

Sermon after the fire
December 11, 2005
James R. Gorman
Third Sunday in Advent

Grace makes me cry

Anyone who has heard me preach more than once knows that the theological idea of Grace is at the very center of my understanding of God.

The first baptism I did a year ago last September, I wanted to visually depict the idea of the over abundant grace of God. So, when I poured the water from the pitcher into the basin I purposely poured it too fast so that it would make a small mess. Grace makes a mess was my idea. Only when I poured the water, I poured it on one side of the basin with such force and volume that the water simply went from one side of the shallow bowl and out the other and onto the carpet leaving very little water in the font itself.

I guess I made my point. Grace which we know in our Baptism flows over us entirely and completely. And we are embraced by God without having done anything to deserve that embrace. That's one of the reasons that Martin Luther insisted on continuing to baptize infants. Because, Luther reasoned, they have done nothing to deserve this graceful offering of God's love. Grace just pour out on us and engulfs us with every good thing.

The God we know in Jesus Christ is a God, first of all and last of all, of grace.

Grace is, quite simply, an undeserved gift.

St. Anselm, who became the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1097, defines Grace first of all in terms of Christ saying that

No man except this one [Jesus] ever gave to God what he was not obliged to lose, or paid a debt he did not owe. But he [Jesus] freely offered to the Father what there was

no need of his ever losing, and paid for sinners what he owed not for himself.

(Proslogion, Ch XVII)

So that's the starting point for our understanding about Grace. That while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us that we might be saved.

So, that's the main idea of Grace in the Christian tradition. And that is the idea expressed in Baptism

But then there are the little graces that apply to each of our lives. The little undeserved day-to-day gifts. Little reflections as in a mirror dimly.

I was heading to the church office one morning some weeks ago and I saw that the leaf removal trucks were out there picking up our leaves. I immediately returned to my front yard to get the leaves there onto the street so that they could be picked up. My neighbor across the street is also a pastor and he was doing the same thing. As were about half my neighbors.

I'm working furiously in suit and tie to get the leaves onto the street before the trucks come by and David, my pastor neighbor, comes across the street and, having finished his own yard, says simply, "I'll start over here and we'll beat the trucks."

A grace-filled moment. I had done nothing to deserve David's act of kindness. But I felt obligated. So when the first snow came, I got him back. I went over to his side of the street and blew the snow off of his sidewalk before the school kids came and beat down the snow.

I thought we were even.

Then comes a great fire and all my neighbors know I'm the pastor of the church that burned down. In fact, this may be the way I introduce myself to anyone from Waukesha

who does not know me. “I’m the pastor of the 19th century church which burned down on December 4th, 2005.

When it snowed again this past week, I got up knowing that I had to do the liturgy for this morning and there were so many loose ends, and here I had to blow snow. I got the snow blower going and I found out immediately that somebody had already done the hardest part. You know, the part where the driveway meets the road where the snow plows had piled up a mountain of snow and chunks of ice.

Well, I thought it was David. But, having watched CSI, I now know how to look for clues—how to analyze the scene of the crime. I followed the tracks of the snow-blower which had accomplished this deed and discovered that it was the Sanchez family immediately to our south. Well, I thought, I’ll have to repay them later in the Winter if I get out there before he does.

But then the acts of kindness kept pouring in. Not just to me personally, but to the Church I serve. Members as well as non-members of our church have come bringing gifts and notes of such, well, Grace.

Pastor Joe Ellwanger was the pastor of Cross Lutheran Church in downtown Milwaukee. At the end of his pastoral career, the church burned to the ground. They were not well-insured. But they rebuilt anyway. He and his wife Joyce sent a sizeable check with this note, “As the retired pastor of Cross Lutheran Church which was destroyed by fire in 1995, I feel your shock, your pain, and your loss. However, I can, from experience assure you, that you will undoubtedly learn what we learned through our own experience – That “fire strengthens” – especially people of faith.”

It was just the right note. I thought of that great passage from Malachi enshrined in Handel's Messiah, "For who may abide the day of his coming and who shall stand when he appeareth. For he is like a refiner's fire and a fuller's soap. And he shall purify."

