“Grace”

In the early 1990s, I watched a program on public television produced by Bill Moyers called "Amazing Grace." It was about the famous old hymn written by John Newton in the 18th Century. Until his conversion, Newton was best known as a slave trader. Reflecting on the evil he had perpetrated on other human beings and how completely he had transgressed God's law, Newton penned the words that have become timeless:

Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

Not long after seeing the program, I had an enlightening conversation with a colleague. This colleague had not seen the program, so I described some of the images and scenes from it. One of them was of the famous Harlem Boys Choir. These boys, most of them between the ages of 9 and 12, hardly seemed old enough to understand what they were singing about. Being so young, they had insufficient experience to comprehend grace that can restore an egregious sinner like John Newton. When Moyers asked the choir director about this fact, the director responded, "You're quite right. They don't understand grace. But when they are old enough to be touched by grace, they will remember this song." After I recounted this story to my colleague, he said, "You know what, Mike? I don't understand grace either."

About that time, we parted company, so I didn't question him
further. But for a while I was taken aback by his remark. I had been trying to make a very sensible point about these young boys not understanding something of which only the experience of an adult could make sense. And here this seasoned, mature colleague was saying that even he didn't understand grace. I wondered, "Why would he say that he doesn't understand grace?"

Reflecting on that conversation over the years, I have concluded that my colleague was making an important point. In a certain respect, we don't understand grace. To begin with, there is the essential mystery of grace – why is such a gift granted to the undeserving? But beyond this, we may be too comfortable with our lives to understand it – perhaps too complacent to feel its profundity and mystery, and to know it by acquaintance deep within our souls.

I'm reminded of a story told by Lofton Hudson, a Kansas City minister. A parishioner who attended his church only occasionally was chatting with Hudson one day. He mentioned to Hudson that he didn't know much about religion and that religious terminology puzzled him. So Hudson asked him: "What do you think of when I say the word 'grace'?" With a little smile on his face, the man said, "Why, Grace is a blue-eyed blond." Taking that incident as a metaphor for a more general confusion about grace, Hudson wrote a wonderful little book entitled, *Grace is Not a Blue-Eyed Blond.*

Now, I don't for a minute think that Hudson's parishioner knew so little about grace that he really believed it to be a blue-eyed blond. Furthermore, I don't believe anyone here is that confused either. But I do think that we entertain some misconceptions about grace. I also think that for some of us the word **grace** has become a

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piece of pale religious jargon. As a result, we regularly overlook the more profound and challenging aspects of a grace that would transform us if we recognized it for what it is and consented to its work in our lives.

So, what is grace? In one sense it is precisely what we have always been taught: it is the free gift of God to people who do not deserve it. The old paraphrase serves us well: grace is God’s unmerited favor.

The conversation about grace becomes more complicated and thickly textured, however, when we take account of how different people respond to this gift. And this is where we need the assistance of a good story – like the parable of the prodigal (Luke 15:1-3 & 11-32).2

The basic features of the story are familiar. A young man asks his father for his portion of the family inheritance. When his father gives it to him, the son goes off and squanders it. Destitute, he decides he would be better off at home, even if he has to live as a servant. As he approaches the home, his father rushes out to welcome him, gives him gifts, and hosts a celebration dinner. When the elder son sees all this, he is offended.

Now it seems to me that despite our familiarity with the basic storyline, this parable is difficult to understand, for two primary reasons.

First, as modern readers we lack an immediate appreciation of the culture and ethos of the ancient near east.

- We don’t easily grasp the egregious nature of the younger

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son’s offence. (Robinson’s *Gilead*)

- We also don’t appreciate the correctness – the essential rightness – of the elder son’s diligent compliance with family and cultural norms: loyally staying with his father, caring for the property, maintaining the buildings, overseeing the livestock, supervising the servants who lived and worked there, and nurturing and protecting the other family members.

- We also don’t fully grasp the extent to which the father disregarded social norms and reached out to the younger son. For an elderly near eastern man of that time period, running out to meet someone, especially a wayward son, was an unbecoming act. It would certainly have evoked reproach from neighbors.

So, as modern readers of the parable, we are inclined to miss the weight of the story because we don’t fully appreciate the cultural and ethical norms that constitute its unspoken premises.

But also we are inclined to do something to this parable that we do to parables generally.

- Through time, repeated retellings, and familiarity, we oversimplify and thus convert this parable of grace into conventional wisdom.

- We convert it into an easy story – a story that is as pleasing, mild-mannered, and non-threatening as our caricature of a blue-eyed blond.

