
Extending Grace

Matthew 1:18-25

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 18, 2016,
by the Rev. Meghan Feldmeyer Benson

I wonder if any of you can recall a moment in your life where you felt vulnerable and anxious because you were in a situation where people might discover something about you that made you feel embarrassed or ashamed? I have a story. When I was in college I traveled to Kenya with my campus ministry. We were in a rural part of Kenya and when we'd visit churches or schools in the area, we would often sing. Apparently, we became known for our singing! So, one Sunday morning we all split up to attend a local church with one of our student hosts, and upon my arrival at a large church the pastor eagerly let me know that they planned for *me* to sing a solo as part of morning worship. And here's the thing—in Kenya, you really just can't say no, even if you aren't *really* a singer and are only good at singing along with others. And so, the next thing I knew, I was singing a deeply cringe-worthy, a Capella version of the praise song "I Love you, Lord" in front of a sea of about 500 Kenyan faces. As I was singing I consciously thought "this is truly terrible and a disgrace to singers everywhere." But then something astonishing happened when I finished—that sea of African faces erupted into vigorous applause and cheers as if I were Adele. This was a clear moment of undeserved grace.

I want to focus on the presence of grace in the gospel reading from Matthew today. We see a young, betrothed couple in a predicament. Mary is pregnant, but Joseph had nothing to do with it. You can imagine that for Joseph, who up to this point has not received angelic visions or dreams, this is truly terrible heartbreak, made all the worse by its potential scandal. The author tells us, "Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss Mary quietly." Joseph, *being a righteous man was unwilling to expose her to public disgrace*. I have some tenderness for Joseph in this moment, because for all his pain and anguish and probably a good deal of perplexity and anger, he still sought to protect Mary from harm and public humiliation. The Greek term here has the connotation of shaming or making a show of something¹—and yet Joseph resolves that he won't shame Mary. He won't make a show of her. He won't expose her to public disgrace. And Matthew ties this quality to Joseph's *righteousness*.

We live in a culture that tends to delight in shaming and making a show of people. Perhaps this has always been true, but the presence of social media has accelerated this human tendency—made all the more dangerous because we don't often know in real life the people we are shaming in virtual life. It's easy for compassion to go missing behind the computer screen. Who among us hasn't experienced emotional satisfaction when someone we deem as an enemy is brought down on Facebook or Twitter?

There is a difference between criticizing and shaming. Criticism is reasoned analysis or evaluation of an argument or set of ideas...shaming takes things a step further with its sense of *spitefulness*—not

¹ δειγματιζω – www.blueletterbible.org Strong's G1165

simply criticizing the idea, but criticizing the person behind the idea, often with the intention to humiliate that person in front of others.

You might wonder, “But what if the person has done something truly shameful and they *should* be ashamed?! Are you saying we should just let shameful things slide?” No. But I am saying we should be cautious to shame ideas, not people. One says “I see the image of God in you, even if we disagree” and the other says “you are nothing, you are the sum of your worst thoughts and moments, you are beyond redemption.” And I get it, this is tricky work. It is not so easy to tease apart people from their ideas. Part of why we get so tangled is that an idea may be harmful to another’s personhood. It is brutal work *to actively seek the image of God* within everyone we engage, but it is also critically important work. Because shaming is usually about satisfying *our own emotions* instead of satisfying what pleases God. God does not delight in people being shamed, God delights in people being *converted*—God delights in people’s hearts being changed to more closely resemble God’s heart. And as a matter of simple strategy, shame and disdain are not good starting points for conversion, or for conversation.

One way we know God’s heart is through Joseph, who *being a righteous man was unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace*. Righteousness here means just²—and not a human standard of justice, but God’s standard of justice—which is conformation to the will of God. Because Joseph knew something of God’s justice, he didn’t want to expose Mary to public disgrace, even if he had every right to expose her by the standards and customs of his day. *Joseph chooses grace over disgrace*.

I wonder how lives might be transformed if we made a commitment to pursuing grace over disgrace? Grace is a free and unearned gift from God—a form of mercy, undeserved. And disgrace...the prefix “dis” means apart from or away, so disgrace is anything that moves us away from divine grace and mercy. When we choose to disgrace and shame others, we are moving them (and ourselves) further from God. God’s grace isn’t a cheap grace that sees no wrong and overlooks injustice—it can be an act of grace to boldly and respectfully speak to God’s heart and invite people in. But God’s grace is often a grace we humans may find both painful and even offensive, because it pushes the limits of our own imagination and insists *all are made in God’s image* and are worthy of sharing life with God...even if we aren’t sure we want to share life with them.

In October The Washington Post had an article³ about a man, Derek Black, who was raised in a crucible of white nationalism and white supremacy—his godfather is David Duke—and Derek was at the forefront of the rise in white supremacist thinking, including heavy involvement in white supremacist websites and a daily radio show to broadcast the white nationalist agenda. He was considered the future of the movement when he transferred from community college to a private college in Florida. When he arrived on campus, he was socially savvy enough not to advertise his racism. He made some friends but kept that part of his life quiet from others until the semester he was studying abroad and another student made the connection between Derek and the white supremacist movement and posted on the campus community forum. When Derek returned, that thread had become the most-commented thread in the history of that school, and Derek was eager to

² δίκαιος – www.blueletterbible.org Strong’s G1342

³ “The White Flight of Derek Black” in *The Washington Post*, Eli Saslow, October 15, 2016

avoid campus and friends who'd expressed to him their sense of anger and dismay and betrayal. He was disgraced.

