

Grace and Gratitude

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Texts: Exodus 16:2-15; Exodus 17:1-7

Last week our readings were about the escape of the children of Israel from the armies of Pharaoh—the King of Egypt finally came to a point of granting the Israelites their freedom, but shortly after they left, he changed his mind and came after them with all of his armies and chariots. But God saved the children of Israel by separating the Red Sea so that they could travel through on dry land; and when they were through, and the armies and chariots of Pharaoh were in pursuit, the waters came back and destroyed them. Israel was free at last. And last week, we discussed the many ways in which we are unfree, and God’s deep desire for our freedom. Remember—part of the reason we are studying Exodus is to learn more about our own discipleship and how we might learn from the Exodus journey.

God had worked through Moses to lead the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt to gain their freedom. Very shortly after they left on their way, they were pursued by the Egyptian army. They cried out to God. They complained to Moses, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you led us out here to die? We were better off in slavery.” But God delivers them through the Red Sea to safety, and when the army follows, they drown in the sea.

Three days later, they find themselves without water, and again they complained and again God provided for them—bitter water was changed to drinkable water. We didn’t read that story. Then, they come to a campsite with plenty of water and shelter—12 springs and 70 trees—and stayed there about six weeks apparently, and then moved on. That’s where our first story of today began. They found themselves without food, and what did they do? Do they say, “God has cared for us so faithfully, let us trust in God and pray”?? Did most of them wait quietly, while a couple approached Moses to discuss the situation? No. “The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, ‘If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.’” God heard their cry, and God caused bread – they called it manna – to rain from the heavens each day, with a double ration on Friday morning so that they could gather enough to see them through the Sabbath. Yet again, God has cared for them.

And so a few weeks later, when they move on from this place to the next stop, as our second reading began, they found themselves without water again. And, again they complained, saying “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” And God remains faithful. God has indeed cared for them, and again, God cares for them. God grants Moses the ability to draw water from a stone. And so as they have been delivered from slavery, and thirst, and hunger, they are now delivered from thirst again...

So there are a few things going on here. One is a counter-parallel narrative to the earlier plagues that were visited upon Egypt, a regression that two weeks ago we had noted was a kind of uncreation—moving Egypt back into more and more chaos. In the plagues, the first plague rendered the water unfit to drink. For the children of Israel newly freed, the first miracle was that the bitter water was made fit to drink. In Egypt, a later plague involved hail falling from the sky and destroying the crops; while the newly freed Israelites camped in the wilderness, another miracle involved food falling from the sky onto the ground. Again, earlier at one time Moses had struck the water in Egypt with his staff and made it undrinkable; for the children of Israel, he struck a rock with his staff to produce water.

Whereas in the empire of Egypt, creation became progressively undone; for the newly freed children of Israel, creation is becoming more and more abundant. But the children of Israel, while they are technically freed, have not yet become fully free. They have not discovered the freedom of trusting in God. They are not learning to fully rely on God. They haven't yet discovered that grace is not only amazing, but dependable.

What is grace? The late psychiatrist and contemplative teacher Gerald May defined grace as "...the active expression of God's love."¹ That is, grace is all the ways God's love is shown to us: any experiences of God we sense; any manifestations of God we experience; any insight that arises which helps us to cope or understand our experiences better; any feelings of strength, or love, or peace that seem to come as we need it in difficult situations; or even any deep experience of beauty or wonder, such as in experiencing awe in nature.

The Sunday School teachers put up a bulletin board outside the sanctuary where they had interviewed the kids here at Frame, asking them where they see God?? Their answers are examples of grace, and unlike the children of Israel, the children of Frame are seeing God all over.

And God's grace is in abundance supply, if you know where to look. It's not be measured out like medicine from an eyedropper; it is flowing out steadily, forcefully, and abundantly like a river – it never runs out, it just keeps coming, and one could say about God's grace, like a river, that you never step in the same grace twice. It's always new, always flowing freely, blessings new every day, but for many reasons, people don't always recognize grace.

The biggest reason people don't recognize God's grace is because we are oriented toward relying on ourselves instead of on God. Particularly in our culture, which values autonomy very highly, and in which dependence of any sort is seen as a weakness, ironically the one dependence that can set us fully free is one in which we learn to depend upon God.

Another reason that we don't fully rely on God is that life is good—and by that I mean that we, again especially in North American middle class culture, have not found that we needed to rely on God. Life has had a comfortable amount of security for many of us. It is often the case that we don't learn to rely on God until we find ourselves powerless in one way or

¹ Gerald May, *Addiction and Grace: Love and Spirituality in the Healing of Addictions* (New York: HarperCollins, copyright 1988, e-book version) 119.

another, in a life that has become unmanageable, perhaps because of an illness, or crisis, or some kind of other brokenness that has come our way: addiction, grief, or loss. When life seems safe and secure, we rely on that safety and security. We often see people who are more comfortable relying on God in situations that are precarious, such as illness, poverty, or danger.