We do this in failing to pay attention to ways in which the various characters respond to the father’s acts of grace and compassion.

Remember, when the father sees the younger son approaching, he runs to meet him, embraces him, orders a robe, ring, and

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shoes for him, and then crowns his welcome with a feast. Given what we are told about the younger son’s past, the father’s acts are extraordinary. So it is worth asking: within the circle of hearers, who understands these gracious and forgiving acts?

This question is important because when we truly grasp what it is asking, we will understand what the gospel – the good news – is all about.

Well then, the younger son understands.

- As the offender, the sinner, the prodigal, he understands. Like the tax collectors and prostitutes mentioned elsewhere, he is acutely aware of his own short-comings and failures. And like them, he recognizes at once that grace is for him.
- The younger son is overwhelmed and delighted by the father’s generosity because he knows that he deserves nothing.

But doesn’t the elder son also understand? Doesn’t he grasp that it is his father whose love is reaching out to the wayward son? Doesn’t he realize that it is his brother who was lost and is found? In a certain sense, he does understand. And that is precisely the problem. From the elder son’s point of view, his father is completely blind to merit and therefore irresponsibly undiscriminating. That makes him angry.

- The elder son, who has been loyal and thinks that his loyalty ought to count for something, is deeply offended. He wants justice on top of grace. For that reason, he sees his father’s gracious acts toward the younger son as rejection of him (the elder son).

The responses of the two sons point to a general pattern: words and deeds of grace divide the audience into younger sons and elder sons.
For the younger sons, the prodigals, grace presents itself as the open arms of a father who would defy social conventions to express his extravagant compassion.

For the elder sons, social and moral correctness are more important than grace. Without them, grace is an affront.

Is grace really as indulgent as it seems to be to the younger son? The answer is “Yes,” but (paradoxically) it is usually not indulgent in the way we think it should be indulgent.

On the other hand, is grace really so confrontational as it appears to be for the elder son? The answer is yes, sometimes it is. Grace sometimes pulls us out of our comfort zone; wakes us up; challenges our assumptions; wounds us from behind where we think we are the least vulnerable. Sometimes it offends.

Is grace like that? Does it have the capacity to offend?

Paul, quoting a passage from the Old Testament, says of Jesus: "Behold, I have laid in Zion a stumbling stone and a rock of offence." Jesus is the bearer of grace. But the grace that he offers is not a blue-eyed blond. His grace has the potential to offend people.

Think here of the story of the Canaanite woman who came to Jesus requesting healing for her daughter. Jesus said: "It is not proper for dogs to get the children's food." Jesus gave this woman the opportunity to be offended by him.

Why is this theme of offence so important to grace? Because as we go through life, each of us develops a certain self-image. This self-image is actually a way we explain to ourselves who we are. Our self-image can take many forms, but one common form goes something like this:
"I'm not perfect; I have my flaws. Still, I'm not as bad as a lot of people. And on the whole, I'm a pretty decent person."

This reasoning is a common way people explain themselves to themselves.

But this self-image – this account of the self to the self – is largely a self-deception. I'm not suggesting that we are vile and evil in the crassest sense. But we are sinners – sinners saved by grace. And a self-image that keeps us from being reminded of that fact is a deceptive self-image.

Jesus seeks to take fractured, incomplete, imbalanced lives and make whole persons. He seeks to restore us to our full humanity, which is made in the image of God. But he can't do that without showing us in various ways wherein we stand in need of being made whole. He has to get behind the account we invent for ourselves that says we are, on the whole, pretty decent people. And for this reason, words and deeds of grace often come to us in ways that reveal something to us that we would rather not face. In that sense they have the potential to offend.

Consider Flannery O’Connor’s short story “Revelation.”

The good news in the parable of the prodigal is this:

- The younger son, for all of his wasted living, came to two remarkable insights and made one good decision.
  - Insight 1: He recognized that he deserved nothing.
  - Insight 2: He recognized that he would be better off as a servant in his father’s house than in his present situation.
  - Decision: He would go home.

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• The other piece of good news is that the elder son is not inevitably stuck in his moralistic self-justification. He too can have a home coming of sorts. In a way, his situation is more difficult than that of the younger son. Self justification is very difficult to acknowledge. As with O'Conner’s Mrs. Turpin, grace sometimes has to confront us as directly and powerfully as if we were being struck on the head by a book. But also, when so struck, we can awaken to the truth. And there is hope in that possibility.