

Not Quite True: There But For the Grace of God Go I...

I Corinthians 15:1-11

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In the mid-16th century, a Protestant minister named John Bradford was imprisoned in the Tower of London. He had been arrested in the first month of the reign of Mary Tudor for the nebulous charge of “trying to stir up a mob.” Bradford, who had an auspicious career, and had once served as Chaplain to King Edward VI, was one of countless protestants targeted and imprisoned when Mary Tudor, Edward’s Roman Catholic half-sister, ascended the throne. As you may remember, she would posthumously earn the nickname “Bloody Mary” for the mass executions of Protestants during her reign.

During his seminary days, Bradford was known as “holy Bradford” for his selflessness and his deep piety. It was said that he was so aware of his own sinfulness that the sight of another person’s misdeeds was enough to send him into emotional confession. If he saw a drunk person, he would exclaim, “Lord, I have a drunken head!” and if he heard someone swear, he would cry out, “Lord, I have a swearing heart!”¹

Legend has it that one day while he was in prison, Bradford noticed a group of fellow prisoners being led to their place of execution and exclaimed, “But for the grace of God, there goes John Bradford.” The statement was repeated over the years as evidence of Bradford’s deep faith and humble reliance upon God.

Now, some 500 years later, the phrase, “there but for the grace of God go I” is widely used to express gratitude for one’s blessings in the face of

¹ www.wikipedia.com, *John Bradford*.

misfortune or suffering. There's even a country music song with that title (of course there is).

There are countless instances when this phrase may be used. A person who sees a man huddled under a coat on the sidewalk on a cold day asking for spare change might think, "there but for the grace of God go I." So, too, might someone who watches a news story about refugees crowded in a leaky boat, or hears about an addict who is unable to break free from the shackles of her disease.

When we see evidence of the very real tragedies that are all too common in this fallen human world, when our hearts break over the suffering of other people, we all struggle to find ways to express how we feel. And, as we have noted throughout this sermon series, that isn't always easy. There is so much in this world, in our lives, that defies explanation.

We want to trust and believe in the goodness of God, but it can be challenging when we see so much evidence of evil, brokenness and suffering. We struggle for the words to make sense of that which we don't understand. This is the power of the half-truth – it gives us something to say in the face of that which cannot easily be explained.

"There but for the grace of God go I" is, at its best, an expression of humility and compassion, a statement of reliance upon God and not on one's own moral uprightness. It points to the truth that each of us is fully reliant upon God's grace and it seeks to acknowledge that terrible things can happen to anyone; that none of us, by our own virtue, is any better than anyone else.

It seeks to express empathy, humility, and connection with one's fellow human beings in the face of deep struggle and pain.

But that is not all that it says, hence its inclusion in the "Not Quite True" sermon series. I must confess that I cannot hear this phrase without wondering why, if God's grace protects me from a particular tragedy, it didn't protect the person who suffered that tragedy. If I'm not in someone else's predicament because of God's grace, then what does that say about that person? Did God decide to withhold grace from them?

John Bradford's story didn't end with his observation about the other prisoners heading to their deaths, and it didn't end many years later in a peaceful death from natural causes. Just a few short months after he uttered those words, he himself was burned at the stake for his heretical views. If it had been God's grace that had sheltered him from the fate of the other prisoners a few months earlier, then what changed that led to his execution?

The trouble with this phrase, I think, is its assumption about grace. As it is uttered, it makes grace sound like some sort of force field – a magical, mystical protection from suffering that is handed out to those whose faith is strong. “that person has it really bad,” it asserts, “and I could too if it weren't for this grace that protects me.” It sets up a “me vs. thee” kind of thinking that keeps us isolated from the very people God calls us into communion with.

It has been assumed over the years that, when John Bradford made his comment, he was paraphrasing this morning's text from I Corinthians 15, particularly the words of the tenth verse.

Paul wrote, “But by the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them – though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.”

At first glance, maybe we can see how these two statements are connected. Both seem to be saying that it is God's grace, not our own action, that is to be credited for that which is good in us and in our lives.

That's something I think those who seek to follow Christ can agree upon.

But upon further examination, the connection between these two phrases begins to unravel.

Paul's words express the truth about grace- none of us is anything without it. “By the grace of God,” he says, “I am who I am.” It is hard to argue with that. We don't make ourselves – God made us.

The popular saying seeks to acknowledge that, I think, but then it bends it, because it says that God's grace doesn't just make me who I am, it also

keeps me from being who someone else is or in the trouble someone else is in.

Do you see that difference? It is small, but it is significant.

