EXCELLING IN GRACE

2 CORINTHIANS 8:7-15
A SERMON PREACHED AT DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON SUNDAY, JUNE 30, 2024
BY THE REV. DR. LUKE A. POWERY

Love, joy, and friendship—all mentioned in today's gospel lesson—are not making headline news these days. Rather, hatred, sadness, and enemyship are making the most rambunctious noise. As Wilfrid Laurier University religion and culture professor, Carol B. Duncan, recently said, "We are living in challenging times." But we are not the only ones who have ever lived on tough existential terrain. In many ways, the history of humanity, since the human fall in the Book of Genesis, has been pretty rough.

Even in the ancient near eastern culture and early Christian communities, there were human struggles. We get a hint of it in the Gospel of John when Jesus tells the disciples, "I do not call you servants any longer…but I have called you friends." The NRSV says "servants" but the Greek word, *doulos,* actually means "slaves" and that has a harsher sensibility to our contemporary ears. Yet it is true that Jesus and his disciples were in a slaveholding culture, and so to speak of "slaves" literally or metaphorically as in Jesus's words here, shouldn't be surprising.

The presence of the enslaved means there was violence at times, enacted upon the enslaved. In John, we get an example of this with the high priest's slave, whom I talked about on Good Friday night. When Jesus is betrayed and arrested, "Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave's name was Malchus"(18:10). Though Peter's act could be viewed as a violent strike against the high priest, it is the slave who literally receives the actual physical blow. The ones in physical bondage received the brunt of the brutality. Because of their place in society, they were the ones expected to receive more violence than those in power such as the masters.

This is what happens in that ancient society, and this is similar to ours and has been the unfortunate history of humanity. We enact violence or it's acted upon us. We are enslaved to systems, structures, and relations that support dehumanizing hierarchies, keeping In his1936 short story "The Capital of the World" Ernest Hemingway mentions a story that was circulating in Madrid, Spain. "It seems that a remorseful father placed a personal ad in the newspaper *El Liberal,* which read: 'PACO MEET ME AT HOTEL MONTANA NOON TUESDAY ALL IS FORGIVEN PAPA.'" What the father had forgotten is that Paco (short for Francisco) was a popular name and ultimately, the Madrid Civil Guard had to be called to the Hotel Montana, because 800 Pacos had answered the ad. This tells us more than about an abundance of people named Paco. It tells us about the abundant human need for forgiveness. It tells us that we are all in need of grace. Don't we all yearn to hear 'all is forgiven'? Pacos, Peggys, Patricias, Prestons, Powerys, pastors, priests, people. We all need grace. But if you listen to the daily news, scroll through Instagram, survey online chatter, pop in on Facebook, hear the latest celebrity feud, it will seem that grace is on short supply.

We even sing of how grace is so amazing, so divine. Yet we can miss it, not recognize it, and not share it, even when it's so prevalent before our eyes and in our own lives. John Wesley taught that there was prevenient grace even in the so-called "heathens." Just to be alive and breathing as human beings is a sign of grace! But we can still overlook or ignore it. In our English translations of the Bible, even of 2 Corinthians chapters 8 and 9, we can easily not see what's actually so prominent, so abundant, so excelling, so necessary, because even our language is limited in capturing the limitless resource that is God. Biblical translators do their best in trying to capture the meaning of the text but what do you do when one Greek word can have multiple English meanings? The truth is to translate a text from its ancient manuscripts and to have some understanding of any translation requires grace.

In chapters 8 and 9, the apostle Paul uses the Greek word *charis* to describe the benevolence of God and Christ and the human response to God's action. In these two chapters, *charis* has multiple English translations although it is one Greek word. It's translated as grace, blessing, generous act, thanks, privilege and generous

undertaking, depending on the context, which is the challenge of translation. At its heart though, and most frequently throughout the scriptures, *charis* refers to grace like we see right at the beginning of Paul's greeting to the church at Corinth in 1 Corinthians—"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." But the multiple translations of *charis* in 2 Corinthians signifies something to me about grace—that it is a surplus; that it is extraordinary, abundant, uncontainable, undefinable really, as one word in English can't capture the fullness of its essence. To play off the hymn, what language shall I borrow to describe grace?

Grace is pasted all over these two chapters, but you wouldn't necessarily know it from a surface reading, which is the same thing that can happen from a surface faith, one in which you think grace is only for a select few or grace is an occasional experience on Sundays or grace is something nice to sing about in hymns, rather than a pervasive theological reality 24 hours 7 days of week. To be honest, grace is everywhere in every time, whether we see it or experience it or not. It might be hard to see because we're so used to pulling up our own bootstraps in the life of faith—if we work harder, pray harder, read scripture more, find the right job, marry the right person, attend the right university, we will win salvation or blessing through our works. But then Ephesians reminds us, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast." Grace, in all its forms, is the gift of God. Nothing we do can earn it.

