

## **“Grace to the Heart”**

**Exodus 14:19-31   Romans 14:1-12   Matthew 18:21-35**

**Year A, Twenty Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, September 14, 2014**

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"Yevtushenko, a great Russian poet, writes in his autobiography of a moment in 1944 when 20,000 German war prisoners were marched through the streets of Moscow, wearing blood-stained bandages, hobbling on crutches, leaning on comrades. [You can imagine how despised these prisoners of war were in Russia because millions of Russians had been killed through German aggression.] At one point an elderly woman, herself ill-clad, pushed through a police line, went up to the column of ragged German soldiers, and pushed a crust of bread into the pocket of a soldier so exhausted that he was tottering. And then suddenly from all sides women were running to these enemy soldiers, pushing bread, cigarettes, whatever they had into their hands. It was reminder that human compassion has sources that transcend powerful hatreds. It suggests that the roots of reconciliation are not alien feelings to the human spirit, but a residue of our origin in the timeless being of the Creator, the Eternal One." (Pulpit Resource for August 18, 2002).

Today's texts focus on the power of God and the *transformation* God's grace and forgiveness bring. We see that grace is a gift from God and if truly received, is a matter of the heart that affects who we are and who we become.

Someone once asked me, "What is grace?" Grace in the human sense simply means charming or kind, even a prayer you say before a meal. But in a biblical sense, Grace is both an action and a description referring to God with divine qualities. One could say, for example, that God's kindness knows no end, and that God's mercy is from everlasting to everlasting. God is Grace in it's truest form. Grace is Reality, Ultimate Reality, blessing us with God's Presence, acting in unwarranted compassion, undeserved forgiveness, and unconditional love. When God's grace is received it brings transformation and new life that was impossible without it. Grace is a gift from God that restores us to that original image of God we were created to be.

Last Wednesday we hosted our first evening in the Peacemaking series and Father Gregory from the Eastern Orthodox Church in Naples near Bonner's Ferry came, along with several church members, and shared about their faith and their church and peacemaking. One of the things he mentioned had to do with worship and how for Eastern Christianity, that branch that was not influenced by Roman Catholicism or Protestants, worship involves all five senses, where as Presbyterians in particular tend to lean toward a cognitive experience during worship. We often focus on the word read and proclaimed, listened to, received through our ears and processed by our mind. It is very difficult in Presbyterian worship services to get 'out of our minds', to get into that heart space, let alone that body experience of the divine. But in Orthodox worship Christians are invited to calm their thoughts, to quiet their mind and experience worship in a heart-space, not so much "up here" but "down here," (motions) inviting union with the divine in the essence of our humanity, physically experiencing the presence of God through all the senses. Christian faith, then, is not just a

set of beliefs we intellectually ascribe to, but an experience of the mind and heart and soul that celebrate our union with God through Jesus Christ.

In the story of Moses and the people Israel crossing the Reed Sea, or Red Sea, the people were pretty helpless in the face of Pharaoh's army. But God's action makes a way for them to journey on, through the waters as they part. Historians and theologians debate endlessly over the mechanics of how this worked, whether it was Moses raising his staff and the waters dramatically parting like the movies tend to show, or a natural event like the annual winds that literally blow the water away from a certain region of the sea, exposing the bottom for a couple days before the waters return. Either way, God's providence was involved and the people were saved. Moses is simply invited to partner with God and be part of God's saving work, and this affects the people. They "feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant."

The people had a role to play; they had to trust God because walking across the bottom of the sea had to take great courage in a desperate situation. If they never took those steps, never trusted enough to set out on something that looked absolutely crazy, never did their part to flee Pharaoh's army and aggression and desire for control, if they gave in to their fear, then the story would've come out differently. But God made a new outcome possible and the people responded. We might say they didn't have much choice, the alternatives weren't good; either being re-enslaved or killed, blamed for all Egypt's problems. That type of situation, where their own efforts, no matter how hard they tried, would still come up lacking, is the type of moment when faith is often at its best because trust and dependence is pushed to the foreground and God gains our total focus.

This past week Elaine Taylor's husband, John, fought for his life in ICU at the hospital following a heart attack and other physical complications. Life sometimes reminds us of how fragile it is, and when living or dying is right before us, it gets you thinking about what's really important. What is really important, anyway? What is the goal of life? What was so important for the Hebrew people to struggle toward? Why would Jesus tell this story about forgiving, not seven times, which was a lot, but seven times seventy times? What was it that this slave of the generous lord didn't catch on to as he failed to extend generosity towards his fellow servant? What was it that we would've hoped he learned?

Grace. God's gift of God's self. As readily present as each breath. As the Hebrew people walked across dry land, they could breathe and they found life through the power and protective presence of God. As Pharaoh's army entered that same place, the waters engulfed them and they drowned. They couldn't breathe. In their anger and aggression they were far from God's intentions and their own egotistical, prideful, hateful desires engulfed them. Same with the ungrateful servant. His own condemning of his fellow servant engulfed him and he wasn't free to live in generosity and grace.

We rely on and put confidence in our own efforts so much, we get so focused on a cause and pour our energies into it, we get consumed by our passions, careers, hobbies, relationships, thinking that if we only work harder or longer or more intentionally that we will find success and be happy, but in reality we often find exhaustion or emptiness or a hollow victory. When things go wrong we shout to God, and God hears our prayers. But

God also knows what it is that we really need. God knows what we were originally created to be. And so God answers a prayer we may not even realize the depths of our soul has uttered, because we are too preoccupied up here, in our mind, with our racing thoughts.

God's grace has a way of reaching out and in, deep into our life in ways that go beyond what we thought ourselves capable of or in need of, and this is based on God's graciousness and God's presence. Like those Russian women who faced the pain of their own husbands, and fathers, and sons, being killed and captured during years of brutality and insanity. They hated those Germans! But they hated hatred even more and they were sick of being victims and chose to live out of something else, something stronger. Love and forgiveness and grace transcend evil and sin because through Jesus the Christ we don't owe God anything, and in fact we have been freed from ourselves. Jesus sends us out, letting us go with forgiveness, new life, and the enormous gift of God's grace. Along with this comes the invitation to share that grace with the world, to allow God's gifts to flow through us to bless others as we share grace from the heart.

God does not want us to respond to God's grace out of guilt or intimidation or obligation, just like the master wouldn't have wanted the servant to forgive the minor debt of the other guy because he felt like he had to. Rather, the master's gift was out of love, a desire to, a radical caring for the other even when circumstances would suggest otherwise.

That's the kind of transformative living we are called to in this world. May God bless us as we receive God's forgiveness, and may we live out of the grace of God in Jesus Christ that dwells within our hearts. May we partner with God, in all that we do and all that we are, as God makes a way to be glorified now and forever. Amen.