

LIVING (AND DRIVING) GRACEFULLY

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Grace Church in New York
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 3, 2019

All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is this not Joseph's son?" (Luke 4:22)

Last Sunday afternoon it was finally time for Stacie and me to drive our eldest son, James, back to school after his long Christmas break. James is a sophomore at Lafayette College, in Easton, PA, which is a straight shot across I-78, just over the New Jersey border. In good traffic it's an easy trip that should take 1 ½ hours. But it all depends on one thing: traffic at the Holland Tunnel. Hoping for the best we headed across 9th Street and down 7th Avenue. Unfortunately, just past Houston Street we encountered congestion so heavy that the two lanes designated for the tunnel were like a parking lot. Grimly, we took our place in line and inched our way along, sometimes waiting four cycles of the traffic light just to go one block.

What made matters worse were the drivers in the left lanes zipping down 7th Avenue, who then tried to cut their way into the tunnel line without having waited in it. Most of these were Uber drivers in big black SUVs. It was no mistake that they weren't waiting in the tunnel lane with the rest of us. They simply knew the system and were cheating it. Therefore, I decided that I was going to hold the line against such brazen injustice. No way was I going to allow one of these vehicular sharks to cut in front of me. No way! So I made sure that no daylight was visible between my front bumper and the back of the car ahead of us. Many tried to wedge their way in, but I was in no mood for it.

Then at one intersection we were the first car in line at a red light. Sure enough, a big SUV pulled up to my left. My guess was that the instant the light turned green the driver would gun his engine and try to cut in front of me. I was right. He made his move, but so did I. We were off to the races: he in an Infiniti QX80, me in a 16-year old Chevy minivan. I suppose he figured he had more to lose than I, because he flinched and continued on to the next intersection. Yes, I did have to put the brakes on rather suddenly so as not to slam into the trunk of the car ahead of me. But it was worth it! I had rolled with the righteous, and frustrated the way of the wicked.

We turn now from the Holland Tunnel in Manhattan to the synagogue in Nazareth of Galilee. In today's reading from the Gospel of Luke we've heard how Jesus, early in his public ministry, returned to his hometown. On the Sabbath day he went to the synagogue, not only because it was his custom, but also because he was apparently to be the guest preacher. For Jesus, it would be a tough crowd to please. Any preacher will tell you that the first few times of delivering a sermon in the hearing of your family is a nerve-wracking experience. They know you. You can't claim any holier-than-thou status. Nevertheless, *all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?"* You may recall from last week that Jesus preached a remarkably short sermon – just nine words. What followed must have been a question-and-answer period – the teaching. In it, Jesus went on to say some things that infuriated the people. In fact they were so enraged that they drove him out of town and almost threw him off a cliff.

What could Jesus possibly have said? The writer of Luke gives us a clue: he says that the words of Jesus were *gracious words*. Some translations render the Greek, *words of grace*. Luke is referring not just to the style, but also to the theme of Jesus' words. The subject of the teaching

was the grace of God. Another clue to the theme occurs in Luke just before today's reading. We heard last week how Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah, where the prophet wrote about "the year of the Lord's favor." Biblical commentators believe this might be a reference to the Jewish idea of a Year of Jubilee. The concept was that every fifty years, all debts within the Jewish community should be erased. No matter how deeply into the hole you'd dug yourself, the ledger was justified. Jews who had sold themselves into slavery to other Jews were to be set free. If Jubilee isn't grace, I don't know what is. I can also understand how everyone – especially those waiting in line the old fashioned way – would not be amused when someone suddenly came along and cut to the head of the line waving the banner of Jubilee. It's no surprise that Jubilee was a concept that seldom, if ever, made it off paper and into practice.

Jesus must have pounded hard on the theme of God's grace. But what is grace? Grace is nothing short of everything God does to create, to redeem, and to sustain our existence. Grace is God's free, spontaneous gift of life. Grace, in fact, is the only means by which we enter the kingdom of God, regardless of how long you have waited in line. Last Sunday at the Holland Tunnel I wished not for grace but for law. I wished for a traffic cop who would bring order to the chaos, punish the cheaters, and reward the righteous. Perhaps God is like a heavenly traffic cop, but if so, this traffic cop doesn't exactly play by the rules. This traffic cop has a penchant for pointing and blessing and granting tunnel entrance to anyone he chooses at any time, even those who should rightly be at the end of the line.

