Sunday, September 28, 1997
WHAT'S SO AMAZING ABOUT GRACE
Mark 9:38-50

The title of today's sermon, What's So Amazing About Grace, is taken from a book by Philip Yancey, published by Zondervan. In the book, Yancey tells this story:

During a British conference on comparative religions, experts from around the world debated whether any one belief was unique to the Christian faith. They began eliminating possibilities. Incarnation? Other religions had versions of gods appearing in human form. Resurrection? Other religions had accounts of returns from death. The debate went on until C.S. Lewis wandered into the room. "What's the rumpus about?" he asked, and when told that his colleagues were discussing Christianity's unique contribution among world religions, Lewis responded, "Oh, that's easy. It's grace."

After some discussion, the conferees had to agree. The notion of God's love coming to us free of charge, with no strings attached, seems to go against every instinct of humanity. The Buddhist eight-fold path, the Hindu doctrine of karma, the Jewish covenant, and the Muslim code of law — each offers a way to earn God's approval. Only Christianity dares to make God's love unconditional.

Yet we resist the idea of grace. Maybe that's why Jesus spoke of it so often, although He rarely used the word itself. He described a world suffused with God's grace, where the sun shines and the rain falls on both good and bad people; where birds gather seeds freely, neither plowing nor harvesting to earn them; where wildflowers bloom on rocky hillsides without care. Jesus saw God's grace everywhere.

Though He seldom used the word "grace," He communicated it through stories we call parables and through His actions. Yet, still, we struggle to believe it and live it.

Here's one of those parables set in a modern context.

A young woman grows up in an apple orchard near Nebraska City. Her parents overreact to her nose ring, the music she listens to, and the length of her skirts. After being grounded several times, she boils inside. "I hate you!" she screams at her father one night, and acts on a plan she had mentally rehearsed many times. She runs away.

She has only visited Kansas City once before, on a bus trip with her church youth group. After arriving there, she meets a man driving the biggest car she's ever seen. He offers her a ride, buys her lunch, and arranges a place for her to stay. He gives her pills that make her feel better than she's ever felt. She decides that her parents were keeping her from all the fun.

The good life continues for a month, two months, a year. The man, whom she calls "Boss," teaches her things men like, and since she's underage, men pay a premium for her. She lives in a penthouse and orders room service whenever she wants. Occasionally, she thinks about her family, but their lives seem so boring and provincial that she can hardly believe she grew up there. She has a brief scare when she sees her picture on the back of a milk carton with the headline, "Have you seen this child?" But with her blonde hair, makeup, and jewelry, nobody would recognize her.

After a year, the first signs of illness appear, and her “Boss” turns mean. She finds herself out on the street with no money. She still turns a few tricks at night, but all the money goes to support her habit. When winter arrives, she’s sleeping on metal grates outside department stores.

One night, lying awake in the cold, everything looks different. She no longer feels like a woman of the world; she feels like a lost, frightened girl. She begins to whimper. Her pockets are empty, and she’s hungry.

“Why did I leave?” she says to herself. Her dog back home eats better than she does now. She sobs, and in a moment of clarity, she knows that more than anything, she wants to go home.

Three straight phone calls connect her to her family’s answering machine. She hangs up without leaving a message the first two times, but the third time she says, “Dad, Mom, it’s me. I’m wondering if I could come home. I’m catching a bus, and it’ll get there around midnight tomorrow. If you’re not there, I’ll just stay on the bus and head west.”

It takes four hours for the bus to make all the stops between Kansas City and Nebraska City. During that time, she realizes the flaws in her plan. What if her parents are out of town and miss the message? What if they’ve written her off as dead? She rehearses her speech: “Dad, I’m sorry. It’s not your fault; it’s all mine. Can you forgive me?” She hasn’t apologized to anyone in years.

When the bus finally rolls into the station, the driver announces, “Fifteen minutes, folks. That’s all we have here.” Fifteen minutes to decide her life. She checks herself in a compact mirror, smooths her hair, and wipes the lipstick off her teeth. She looks at the tobacco stains on her fingers and wonders if her parents will notice. If they’re even there.

