

Sermon Preached by the Rev. John S. Nieman
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
October 15, 2017 Pentecost 19/Proper 23/Year A
Texts – Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

Last week during coffee hour after the 8:00 service, someone came up to me to chat about the sermon. I won't blame you if you don't remember the sermon from last week. I can barely remember it, and I wrote it. Regardless, it was basically about the relationship between Law and grace. So the person said, "That was an interesting sermon, but what really is grace?" Ah, what a question! The answer to it truly is the pearl of great price.

How **do** we answer that question? I think grace, like love and God, is not something that we can put words to, at least not adequately. Grace is sublime, like fine art or music: you can't describe it, but you know it when you experience it.

I was thinking about how I might work in a sermon about grace in the aftermath of last week's question when I first looked at the Propers for today early in the week. Today's collect jumped out: "Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us." Well, there you go. I'd call that a little nugget of grace.

The mention of grace in the collect prods us to open our eyes to see grace in the scripture passages for today. So let's look. What do we see when we put on the lens of grace?

As we follow our ancestors on their forty-year journey toward the Promised Land, we see they've hit another snag. This time it's a big one. Their leader, Moses, seems to have lost sight of the time up on the mountain with God – they've been chatting away, you see – and the people are getting a little impatient down in the valley. "Moses is up in the cloud," they say. "But we need him here, right now. He's not doing his job." So Aaron, picking up on the new polling data, sees an opportunity. He melts down the people's bling and fashions it into pseudo-gods to quell their angst. And it works, at least for a while

This does not make God happy. In fact, he's furious. "Your people!" he says to Moses. That's what I say to Margaret when one of our cats acts up – "your cat!" "Your people, the ones **you** brought up out of the land of Egypt, are acting perversely," God says, conveniently forgetting it was all his idea in the first place. God's temper flares and he's ready to incinerate the whole lot of them. And why not? God went through all that trouble to liberate them, even sacrificing the lives of countless innocent Egyptians in the process. And this is how they act? This is how they say "thank you"? Some payback. "Get out of my way. I'm done with them."

But Moses intervenes. He steps into the breach. Like a good parent, he talks God down from his tantrum and gets him to look a little more rationally at the situation. "It won't look too good for you to wipe out the very people you bent over backwards to save" he tells him. "You might think twice about this. Remember your love."

And here's the kicker: God changes his mind. God goes through something of a conversion experience. We are watching God's consciousness evolve in this story. He moves from a hard stance of retribution for an offense against him to a more open stance that creates the possibility for staying in relationship. In his willingness to change his mind, God offers grace. And as a result, the people live.

It's a little harder to see grace in the Parable of the Wedding Banquet. In fact, on its face, we see the exact opposite. The king is ticked off at the invited guests who not only refuse

to come to the party, but also kill the servants sent to reissue the invitation. He has every right to be mad. So he yields to his rage and has all the invitees slaughtered. An eye for eye, and all that. Martha Stewart would not approve of this response to a snubbed invitation. We seem to get relief in the story when the king then extends the invitation to all people, “both good and bad.” There’s grace, right? An open invitation to all, no matter who you are or what you’ve done. That’s the gospel as we progressive Christians want to hear it.

But wait. Just as we held on to that thread of hope, the story ends on a baffling note with a guest who is thrown into the outer darkness for not wearing the appropriate attire. Leaves something of a sour taste in the mouth. Where’s the grace in that? Sounds like harsh and irrational judgment to me.

It would take a scholar far more creative than I to see this as a story about grace. I won’t attempt it. But it may be a story about the experience of those who turn their back on grace or mock it or insist on cynicism in the face of it. Is not life dark and hellish when we refuse a gift? Is not life a grind, a gnashing of teeth when we reject the surprise of an invitation to live in joy and celebration?

What is grace? Grace is the unexpected gift of someone who refuses to enter the all-too-familiar economy of retribution, of an eye for an eye, or any *quid pro quo*. Grace stops us in our tracks when we receive forgiveness rather than rejection. Grace is Elijah knocking at the door: the expected guest we never really expected would arrive. Grace is, as the hymns says, “amazing.”

Grace is the refusal to require a secret password, handshake, rite of passage, or language to enter the house of love. The door of grace is off its hinges. Anyone can come in – from the streets, from the homeless shelter, from the war-torn regions of the earth. Grace is the light that illuminates the Statue of Liberty. Grace knows we’re all refugees in the end.

Grace is what opens our arms to others. Grace is the hug, the kiss of peace, the knowing smile of a parent that erases a naughty child’s fear and guilt. Grace is the utterly extra-human gift that makes us human.

And to refuse the invitation to live in grace, to turn down the unconditional gift, is to refuse the Kingdom of God itself. It is to insist on staying bound up within the cycle of conditional gifts, the economy of life as a balance sheet. It is a life of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

To paraphrase Martin Luther King, Jr., we haven’t gotten to the Kingdom of Grace yet – not fully. But, paradoxically, it is here. You and I are invited into it, the banquet where we dance free of our debts to one another, free of the offenses others hold against us and we hold against them. It’s the Kingdom where the worker who has born the heat of the day gets his due and celebrates, rather than gripes, when the one hired later gets the same.

You and I as the Body of Christ are called to offer that grace to the people we meet every day – in our homes, in the coffee shop, hopefully in church, and yes, even in the Hannaford parking lot. Because it’s through the experience of grace that we all glimpse God.

We will sing that precious conviction and challenge in the third verse of our final hymn this morning. “The cup of water given for thee still holds the freshness of thy grace; yet long these multitudes to see the true compassion of thy face.”

Grace is what we’ve been yearning for all along.