If the idea sounds preposterous to you, listen to how Jesus hammered home the point to the indignant congregation. Here I will paraphrase: *Remember the days of the great drought when people were dying right and left, and many widows in Israel pleaded for God's help? God sent Elijah to none of them, but rather to a widow in Sidon – a Gentile, a pagan, someone who hadn't even been waiting in the proper line! And do you remember all those lepers in the days of Elisha? None were cleansed but Naaman the Syrian – another Gentile, and a pushy one at that. So it is that the Gentiles and lepers will enter the kingdom of heaven ahead of you.* If you recall that the hearers of Jesus' teaching were his family, his childhood friends, and the people who had watched him grow, you can begin to understand their anger at his words. The widow of Sidon and Naaman the Syrian entering the kingdom ahead of us, your own family members? No way! It would be like telling a group of New Orleans Saints fans today that they should enjoy the Super Bowl and root for the Rams. "No way," they would say. They would contend that the only reason the Rams are in the Super Bowl at all is because the traffic cop wasn't watching two weeks ago, and missed a call. Root for the Rams, who cut in line ahead of the Saints? No way!

The message of grace can infuriate as much as it can heal. We grumble. Consider the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son, who also grumbled at grace. Recall what he said to his father: *Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!* (Luke 15:29-30) Remember also the laborers in the vineyard, who worked all day long, only to receive the same wage as those who cut in at the last hour: *These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.* (Matthew 20:12) Let's admit it: grace is amazing when it saves a wretch like me, but not when it saves some of those other wretches out there. You see, they really are wretched, whereas my wretchedness is merely a useful theological metaphor to describe my oneness with the human predicament. Jubilee for me? Hooray! It's my favorite time of the century. Thank you very much. I deserve it, because I'm in line with the righteous, wretched though I am. Jubilee for those other wretches? Not so fast.

Theologians in Eastern Christianity think that we in the West have too closely tied God's grace to human wretchedness. Ever since Augustine, they say, we've talked exclusively about saving grace – grace that restores human nature. In so doing we've lost sight of the grace that constitutes human nature. Our focus should be on original grace instead of original sin. Consider the prophet Jeremiah, who in today's Old Testament reading discerned the word of the Lord saying, "*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.*" (Jeremiah 1:4) God's grace constituted and called Jeremiah before he was born, so let's talk about the grace of God that appears not because of human wretchedness, but despite it. The theologians of Eastern Christianity have a point. Of course, God's grace precedes and gives birth to all human existence. The father's love precedes the prodigal son's offense, and it's the same love that welcomes him home. So to me it's not an either-or but a both-and proposition. God's grace both constitutes and redeems human nature.

Call me a creature of the west if you like, but it seems to me that our more pressing concern needs to be the latter: the grace that saves. Yes, God loves us from before time and forever, but look at what we do with the gift of grace. For reasons that you and I can hardly understand, our human nature disbelieves the love of God. Because we disbelieve we rebel. As we daily bump up against people ready and willing to take advantage, it's off to the races we go. The result is sometimes silly, sometimes dangerous, and frequently unattractive. Consider the people of Nazareth. God's grace was performing a mighty work right in their midst. Jesus, one of their own, was doing amazing things. People were even speculating that he – the carpenter's son – was the Messiah sent from God. What an honor, what grace right in their own house of worship. What did they do with the gift of grace? Within the space of minutes they were running the Lord of life out of town and ready to throw him over a cliff. Jesus was able to pass through them. I remember as a child in Sunday School wondering how Jesus managed to get away in those cumbersome robes and flip-flops that all the Bible story books depicted him to wear. The scene is comical, and tragic, and silly, and awful. What a mess. It is the mess of human nature that needs the saving grace of God.

Let me tell you a story of amazing grace that should leave us all with a mild case of theological heartburn. Years ago an avid golfer won a tournament at his club for a prize of \$20,000. On the way to his car he came across a woman in the parking lot who was sobbing. He asked her what was wrong. She told him that earlier in the day she'd received a devastating medical diagnosis for her child, who would need expensive treatments for which she had no insurance. The golfer, moved by her sincerity, endorsed the check right there and gave it to her. The truth was that the woman's child was perfectly well, and in no need of a doctor's special care. Sometime later another club member informed the golfer that he'd been conned. The golfer replied, "You mean the child is well? This is wonderful news, the answer to my prayers. I have been praying for the woman, and praying that the child would not be sick."¹

Imagine: the man wished blessings upon the one who had cut in and cheated him out of his prize. Such gracious words are hard for us to hear, and harder still to live. Such gracious words were hard on the ears of those in the synagogue at Nazareth, and clearly the people had trouble living and driving by grace. But Jesus passed through the midst of them. So I will try to remember the gracious way of Jesus the next time I am approaching the Holland Tunnel. Perhaps I will even sing the song of God's amazing grace that saves a wretch like me. Then, full of grace, I too might pass through the angry crowd, and take hold of the life that really is life.

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¹ The story is adapted from that told by Charles V. Bryant in Rediscovering Our Spiritual Gifts, Upper Room Books, 1991, p. 86.