Book 34

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 the title of a new 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 different versions of gods appearing in human form. Resurrection? Again, other religions had accounts of return from death. The debate went on for some

time until C.S. Lewis wandered into the room. "What's the rumpus about?" he asked, and heard in reply that his colleagues were discussing Christianity's unique contribution among world religions. In his forthright manner 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, 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 Muslim code of law--each offers a way to earn God's approval. Only Christianity dares to make God's love unconditional.

And yet we don't want to believe it or live it. We seem to have a built-in resistance to grace. May-

be that's why Jesus talked about it so often although he seldom used the word itself. He described a world suffused with God's grace; where the sun shines and the rain falls on the good people and the bad; where birds gather seeds gratis, neither plowing nor harvesting to earn them; where untended wildflowers burst into bloom on rocky hillsides. Jesus saw God's grace everywhere.

As I said earlier, he seldom used the word. Instead he communicated grace through stories we call parables and in his actions toward others. But still we don't want to believe it and live it.

Here's one of those parables transposed into modern setting. A young woman grows up in an apple orchard near Nebraska City. Her parents,

like many of us, overreact to some of her traits, her nose ring, the music she listens to, and the length of her skirts. They ground her a few times and she boils inside. "I hate you!" she screams at her father when he knocks on the door of her room after an argument, and that night she acts on a plan she had mentally rehearsed scores of times. She runs away.

She has visited Kansas City only once before, on a bus trip with her church youth group to watch the Royals play. Her second day there she meets a man who drives the biggest car she's ever seen. He offers her a ride, buys her lunch, arranges a place for her to stay. He gives her some pills that make her feel better than she's ever felt before. She was right all along, she decides: her parents were keeping her from all

the fun.

The good life continues for a month, two months, a year. The man with the big car, she call him "Boss," teaches her a few things that men like. 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 the folks back home, but their lives now seem so boring and provincial that she can hardly believe she grew up there. She has a brief scare when she sees her picture printed on the back of a milk carton with the headline, "Have you seen this child?" But by now she has blond hair, and with all the makeup and body-piercing jewelry she wears, nobody would mistake her for a child.

After a year the first signs of illness appear, and it amazes her how fast the boss turns mean. Before she knows it she's out on the street without a penny to her name. She still turns a couple of trick a night, but they don't pay much and all the money goes to support her habit. When winter blows in she finds herself sleeping on metal grates outside the big department stores.

One night as she lies awake, shivering in the cold, all of a sudden everything about her life looks different. She no longer feels like a woman of the world. She feels like a young girl, lost in a cold and frightening city. She begins to whimper. Her pockets are empty and she's hungry.

"Why did I leave," she says to herself. My dog back home eats better than I do now. She's

sobbing and she knows in a flash that more than anything else in the world she wants to go home.

Three straight phone calls, three straight connections with the 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 was wondering about maybe coming home. I'm catching a bus up your way and it'll get there about midnight tomorrow. If you're not there, well I guess I'll just stay on the bus and head west."

It takes about four hours for a bus to make all the stops between Kansas City and Nebraska City, and during that time she realizes the flaws in her plan. What if her parents are out of town and miss the message? Shouldn't she have waited

another day or so until she could talk to them? Even if they are at home, they probably wrote her off as dead long ago. She should have given them some time to overcome the shock.

Her thoughts bounce back and forth between those worries and the speech she is preparing for her father. "Dad, I'm sorry. I know I was wrong. It's not your fault; it's all mine. Dad, can you forgive me?" She rehearses them. She hasn't apologized to anyone in years.

When the bus finally rolls into the station, the driver announces in a crackly voice over the microphone, "Fifteen minutes, folks. That's all we have here." Fifteen minutes to decide her life. She checks herself in a compact mirror, smooth-es her hair and licks the lipstick off her teeth.

She looks at the tobacco stains on her fingers and wonders if her parents will notice. If they're there.

She walks into the terminal not knowing what to expect, and not one of the scenes that have played out in her mind prepare her for what she sees. There, in the concrete walls and the plastic chairs of the bus terminal stands a group of forty members of her family, brothers, sisters, great-aunts and uncles and cousins and a grandmother and great- grandmother to boot. They're all wearing ridiculous-looking party hats and blowing noise-makers and taped across the entire wall of the terminal is a banner that reads, "Welcome home."

