

“This Grace Given: 2) The Power of Grace”

a sermon by

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Text: “...since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:23-24).

In his book *Race Matters*, Cornel West, an African-American professor of religion at Princeton University, relates an experience that he had some years ago in New York City. He and his wife had gone to the city for appointments. At one point it began to rain and West attempted to hail a cab. He watched as one empty cab, then two, then three, and more cabs passed him by, though he was well dressed and clearly a professional person.

West also recalls driving one day to Williams College to deliver a lecture. On his way to the college he was pulled over by a policeman and accused of trafficking in cocaine. When West told the officer that he was a professor of religion, the officer replied, “Sure you are, and I am the Flying Nun.”

One of the great dilemmas of the human condition is that we are a people who are estranged and separated. We are separated from other people, often by race or class or nationality. We are often separated from people that should be the closest to us. Husbands are often separated from wives, wives from husbands, children from parents.

We are separated from God. So often we feel ourselves abandoned by God, unsure of who God is, and wondering where God is in the midst of all the suffering of the world.

I.

During the Sundays of June, we are looking at Paul’s letter to the Church at Rome. The Book of Romans has played a momentous role in the life of the church. As I mentioned last week, it contains the most insightful understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ that is present in all of Paul’s writings. This past week we looked at Paul’s theme expressed in Romans 1:16-

17, where he writes, “I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”

This morning we examine the way that Paul expands that theme and how he understands the “Power of Grace.”

II.

The place to begin is with our understanding of sin. “All have sinned,” Paul observes, “and come short of the glory of God.” Through the years the church has understood sin in a number of ways. It is the “failure to do things that we should have done, as well as the things that we should not have done, yet did do.” Sin is pride. It is oppression. It is disobedience. It is apathy.

One of the ways that the church has understood sin is as “separation.” Paul Tillich in his little book *The Shaking of the Foundations*, once observed that before sin could be understood as an “act,” it had to be understood as a “state.”

We are separated from God. At some fundamental level I believe that most of us understand this. We know that there is something missing from our lives, something we long for, yet do not know exactly how to find. Sometimes in the midst of great suffering, we feel estranged from God. Sometimes when we look at the world of human suffering around us, we wonder how there could possibly be a God. All of our despair, our sense of meaninglessness, all of the expressions of despair that we feel are pointers to us that we are separated from the one who created us. St. Augustine speaks for all of us when he says, “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.”

We are separated from each other as well. I mentioned Cornel West and the difficult subject of race in this country. But the separation I am speaking of between people isn’t just about race. There is separation in families, in marriages, in churches, in communities. It is also evident in the fact that we can pick up the newspaper in the morning and read about the terrible killing in Darfur, the starving millions of children in Africa, the terrible plight of families in children in our own community and yet go on with our lives as though we were completely ignorant. In both humankind and nature, life is separated from life. Estrangement prevails in all things that live. Sin abounds.

We are also separated from ourselves. Karl Menninger, a famous psychologist, once wrote a book he entitled *Man Against Himself*. We are split against ourselves. We sometimes condemn “self-love,” but really what we mean to condemn is self-hatred. It is this mixture of selfishness and self-hatred that pursues us and prevents us from loving others. Only the person who is able to love himself can love another. Only the person who has overcome self-contempt can overcome his contempt for others. But the depth of our separation lies in the fact that we are not able to love ourselves.

Paul understood this. “For I do not do the good I desire,” he writes, “but rather the evil I do not desire.” And then he continues; “Now if I should do what I do not wish to do, it is not I that do it, but rather sin that dwells within me.”

III.

The answer to the problem of sin is the reality of God's grace. "Where sin abounded," Paul writes, "grace abounds even more."

In the passage from which I have read, Paul uses several words to describe how we experience God's grace: justification, redemption, expiation, and pardon. The point of this, of course, is that salvation is given to us in Jesus Christ. The Christian church has spoken of the work of Christ in a number of different ways. For some the death of Jesus is a ransom that pays for our freedom and our deliverance. Others have seen the death of Jesus as victory of God over our sins. Still others speak of God's atonement in terms of Christ's substitution for us. But regardless of how one speaks of this—the point is the same. Someone has to pay the price. In order for the separation between God and us to be bridged—someone has to pay a price.

That is what Paul experienced. That is what he means when he says, "where sin abounded, grace abounded even more." I don't think he wrote these words to be sentimental or even to insist that everything must have a happy ending. I believe he said them because in the moment that he encountered the risen Christ he found himself accepted in spite of being rejected. And when he found that he was accepted by God, he was able to accept himself and to be reconciled to others.

Harry Emerson Fosdick spoke on a number of occasions of his friend Bill Wilson, the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. If you had seen him coming to church on a Sunday morning, Fosdick observed, you would have thought that he was a successful man in every way. He was a success in business. He had a beautiful family. What you would not have known, observed Fosdick, was that Bill Wilson was a hopeless alcoholic. He was drinking a bottle of gin a day, then two, then even more until he went to his doctors. They hospitalized him, diagnosed him, and confirmed to him what his family and loved ones knew: he was a hopeless alcoholic.

But Bill Wilson was not only an alcoholic. He was an agnostic as well. But in his crisis he went down on his knees in a desperate need to find some power greater than himself.

He found that power. Explain how you will, says Fosdick, but that man has never taken a drink since. As for his agnosticism, you should hear him talk about God—quietly, with a deep sense of mystery, not supposing he knows much about theology, but sure of one thing—the power of God to remake him.

That is what we mean by the grace of God. It is not only God's forgiveness. It is God's power as well.

Now most of us will not have an experience that powerful. But there is nothing the church needs more deeply than women and men who understand the power of God's grace in their lives. How real is your God? "He restores my soul." Do we mean that? "Not my will but thy will be done." Do we mean that?

Recently I came across a remarkable article in *The Christian Century* entitled “Failing Christianity” by Barbara Brown Taylor, who teaches at Piedmont College and Columbia Theological Seminary in Georgia. In this article, she relates a course she teaches at Piedmont College on “Introduction to World Religions.” She finds that her students appreciate the course very much. It allows them to understand other religions including Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism. The strange thing for her is that the religion that most of her students have the most trouble with is their own religion—Christianity. Many of them could talk about their “favorite Bible passages” or their “summer mission trips” or “what their church meant to them.” But in many ways, Brown notes, they were ignorant about their faith. They did not understand the Trinity. They were not able to name the “four gospels.” They did not know about the Reformation of the church in the Sixteenth Century or what the Orthodox Church was.

Surely, one of the most important things that the church has to do is to teach our young people is to understand not only the faith of others, but to understand our faith as well.

God’s great work for our redemption in Jesus Christ cannot be adequately stated or summarized in neatly written sentences or propositions. Salvation is always God confronting us in a person. Yet there are various facets of God’s work for us in Jesus Christ that should be clear to all of us. Our salvation is the work of God in Christ, who did for us what we could not do for ourselves. He suffered vicariously for us, made satisfaction for our sins, and in the person of Jesus not only condemned sin but overcame sin and death. Yet God’s salvation is also the outreaching of the love of God and the demonstration of God’s will for human beings in Jesus Christ which elicits and evokes love and discipleship for us.

“Sin” and “Grace” are strange words; but they are not strange things. We find them whenever we look into ourselves with searching eyes and longing hearts. They determine our lives. They abound within us in all of life.

May grace abound even more in us.

Amen.