

GRACE UPON GRACE

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Grace Church in New York
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
January 30, 2022

All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. (Luke 4:22)

Every now and then someone takes a stab at compiling a list of the greatest books ever written. One author who almost always makes the cut is Leo Tolstoy for his novels *War and Peace*, and *Anna Karenina*. In fact, some reputable lists rank *Anna Karenina* at the very top: the best novel of all time. Tolstoy was a Russian author who wrote extensively in other genres as well. One of his lesser known works is a short story called *God Sees the Truth, but Waits*, first published in 1872.

A young merchant named Ivan has everything that life can offer: a wife and children, a house of his own, and two successful shops. He is handsome, full of fun, and fond of singing. One day Ivan sets off on a journey to a distant fair to sell his goods. Along the way he meets a fellow merchant heading in the same direction. They travel together and eventually stop for the night at an inn, bedding down in adjoining rooms. The next morning Ivan arises early to take advantage of the daylight. He pays his bill and continues on his way. Twenty-five miles down the road the police catch up to Ivan and begin interrogating him. Apparently, Ivan's fellow traveler in the adjoining room had been murdered in his sleep. Ivan is the prime suspect. What is more, when the police search his bags they find a bloody knife. Ivan knows he's been framed, but he has no defense. No one can see the truth. He's found guilty and sentenced to 26 years of hard labor in Siberia.

Well into Ivan's imprisonment he has lost everything: wife and family, home and business, youth and happy spirit. A new convict named Makar arrives at the camp. Makar is a horse thief, but after a series of conversations, Ivan realizes that he is much more. This is the very man who framed him all those years ago. Makar is the one whose sins Ivan had absorbed. At length Ivan spies Makar trying to dig a tunnel beneath the prison wall through which he might escape. When the guards discover the tunnel and question the inmates, Ivan realizes he has the opportunity for vengeance. All he need do is point to the one who stole his life, then Makar would be flogged nearly to death and condemned to a longer sentence. What does Ivan do? He shows mercy. He who knows the truth refuses to implicate Makar. Makar, the unworthy person who deserves no mercy receives grace upon grace.

We turn now from 19th century Russia to 1st century Palestine. In today's reading from the Gospel of Luke we've heard how Jesus, early in his public ministry, returned to his hometown of Nazareth. 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 seminarian or new preacher will tell you that delivering a sermon at your childhood church can be an interesting experience. To prepare you take stock of yourself. You look in the mirror. You've been in the big city for a year. Now you know a thing or two about real spirituality. Now you have newly acquired Bible trivia on the tip of your tongue, and a wealth of theological curiosities at your command. You're ready to go. You're ready to let them have it. On the other hand, these people know you. You can't claim any holier-than-thou status in front of them. They won't be impressed if you try to razzle-dazzle them with Hebrew and Greek.

You may recall from last week that Jesus preached a remarkably short sermon to the hometown congregation – just nine words. Nevertheless, *all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth*. What followed must have been a time for questions –

a time for 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. If you've ever read in the Gospel of John (1:11) how Jesus *came into his own, and his own received him not*, you may have wondered what John meant. Today you need wonder no more. John was referring to the incident at Nazareth when the good, respectable townspeople chased the home-grown preacher right out of the pulpit.

What could Jesus possibly have said? The writer of Luke gives clues. He says that the words of Jesus were *gracious words*. Some translations render the phrase, *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. Prisoners were to be released. 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 law-abiding citizens would not be amused. A wretch like Makar goes free? 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? Actually, the Bible doesn't use the term as often as you'd think. Nor do we find one clean definition of grace in the Scriptures. What we find more often than definitions are illustrations of grace. The grace of God is like the father who rushes out to welcome home the son who squandered his living (Luke 15:20). It is like the landowner who paid a full day's wage to the late coming laborers (Matthew 20:9). It is like the shepherd who seeks out the one lost and wandering sheep (Luke 14:3). In his teaching at the Nazareth synagogue, Jesus drew on illustrations from the people's own sacred writings. Grace happened when God sent Elijah to the Gentile widow at Zarephath in the land of Sidon. Grace happened when God cleansed another Gentile of his leprosy – Naaman the Syrian.