Well, Joe Ellwanger's note was a note of such grace. Undeserved and rich. People of faith will be refined by this fire. And strengthened and made pure and holy. And by God's grace we will endure.

Bob Ullman came to our emergency council meeting on Monday. He's the pastor of Redeemer Church in Sussex which burned down a year and a half ago. He shared insights and wisdom from their experience. And without pay.

Judge Joe Cook steps forward to offer his office space for us. And then while we were there setting things up, a representative from Office Depot shows up and asks, "Is this the temporary quarters of the Evangelical and Reformed Church?" We said, "Yes it is." Well, I have some office supplies for you and he began to unload reams of paper, notepads and pens.

Howard Bowman and his lay leaders here at First Congregational Church moved everything around to accommodate us, including agreeing to park far away to make room for us.

Yesterday, John Thomas, the president of the United Church of Christ came to our Church – or the space that used to be our church. We walked around the building making our way out onto the street to survey the wreckage itself from the front of the church. And finally, John Thomas prayed for us. It was marvelous prayer. It was a long and wondrous and eloquent prayer. It was an Advent prayer. And it was cold outside, but I had been looking forward to a prayer like that. There we were standing in a circle with cars going around us in Wisconsin Avenue praying. After the prayer we embraced each other with a

holy embrace. And we gave thanks for the God who comes in the oddest and most marvelous of times and places. For who may abide the day of God's advent and who shall stand when he appeareth?

The good wishes, the offerings, the outpouring of love is thoroughly undeserved and we cannot pay any of it back. We're just too far behind. We are indebted. And our debt can never be repaid.

And as much as I love the idea of grace, there is an aspect to it that I had not reckoned with before.

Grace makes me cry.

Well, there I said it. I'm a grown man but Grace makes me cry.

I didn't cry right away, mind you. It took some days. The first time was Tuesday. On Monday night the council met and decided that we would establish a "rebuilding fund." Sue Sterner got information about that to Kyle Juno who had it up on the website immediately.

About 3:30 in the afternoon, I get a call from the electronic banking person at Waukesha State Bank who said that they have been getting telephone calls and emails about a "rebuilding fund" which they had no record of. I realized that we had agreed to set up such a fund, but no one was assigned the responsibility to set it up. So I drove over there an hour before closing time to set up the account. And the banker who set it up left me alone in her booth while she made copies of things for this account. Alone in the booth, I just started crying.

It was then that I realized that Grace makes me cry. Or at least being on the receiving end of Grace makes me cry. The wonderful grace of the Fire Department and the ATF. The police department most of whom I've gotten to know now on a first name basis. Marvin, Tom, Steve, Sherry, Russ.

We are victims, dear friends. We've been victimized... by "random kindnesses and senseless acts of beauty"

We are victims of God's grace. Undeserving, we receive this gracious God through the good wishes and expressions of love from our neighbors.

And... though the charred remains of that marvelous old building will be there for weeks to come to remind us of the power of death, and the acrid smoke will linger in the winter air for days to come, it turns out that Paul was right after all. We have not been destroyed, for...

We are more than conquerors through God who loves us. For I believe in my best moments that neither life nor death, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor fire, nor water, not smoke and not even our broken hearts...

Will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus Our Lord.

Let me close by reading this poem that Pastor Bob Ullman found and used at Redeemer's groundbreaking service last August. It is on the front of your bulletins...

Burned Church

There has been sorrow here And loss -
And fiercely funneled flame Fueled by rage here ...
There has been a burning here.
Savage, wanton swift,
To brand the place and its people
With smoldering desolation.

There has been darkness here.
And broken beams here,
And fractured dreams.
And charred remains ...
There has been ash here,
And water, steam, and an acrid smell,
And overall a pall of hell here ...

But the Stone still stands -
Like rock on Rock the House will be built ...
The sky looks down upon the place,
And in the sun, revealed,
The previous face of all renewal
Smiles.
For in a little while the day will surely come
When ash and dust are lost in time's eclipse,
and sorrow fades -
For in the husk of grief
There lies a seed
Which waits in a secret quiet
Upon the ripening of the time -
Whose fullness will fill full
The empty space,
and thus fulfill with shining face
The aching need.

Margot Arthurton, England