

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor  
Sermon for January 18, 2009  
Lessons: Genesis 32:24-32 and Romans 12:1-2,9-21

## WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL ABOUT GRACE?

It is a very big little word in Christian thought, especially in Protestant Christian thought since the great reformer Martin Luther declared that justification (being set right) with God, with life, and with self comes “by grace alone, through faith.” So, that big little word, grace, stands tall at the very center of what it means to be Christian. I would go so far as to say that everything that goes wrong in the thinking and in the practice of Christianity happens because we move away from the truth represented by that word or subordinate that truth to some other concern so that something else on our minds overrides the grace of God.

Some Christians scarcely use the term grace, while others repeat it as though the word itself had some power to change life. I think we go wrong in two ways, other than rejecting the whole idea of grace flat out. Both ways of going wrong continue to be popular among Christians trying to avoid something that challenges their core beliefs about life and self, and so both remain temptations or else frustrations to us all. One way is to reduce grace to a mere second chance, a do-over in the game of life. The other way to go wrong is make grace represent divine magic. In the first way, the difference grace makes is all about me, while God stands back as the judge of my virtue and success as a person. If grace is just another chance to do it right, then I am still mostly on my own, with God watching to see how I do but not really participating much in making the difference. In the second way, the roles are reversed so the difference grace makes is all about God, and I become the one just watching but not really participating. God works the magic through Christ while I stand by.

Let's talk first about the second bad choice: grace as divine magic. Why do I call it magic? It has all the right elements. I say the powerful words, and if I say them with the right conviction and sincerity, great change happens to me. It is done by God through Christ *to me*, because I have said the powerful words the right way: “I accept Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior. I give my life to him.” Be assured, I am not making fun of those words or of the human need, grief, and pain that have often led people to utter them in one form or another. The man who penned the words of the hymn, “Amazing Grace,” was, I learned from the movie, a tormented soul, a slave ship captain who could not escape the voices crying out from the hold of his vessel. The problem comes when the “right words” are set into a formula for working like magic, a sort of incantation. Never mind that there's no such thing as real magic because that reality-check has never stopped people from seeking

it and interpreting life as though there were such power — *the power to make things change without a realistic process of change*. That's magic, and that's what Christians sometimes make God's grace sound like, as though God magically changed my whole life and eternal destiny without my having to go through a process of change. It's a new life without a new person. Or it's a new person who somehow is changed completely without effort, struggle, or the pain of growth. Presto! Abracadabra! Instant salvation.

Just to be clear, I am not speaking against stage magic which is entertainment or against fiction that employs the fantasy of magical worlds as the context for real human struggles and changes. In that category I would include both J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. I have read both, and in them the magic is only dressing for the much more realistic human struggles presented in ways quite arguably compatible with Christian thought. In both works, the real changes come, not from magic, but from giving up self-preservation, power, and glory for the sake others — from laying down one's life for those one loves.

Jacob wrestles with a manifestation of God, and in the process becomes Israel. Yes, that's Israel's story and our story. Jesus Christ calls us to wrestle with God, and many times, like Jacob, we wrestle to a draw and go limping on our way. I think when I was a kid, I wondered why God didn't just win, but winning has never been the point for God. Real change in my life requires change in me as a person, which requires a realistic process of change. Grace, God's grace, is not just the chance to go through that process, but is the process itself. Grace is a love that will not let go, that will keep the wrestling match going until the change is complete.

Now, let's look at the other problem. If in the misunderstanding of grace as divine magic to transform us without our engagement in a realistic process of change, God seems to do everything for us while we do almost nothing for ourselves, this other problem reverses the situation. I am left to do almost everything, while God's only significant role is to give me a second chance and then judge the outcome. Why would I succeed the second time, or the third, fourth, or fifth? What change gives me realistic hope for a different outcome? I remain the same person, with the same set of life-forming experiences, the same complex set of responses to life and other people practiced since childhood, the same self-image, the same habits and established patterns for self-destructive reactions to challenge.

Albert Einstein is famously said to have described insanity as doing the same thing over and over but expecting different results. I'm not sure Einstein said that, and I would change the label from insanity to folly, but the point remains, especially when God as judge is said biblically to have impossibly high standards. But we don't even need to consider that argument of Paul's that any attempt toward self-justification by keeping the commandments,

the law, requires perfection, that it's all or nothing. Is it not enough to have experienced the failure of do-overs? What good is a second chance if I'm the same person I was the first time? That same apostle Paul describes the problem poignantly: *The good that I will myself to do, I do not do, and the evil I would not do, that is what I end up doing, anyway.* The situation gets even worse if I delude myself into thinking I am achieving success by comparing myself with others, passing my own judgments. Then what I become is a hypocrite who, failing to recognize my own need for God's grace, extends no grace to other people, but, instead, responds to their hurt and shame with judgment's disgust or pity.

In his Letter to the Romans, Paul contrasts conformity with transformation. "Do not be conformed to this world (or this age, this time in which you live), but transformed by the renewal of you mind." To engage ourselves in that struggle for change, Paul tells us, we need to focus our thinking on "God's mercies." He's not talking about a mental exercise or devotional mantra; he's talking about our learning a new set of responses to life that emerge from a completely new sense of self as loved by God without deserving to be, as forgiven and set free, as embraced by a God who won't let go, and as called to reach out and help others into and through the process we are only just learning ourselves.

Modern cameras come with adjustable lenses so the photographer can step back and view the larger scene, the greater context, or step forward to move in close to the subject, often a person. Jesus Christ gives us a new adjustable lens so we can view the larger context or the immediate situation and the other people involved and see them in a new way. That Christ-given adjustable lens is God's grace — the love we do not have to deserve, the respect we do not need to earn, the forgiveness that changes us so we don't just get a do-over to fail again. Listen to Paul. Don't do harm back to someone who has harmed you. Wow! That's hard, especially when we realize Paul is not telling us we shouldn't stand up to the person who wrongs us but that we need to stand up to that person for the sake of redemption rather than the satisfaction of revenge. Don't take the upper hand to gain advantage and control. Don't take a higher place to feed your pride. Paul is echoing Jesus. But such changes don't come naturally to us or magically. They come from wrestling with the truth that God loves us, calls us to trust that love, and also loves the world's other people. So, I guess I shouldn't be too surprised to find myself limping away from time to time, but think about it. Christ offers us real change, not another chance to fail and not a magical transfiguration that doesn't seem to make a whole lot of difference in the ways we think and live. Paul tells the Philippians to work out their own salvation because God is at work within and among them. That's the process, and, yes, it runs on God's grace which fills it with hope each new day. Amen.