She walks into the terminal, not knowing what to expect, and nothing could have prepared her for what she sees. There, in the concrete walls and plastic chairs of the bus terminal, stands a group of forty family members — brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, a grandmother, and even a great-grandmother. They’re all wearing party hats and blowing noisemakers. Across the terminal, a banner reads, “Welcome Home.”

Her dad breaks through the crowd. She begins her rehearsed speech: “Dad, I’m sorry, I know…”

He interrupts her. “Hush, child. We’ve got no time for that. You’ll be late for the party. A banquet’s waiting for you at home.”

We’re so accustomed to finding a catch in every promise, but in Jesus’ stories of extravagant grace, there’s no catch — no loophole disqualifying us from God’s love. Each story has at its core an ending too good to be true — or so good that it must be true. Jesus didn’t tell stories like this one to teach us how to live; He told them to correct our notions about who God is and how God loves.

In the original story of the Prodigal Son, Jesus introduces the older brother to voice the proper outrage at the father for rewarding irresponsible behavior. What kind of “family values” would the father be communicating by throwing a party for such a renegade? What kind of virtue would that encourage?

Fred Craddock, in one of his sermons, changed the ending of the parable and had the father place the ring and robe on the older brother, then kill the fatted calf in honor of his years of faithfulness. A woman in the back of the church yelled out, “That’s the way it should’ve been written!”

Ask people what they must do to get to heaven, and most will say, “Be good.” But Jesus’ stories contradict that answer. All we must do is cry, “Help!” and God welcomes us home.

One of our church members told me about a conversation with a co-worker who read the Bible an hour a day, believing it necessary for salvation and to earn God’s favor. Now, I’m not saying we shouldn’t read the Bible or pray. But reading the Bible doesn’t make God love us more than someone who doesn’t. What it does is make us more aware of God’s love.

The belief that we must earn God’s love often leads to the assumption that some people have an exclusive right to it, while others do not unless they join our group or believe exactly as we do.

One day, the disciples said to Jesus, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not one of us.”

Too much of religious conversation today focuses on who is “in” and who is “out.” A journalist once asked Carl Sandburg, “What is the ugliest word in the English language?” After a few minutes, Sandburg replied, “Exclusive.” We pride ourselves on being members of exclusive clubs, living in exclusive neighborhoods, dining at exclusive restaurants, and belonging to exclusive churches. But Jesus would say, “Work with them. Do not stop them.”

The first major conflict in the early church centered on who was included. Are gentiles allowed? Peter and Paul debated this until Peter had a dream and concluded that God shows no partiality.

What we forget is that God has a history of acting decisively through outsiders. Jesus Himself refused to live by the divisions of His time. He challenged the practice of limiting God’s grace to one’s own race, religion, or political party.

This makes me think of Mahatma Gandhi in India. Gandhi wasn’t Christian — he was Hindu — but in some ways, he lived out Christian values better than many who worship regularly. He taught about the power of selfless, unconditional love, about nonviolent compassion and justice. I think Jesus would have said of Gandhi, “Work with him. You might learn something.”

God’s grace is more far-reaching and less picky than we can imagine. Trying to shackle the power of God is impossible and ungodly. God’s grace cannot be monopolized by one person, group, or religion.

This also makes me think of Mother Teresa. Like God’s love, her love was unconditional toward all people. She believed it wasn’t “things” that people needed, but love. Her purpose was not to convert anyone but to love them as God loves all of us. She was a channel of God’s grace.

If “exclusive” is the ugliest word in the English language, then “grace” is the most beautiful. Grace comes free of charge to people who don’t deserve it — like you and me. A little poem expresses this well:

“I dreamt death came the other night, And heaven’s gate swung wide. An angel with a halo bright Ushered me inside. And there to my astonishment Stood folks I’d judged and labeled As quite unfit, of little worth, And spiritually disabled. Indignant words rose to my lips, But never were set free, For every face showed stunned surprise— Not one expected me.”

Dear friends, hear this final word about God’s grace: When you experience God’s grace, you realize that things don’t have to be perfect to be good. Every gift you’ve been given makes a good present for someone else, and giving out of your fullness only increases that fullness.

So today, simply accept that you are accepted and loved by God, no matter how unworthy you might feel. You don’t have to earn God’s love — you can’t. It’s a free gift. All you have to do is accept it. That’s what’s so amazing about grace. Amen.