehow condemned to an eternity of torment in a place called hell. We draw distinct lines in the sand and label some people good and some people evil and propose that those we have labeled evil must be destroyed. I'm sorry to say that if Jesus appeared today, he would have to once again rebel against these barriers in the same way that he did 2000 years ago. But he shouldn't have to do that. We can be his agents of grace in today's world. We can transform people through love in the same way that Jesus did. It may not always be easy. It often requires us to look at humanity differently than we do. It means we have to genuinely work at eliminating our need to condemn and criticize before accepting people who are different than us. Dorothy Day, a modern day catholic saint, once said, "I only love God as much as I love the person I love the least." Today, right now, I would like us to ask ourselves, "How much do we really love God?" Are we really and truly amazed at God's grace, his willingness to love and forgive us unconditionally? Are we really working through prayer to connect with that grace in order that it may flow through us into the lives of other people that we touch? Who is it that we love the least? Maybe it's a person in your family, maybe a co-worker. Maybe it's an entire group of people, a race, an ethnic group? As a whole, humanity has not done a very good job of reaching out to each other with unconditional love and forgiveness, with God's grace. Hopefully, our churches can be a place where we nurture grace, where we let God's unconditional love and forgiveness flow through us into the lives of others.

Amen