Grace
It's the name for a girl [*U2 sang*]*, but*
It's also a thought that
Changed the world

And it changed my life. Or should I say, it sustained my life. I probably shared this before. One afternoon resting in my mother's arms on 216th Street in Bronx, New York, in 1974, I began to struggle to physically breathe and convulsed due to a very high fever. One of my older brothers had just arrived home from school and saw what was happening. He picked up the phone and called my father while crying and said, "Luke is dead, Luke is dead." The ambulance came and rushed my mother and me to the hospital while my father met us there. At some point between our departure to the hospital and while there, a neighbor came upstairs in our duplex on 216th Street to see what the noise was all about. She heard a lot of movement above her on her ceiling. When she arrived upstairs, she discovered that the noise she heard was that of my four siblings—ages 14, 12, 8, and 4— pacing the floor, praying for me. The noise she heard was the pacing of little praying feet. She heard the sweet sound of grace walking. By grace, I'm still here—50 years later, though I know I look like I'm 30. I'm still here.

It's because of grace that you're still here. But even if we weren't here, grace would still lead us home and meet us on the other side of the Jordan. On the other side, we might use the words of longtime Duke sports broadcaster Bob Harris who was just memorialized this week and say, 'How Sweet It Is.' Grace. How sweet the sound. In the novel, *Diary of a Country Priest*, we learn about the story of a young priest who struggles against a corrupt church. He has a difficult life and to make matters worse, he develops stomach cancer. In the final days of his life, he's in terrible pain. Another priest is called to perform the last rites. A friend waits with him. And this friend records what happened as they waited. 'The priest was still on his way, and finally I was bound to voice my deep regret that such delay threatened to deprive my comrade of the final consolations of our church. But a few moments later, he put his hand over mine and his eyes entreated me to draw closer to him. He then uttered these words almost in my ear…'Does it matter? Grace is everywhere…' Then he breathed his last breath.

Grace is everywhere, on earth as it is in heaven, just as it is all over this 2 Corinthians text and this grace is rooted in a particular person. Grace is not something we fabricate. We can't sell it or buy it. It's not ours. It walks into our lives without fanfare, without an announcement over the intercom or a press release. AI can't produce grace because AI ain't Jesus. Without him, grace would be cheap. According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ living and incarnate." This is why we hear the ancient benediction from the scriptures—"the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ…"

The paradigmatic source and understanding of *charis*, grace, for the apostle Paul is this: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." This isn't about economic prosperity, but it is about a rich, flourishing life through the grace and gift of God. This is saving grace. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works…" Grace's movement in Christ is from having it all to giving it all, from being full to becoming empty for someone else. It is divine relinquishment. Grace allows you to receive without giving anything for it; grace gives without any expectation of a return. It is unmerited favor; it's not of your own doing.

Christ descends that we might ascend. Fred Craddock calls the phrase—though he was rich, yet for your sake became poor—the "poetic resume of the Christ event." He emptied himself as Philippians says, even to the point of death on a cross. This is costly grace, the epitome of grace for Paul, a grace in which the spiritual touched the material, the Eternal touched the earthly, the divine touched the human, so that grace happens now, everywhere, in every domain of life, every board room, every living room, every locker room. Where grace is, God is. Grace soaks every dimension of life as all of life is God's. Money for the relief of the poor as Paul is encouraging in his letter is just as spiritual as prayer. And all of this is grounded in—"the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor…" He is incarnate grace, the source of any grace we experience or any grace we may extend.

This is bigger than money. This is about a way of life, walking in grace like four little, pacing, praying feet. Walking in grace, as Jesus walks and heals Jairus's daughter and a woman who couldn't stop bleeding for 12 years. In Christ there is a "liturgy of abundance" rather than a "myth of scarcity" (Walter Brueggemann). There's enough grace for everyone in the world, which is why Lamentations tells us that the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, and his mercies are new every morning. There's an overflow of grace flowing from Christ, and nothing can stop it, even if we don't recognize it, even if we're moody in the morning. There's always more grace and mercy for you and others every morning; this is the excellence of God.

And this is what we are to excel in—grace, measured by God's standard in which the rich one became poor. We talk a lot about striving for excellence in higher education, in our research and writing and academic disciplines and guilds and even in patient care within the hospital. Excellence. Excellence is even listed as one of the core values of Duke University.

But spiritually speaking, are we excelling in grace? Paul says, "Now as you excel in everything….so we want you to excel also in this grace." Are we doing our best in the work of grace? Are we walking in grace?

U2 sang:
[Grace] walks on the street
You can hear the strings
Grace finds goodness
In everything….

Because Grace makes beauty
Out of ugly things

I saw a friend from my seminary days this past week; I haven't seen him since 1997. We caught up and I'm glad we did because he was a living witness of this sermon. He's a pastor in New Jersey. In 2020, at the onset of the COVID global pandemic and the early awareness of it in March of that year, he caught COVID, and his wife of 21 years caught COVID, but she died due to complications that April, so her death came very quickly. Because of the restrictions at the time, he couldn't be with her and couldn't even see her body in the end. The first time he was able to be back with her, it was when he received an urn with her ashes. Their daughter was 18 years old at the time. You can imagine what it was like for him to tell his daughter the news—'mommy died.'

Of course, the grief was unimaginable, and it's been a journey for him. Yet out of this tragedy, he's begun a national grief ministry for men who are widowers, and they meet each Monday to share their stories. He's poured himself into further studies and does research and writing on grief and mental health in order to serve faith communities. He also told me that he eventually got remarried and has been flourishing in his personal life. As I listened to him, even as I was preparing this sermon, I thought 'that's grace,' God's grace, and my seminary friend is walking in it even as he works to excel in it.

What once was hurt
What once was friction
What left a mark
No longer stings

Because Grace makes beauty
Out of ugly things

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you, now and forever.