But then something happened. A moment of grace. A number of students began to take a different approach. One said "ostracizing Derek won't accomplish anything...we have a chance to be real activists and actually affect one of the leaders of white supremacy in America." And so, they hatched a plan. An Orthodox Jew, Matthew, had been hosting weekly Shabbat dinners where he'd cook for friends each Friday night. Not just Jewish friends, but Christians and atheists and anyone who was open minded enough to share a meal together with a couple of Hebrew prayers. Matthew decided to invite Derek to dinner. Matthew resolved their goal was not to confront Derek, but simply to include him...to treat him like anyone else. He gave firm instructions to other guests to not bring up white nationalism, and people had enough respect for Matthew that they listened. After one successful dinner, Matthew kept inviting Derek. And Derek kept showing up. And slowly but surely people shared more of their stories. They got to know Derek. And Derek got to know them. Derek was pretty quiet, mostly listening. Perhaps out of self-protection. But after awhile, some of those gathered began to occasionally ask Derek about his supremacist views. It wasn't the *only* topic of conversation, but it was a topic that these friends began to approach carefully and courageously. Derek explained his views. His Shabbat friends would gently point out faulty thinking, prod him to consider alternative evidence, and patiently argue how Derek's views made other people afraid. As time passed, a slow transformation was taking place. Derek was becoming more confused about what he believed—so much of what he'd learned was being dismantled, both intellectually and also through his engagement with people who weren't white and weren't Christian. Finally, not long after he graduated, he formally and publically disavowed the white supremacy of his past. It made national news.

This wasn't a momentary conversion—in fact, it was years in the making. Nor was it easy. But it was grounded in the bravery and grace of a small group of people who decided to avoid the well-worn path of public shaming of Derek and instead pursued the road less traveled—a risky and vulnerable road of pursuing a relationship. Like Joseph, they chose extending grace to Derek over disgrace.

With this story in mind, let's take another look at Joseph's response to Mary. Early in the story, Joseph doesn't have the full picture when he chooses to dismiss Mary quietly. Joseph may feel heartbroken, but he likely thinks at least he's getting out of the woods of this scandalous mess. But then God shows up and basically says "I'm gonna push your notion of grace and righteousness beyond your wildest nightmare!" Because just as Joseph resolves to quietly dismiss Mary and imagine his future anew, an angel appears in a dream and instructs Joseph that the Holy Spirit was at the center of this predicament and that Joseph should go ahead and marry Mary and take this scandal upon himself. And while Joseph may have been able to quietly dismiss Mary, he couldn't quietly dismiss God.

The angelic proclamation adds insult to injury. Joseph is already trying so hard to be righteous and to do the right thing! And we know Joseph was afraid, because the angel made a point of telling him *not* to be. Just when Joseph reaches the limits of his inner turmoil and the limits of his own righteousness as he tries to handle the situation with Mary, God steps in to say that Joseph *doesn't get to walk away* from this mess. Instead, he is asked to enter right into it: into the scandal of a questionable pregnancy...into raising a child not his own...into the possibility of a lifetime of questions and

innuendo and public humiliation...into a life he had not imagined for himself. But, we already have been told that Joseph is a righteous man—that his heart is set on God’s heart—and so he obeys. Joseph marries Mary. The Lord trusted he would. So now Joseph doesn’t simply display righteousness by *not exposing* Mary to shame, he deepens that righteousness and real grace by being willing to *share in the possibility of being shamed, of being in the center of the mess*. Just as God is stretching the boundaries in Mary’s womb, he’s also stretching the boundaries of Joseph’s heart...pushing Joseph beyond what’s ever been asked of him...and trusting that Joseph in his righteousness will say yes, even to this.

I want to offer a caveat here. Sometimes the people most *in need* of divine grace may not be able to extend grace very well themselves. Look at Mary. She’s in a terrible situation, her whole life on the line, in a time when her voice has no validity. We have no idea what she’s told Joseph, and whether or not he believes her. It took an *angel of the Lord* stepping in to convince even a *righteous* man that Mary was being truthful. Sometimes in this world, you may have the opportunity to be Joseph, and to listen for God and obey as you are invited into truly uncomfortable and scandalous places. Sometimes you may be on the receiving end, desperate for a word of grace in the midst of your own mess. And sometimes you may be invited to be like the angel, speaking on behalf of the people who don’t have a voice, or whose voice isn’t taken seriously, telling them to not be afraid.

Because extending grace *is God’s very nature*...it is God’s wild way of being in relationship with us. What Joseph learns, and what our world comes to remember every Advent, is the overwhelming power of God’s grace—a grace that so yearned *to be with us* that God finally took form in the word made flesh, the young infant Jesus. God sees all our mess and all our brokenness and God *chooses to show up in the very midst of it*. Jesus arrives on the world stage, not to some pristine upper-Middle class cocktail party, but through the scandal of an unwed mother in an impoverished Middle-eastern family. God could have shown up *anywhere* but chooses to show up in weakness, in disrepute, and in vulnerability. God may be asking Joseph to extend a scandalous level of grace to Mary, but it’s only because *God is already extending a scandalous level of grace and vulnerability* to our world while waiting in Mary’s womb. And we know that once Christ is born he will continue to righteously extend grace by submitting himself to scandal and vulnerability and even the shame of the cross.

So, when we look at our world today, with all its grief and pain and anger and distrust, perhaps we have something to learn from Joseph who in his righteousness chose grace over shaming. And while extending grace starts with God, it continues through us. And if our call to extend grace is anything like Joseph’s...it may be one of the hardest things we ever do. Will you, like Joseph, trust God enough to say yes?