Out of the crowd of well-wishers breaks her Dad.

She looks through tears quivering in her eyes and begins the memorized speech, "Dad, I'm sorry. I know..."

He interrupts her. "Hush, child. We've got no time for that. No time for apologies. You'll be late for the party. A banquet's waiting for you at home."

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

In the original story of the Prodigal Son, Jesus brought in the older brother to voice proper outrage at his father for rewarding irresponsible behavior. What kind of "family values" would his father communicate 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 of the Prodigal Son and had the father slip the ring and robe on the elder brother, then kill the fatted calf in honor of his years of faithfulness and obedience. 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 reply, "Be good." Jesus' stories contra-

dict that answer. All we must do is cry, "Help," and God welcomes us home.

One of our church members told me about a conversation she had with a person where she works. Her co-worker was telling her that she read the Bible each day for one hour and that this was a necessary activity in order for a person to be saved, that is to earn God's favor and therefore be rewarded with a place in heaven when she died.

I'm not saying that we shouldn't read the Bible, or spend time in prayer. But I am saying that reading the Bible does not cause God to love us more than God loves someone who doesn't. Reading the Bible could make you more aware of God's love and more sensitive to it.

The belief that we somehow have to earn God's love has a corollary. It's the belief that some people have an exclusive right to God's love which others do not have unless they join our particular group or they get our authorization, or they believe exactly as we believe.

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 following us."

Too much of current religious conversation 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." The ugliness of exclusive depends upon whether we see our-

selves as being among the included or the excluded. We pride ourselves on being members of exclusive clubs, living in exclusive neighborhoods, dining at exclusive restaurants, belonging to exclusive churches. Some churches like to say, "You can't take communion here because your're not one of us." "You can't belong to this church because you weren't baptized by the right method."

The first major conflict in the early church centered on the question of who is in and who is out. Are gentiles to be included? Peter and Paul debated that one until Peter had a dream and concluded that God shows no partiality.

Judging people by whether or not they are one of us misses the gift of God's grace. The disciples

missed the power and gift of God's grace in the man casting out demons because he was not one of them. Rather than being grateful that demons were cast out, they were upset that the healing was done through someone outside their group.

What we forget is, God has a history of acting decisively in and through outsiders. Jesus, the very incarnation of God's power, presence and grace refused to live by the divisions and barriers of his time. He challenged the practice of limiting God's grace to one's own race, one's own religious institution, one's own political party.

This story makes me think of Mahatma Gandhi in India. He was not a Christian. He was Hindu, but in some ways he was more Christian than

many of us who worship and preach regularly. Though he was not a Christian, he taught us much about the power of selfless, unconditional love, about working for justice, about non-violent compassion and about freedom. I think Jesus would've said about Gandhi what he said to the disciples about the man in this story who was healing people. "Work with him. Do not try to stop him. Maybe even you will learn something from him."

The story tells us that God's Spirit at work in the world cannot be controlled or fenced in or authorized or licensed or monopolized by any one person or group or religion. The Spirit of God, God's grace is more far-reaching and less picky than we can ever imagine. Trying to shackle the power of God is not only a very unGodly thing to

do, it is impossible. God did not create us or the church so that we could control where and how God's grace is given.

This story also makes me think of Mother Teresa. Like God's love, her love was unconditional toward all people, the rich and the poor, the healthy and the sick. She believed it was not "things" that people needed, but they needed to be loved. Her purpose was not to covert Hindus or anyone else to Christianity, but only to love people as God loves all of us.Her purpose was to be a channel of God's grace.

If exclusive is the ugliest word in the English language then grace is the most beautiful word. Grace comes free of charge to people who do not deserve it. I am one of those people and

each one of you is one also. A little poem I've used before in a sermon expresses it very 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 these final words about God's grace. When you experience God's grace, you know that things do not have to be perfect to be good. You also know that every gift you have been given would make a good present for someone else, and that giving out of the fullness that

is already in you only increases that fullness.

So today, simply accept the fact you are accepted and loved by God no matter how unremarkable or unworthy you might feel. You don't have to earn God's love. In fact you cannot earn God's love--it's a free gift. All you need to do is accept it. That's what so amazing about grace. Amen.