If these Biblical illustrations strike you as too long ago and far away, let's see if this one might raise your hackles. Grace happens today when people who have refused to be vaccinated against Covid-19 nevertheless get admitted to the hospital when they catch the virus and become seriously ill. Having disparaged and disregarded the medical community, still they are given hospital beds and ventilators even if it overwhelms the healthcare system, even if those who have done everything by the book and need other procedures must wait. And insurance covers it. If that isn't grace, I don't know what is. Grace happens anytime God moves people to give good things to those who don't deserve them.

So I ask you: how do you respond to the message of God's grace? Be honest, now: do you think Ivan should have had mercy on the villain who stole his life? Do you think you would have done the same? *Could* you have done the same? What on earth was he thinking? Had you been in the synagogue at Nazareth when Jesus preached, would you have taken kindly to the message that you were no different in God's eyes than the lepers and Gentiles – that they were as equally deserving of a hospital bed as you? If you recall that the hearers of Jesus' sermon were his family, his boyhood friends, and the people who had watched him grow, you can begin to understand their anger at his words, and why they closed ranks against him. We can almost hear their thoughts: "*You're going to give precedence to the Gentiles and the lepers and the convicts! Surely we're going into the kingdom of God ahead of them.*"

My hunch is that the Nazarenes weren't the only ones who resisted the idea of God's grace applying to them. We hear about grace on an intellectual level, and we nod our heads in understanding. But on a gut level, we like to think of ourselves as not needing such a loophole. It's a matter of pride, you see. Yes, amazing grace saves a wretch like me, even though we're not singing

the hymn today. But let's be clear about our terminology. Episcopal wretchedness is merely a useful theological category to describe our oneness with the human condition. As for those other wretches out there, well, they really are wretched, and grace is their crutch. But our own sense of dignity and worth lead us to believe that we have a leg up on them. We're on the inside track with God. We're family. We're good people. We're worthy to stand before God in our own right, merely for being the wholesome, cheerful people that we are. Jubilee for me? Thank you very much. I deserve it. It's always my favorite time of the century. Jubilee for those others? Not so fast.

Some people respond to God's grace from the other end of the spectrum entirely. In today's Old Testament reading (Jeremiah 1:4-10) we heard how Jeremiah received the calling of the Lord. God searched him out and knew him before he was born and chose him to be a prophet. Strangely, Jeremiah responded first not by embracing the status that God wanted to give him. Rather, he pointed out all the reasons why he could never perform the task. For Jeremiah, the difficulty with God's grace was a stubborn, equally proud sense of his own *unworthiness*. "What? God chooses me? God forgives me? God loves me after all I've done and thought and said? Impossible." Jeremiah eventually repented and embraced God's calling. Until he did, the message of God's grace couldn't take root in him. And so we waffle between an exaggerated sense of our own wretchedness on the one hand, and an inflated sense of self on the other hand.

A third way is open to us. It is the way of gratitude. The way of gratitude is this: You can hear the message of salvation. You can hear the message that on the cross of Christ, God absorbed the sins of the whole world, including yours and mine. God brought an undeserving humanity for all time to himself, and you can make your life a response of gratitude for it. You can hear the message that nothing in all of creation can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus, and trust it. You can take such words of grace at face value, and then do good works for the Lord not *in order* to be saved, but *because* you are saved, *in thanksgiving* that you are saved. A life of gratitude is what God is hoping to see in those who receive grace upon grace. God sees the truth, and waits – waits for grace to take hold.

Leo Tolstoy was indeed a master illustrator of God's grace. Make no mistake, his short story is a parable of our salvation, and Ivan is the Christ figure. Ivan is unjustly charged, pays the price for the sins of another, and even in his agony extends mercy to the one who stole his life. Ivan would not condemn Makar. Being shown such mercy shakes Makar to his core, and moves him to beg Ivan's forgiveness for everything. Even though Ivan already knows it, Makar confesses with tears of sorrow that he was the one who killed the other merchant. Remarkably, Ivan replies, "God will forgive you. Maybe I'm a hundred times worse than you." The story ends with Makar then confessing his original crime to the prison authorities, leaving us to wonder how Tolstoy might have written another chapter of his life. We can imagine that this one who finally saw the truth – that he had received grace upon grace upon grace – would never be the same again.

Likewise, you and I have received grace upon grace upon grace. By grace God has created us. By grace God has redeemed us. By grace God sanctifies us. By grace God will bring us home.

Now the invitation is simply to live gratefully, and to speak gracefully, until we see the truth not dimly in a mirror, but face-to-face in the one who knows us fully, even our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.