One of the things that I most value in my visits to Colombia is being among people who are relying on God—it is inspiring to see. And among the things I always notice is the consistent sense of joy. When what you rely on most cannot be taken away, it is easy to be joyful.

I mentioned the psychiatrist Gerald May earlier. His book *Addiction and Grace: Love and Spirituality in the Healing of Addictions* is not only about the obvious addictions such as alcoholism and drug addiction, but even more about our general tendency to rely on things other than God for meaning and security in our lives, things such as relationships, status, jobs, possessions, hobbies, comforting rituals and habits, etc. In this way, he says, most of us are addicts of one sort or another. He argues that the way to find freedom from our addictions is through both grace and community. This is why the two central commandments are to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. That kind of wholehearted, God-centered love brings a certain freedom—for one, we are freed from our obsession with ourselves, and from the worries and insecurities that come from having ourselves at the center of our lives.

The children of Israel were complaining at each obstacle because they hadn't yet found life to be trustworthy, and that was because they weren't trusting in the One that can be trusted. Now we have to be careful with how we interpret this—if we are relying on God to make sure nothing bad ever happens to us—to our health, to our wealth, to our jobs, to our loved ones—then we're still putting our trust in those other things for security, and just expecting God to keep it all intact for us: to keep us healthy, to protect us from any damage to our possessions or our relationships. That's not relying on God. When we rely on God, fully rely on God, we come to understand that—as the apostle Paul said to the people in Athens, it is in God we live and move and have our being. That God is the source and center of our lives. That relying on God will set us free from relying on things that can be lost. And when we are no longer relying on these other things for our security, we are freed to enjoy them, and truly love others.

Many of us don't really want that kind of relationship with God—we don't want to let go of the security we've built, we can't imagine relying on God in that way when we don't feel like we know God well enough, we don't know how to rely on God instead of on ourselves, we don't understand what that might look like.

This kind of reliance on God is indeed very far from what most of us in this room have probably experienced. At best, for many of us, God is among our backup plans, or an extra resource, or a mystery we'd like to understand better, or the One we've yearned to have a sense of contact with. For some, God has been something to study, fascinating as an intellectual proposition, but still too abstract for a real relationship. For others of us, God

has long been a trusted friend, but we still rely on ourselves. How could we possibly move from the independence that seems like the way we're supposed to live, to relying on God in that full sense? It's hard to know what that would look like, or what the steps would be to get there. And honestly, it's a little beyond the scope of a single sermon. But we can begin.

Let's go back to the analogy of God's grace being like a river. We may not be ready to get in a canoe and cast off from the security of life on shore, but we may be willing to look at that as a kind of goal, and for now, we're ready to spend more time on the riverbank, observing the river more closely, and even occasionally stepping in and getting a feel of the flow.

Part of the essence of God's grace, of God's love, is that it comes as pure gift—we can't earn it, we can't lose it. Most of us aren't that comfortable with gifts—we have a more transactional view: if someone gives us a gift, then we should return the gesture with another gift. To just accept a gift again and again is very hard for us. But that is really the foundation of the life of discipleship: to accept that God loves us because that is who God is, not because we've earned it or deserve it in some way. We have difficulty with this. But if you think back to any experience you've had as a giver of a gift, you know that you want the gift to be received and enjoyed. So perhaps step one for all of us is to take time each day to receive God's love. For us, it could be the daily task like picking up the manna for the day. What if each morning we took time to thank God for the gift of a new day, what if we took time to look around wherever we live and notice something lovely—a tree that is changing color, a bush that is still bearing flowers, one of the rivers that flow through our area. What if we noticed something in our body to be grateful for—the hands that can hold a cup of coffee, the eyes that see the people we love, the ears that make conversation possible. Over the next week, let's try and spend time on the riverbank of God's grace, noticing the constancy of God's love flowing in our lives, realizing that although we can't always sense it, God's presence is always with us, and God's love flows around, within, and through us.

Some communities of nuns and monks have the habit of praying the hours – they pause several times each day for prayers. We've heard of morning watch, or vespers. What if you set an alarm on your watch or smartphone for 9 am, noon, 3 pm, 6 pm and 9 pm, and just noticed at those times what was around you that you are thankful for? Or said a silent prayer thanking God for being with you? And in those moments when we find ourselves complaining about something or resenting something? Let's confess to God that we struggle with the areas in our lives that are out of our control, and ask God to help us let go.

Clearly, the life of discipleship is not just about what we receive from God. Gerald May writes that it is also about learning to live in accord with the facts of grace.² We'll be talking about that soon. Becoming aware of God's grace in our lives is the most important first step in learning to rely upon God. Recognizing that everything comes from God is huge. Most of us think we earned what is in our lives. So this week, let us spend time on the riverbank of God's grace, noticing that the flow never stops, and remembering that God's love is always flowing in our lives. Amen.

² Gerald May, 127.