The biblical statement acknowledges that we are nothing apart from God's grace. The popular statement connotes that, because of God's grace, we have something that someone else does not have- health or wealth or status or privilege. It turns the grace inward and makes it some sort of prize that we've earned, but others haven't.

This is a problem, because grace is not an accomplishment. It's not something we earn or deserve. And it is not a tool to keep us safe and comfortable. Grace does not protect us from the hard things that can happen in life, but rather it promises that we will never face those struggles alone.

And God, whose very being is relationship, as we know God as father, son and Holy Spirit, made it so that the surest way for us to experience grace is not on our own, but in relationship.

We will never fully comprehend God, or understand how God works, but we have been given the gift of one another, that we might experience grace through our interactions with other people. Grace reminds us daily that we are connected to each other, no matter the differences that, at times, can seem so significant.

So saying that God's grace shields me from that which hurts someone else perverts the truth of grace, which is that it is God's free gift to all of God's children, not to favor some over others, but that all might know the great gift of God's steadfast presence.

The best way for us to start to understand this is to try, when we encounter someone whose circumstances might prompt us to think, "there but for the grace of God go I..." to try instead to see them as a fellow traveler, a kindred spirit, someone with whom we might, in fact, have something in common.

Laura Schroff was a 35-year-old single, successful ad sales executive living in Manhattan in 1986 when she met an 11-year old boy named Maurice

panhandling on the street. When Maurice first asked Laura if she could spare some change, she kept walking. But after a few steps, something made her stop and turn around. She started talking to him, and ended up tasking him if he wanted to go get some lunch. They went to lunch every Monday for the next four years, developing a relationship² that forms the basis for her book, An Invisible Thread.

What makes the story so memorable is not the unlikely bond between these two seemingly opposite people. Rather, it is the similarity – the invisible thread- that connects them on a very human level. Maurice’s entire young life had been spent in poverty, and though he had family around him, instability was the only constant he knew. All of the adults in his life were trapped in cycles of addiction and incarceration and he was, for all intents and purposes, on his own.

Laura had grown up in a middle class suburban family, but alcoholism and abuse had profoundly shaped her childhood. Though she experienced much professional success, her dream of starting her own family was never realized and the grief of not having a child was overwhelming. As the two got to know each other over lunches of cheeseburgers and ice cream, they slowly began to fit into each other’s lives, bridging their many differences with a genuine affection that helped to soothe old wounds and deeply changed each of their lives.

Instead of focusing on how different they were, each of them, in their own way, focused on what they had in common. And over the course of many years, they developed a unique mother/son relationship that lasts to this day.

The book’s epilogue is a letter Maurice wrote to Laura just a few years ago. Now a husband and father of seven, Maurice is very clear that he is where he is in large part due to his relationship with Laurie, whom he calls “mom.” He writes,

It all began on that day long ago when I asked you for money, and you walked right by me. At that moment, I’m sure I thought you were just

² www.lauraschroff.com

another of those rich, uppity white people I'd always been told about. But then you came back, and now I realize how black and white my world was before I met you. The beliefs that I'd been raised on were based on only one point of view... Because of you, Laurie, I got to see the many different ways people show they love and care for each other.

As he concludes, he references the book, writing,

I know An Invisible Thread is about an unusual friendship between two different people, but I think it is about much more than that. It is about a mother longing for a child and a child longing for a mother. And that longing had nothing to do with umbilical cords or DNA. It had to do with two people who needed each other.³

Whenever we see someone else as the other, placing distance between our experience and theirs, we miss out on something. And that is what I am afraid the phrase, “there but for the grace of God go I” can tend to do. It limits our capacity to truly see and be present to someone different from us, because we fear or don't understand what they are going through. By focusing on their misfortune and our gratitude for avoiding it, we miss seeing how we might still be connected to them.

Jean Vanier, a Canadian philosopher and theologian, founded l'Arche, an international community of support for people with intellectual disabilities, in 1968. He once said:

Each human being, however small or weak, has something to bring to humanity. As we start to really get to know others, as we begin to listen to each other's stories, things begin to change. We begin the movement from exclusion to inclusion, from fear to trust, from closedness to openness, from judgment and prejudice to forgiveness and understanding. It is a movement of the heart.

This movement changes us. It doesn't allow us to see strangers as the other, to distance ourselves with the false comfort of, “there but for the grace of God go I.” It draws us in, inviting us to see the image of God in

³ Schroff, Laura and Alex Tresniowski, *An Invisible Thread*. (New York: Howard Books, 2011), pp. 227, 231.

each person we encounter, and to acknowledge that in the good times and the tough times, we are all wrapped up in God's grace.

And it is a reminder that grace is not a wall that separates us from those who seem different from us. It is a thread that unites us all as children of a loving God.