

## Pentecost III

***“The one who is righteous will live by faith. “ For there is not distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by God’s grace as a gift. Romans 1:17***

After reading the propers for today, the other morning in Maine, I went out for a run. I was going down one of my favorite routes, a road that leads through evergreen woods right along the shore. And as I thought about Paul’s letter to the Romans I was suddenly filled with an onrush of grace, grace as I understand and apprehend it.

For me, the most salient feeling I associate with God’s grace, perhaps, is gratitude. So as I ran along, I was overwhelmed with thankfulness: for the birth of my granddaughter, for the beauty of the spring morning around me, for my parents’ decision more than 60 years ago to move to Maine, for my marriage, for my vocation and the joy of living it out in this community of St. John’s, for all the blessings of my life.

Grace, gratitude and grace. Grace is my delight. Grace opens my eyes to holy beauty in the flight of the Great Blue Heron, to holy wonder as a baby’s hand reaches for the Eucharistic wafer, the bread of heaven. Grace pierces my heart with sharp and joyful remembrance of God’s presence in the most familiar and the most unlikely places

Grace, for me, is a series of shining moments— brilliant gems of light, of lightness, of enlightenment— threaded through an ordinary life of *dangers, toils, and snares*, an ordinary, blessed, life.

That’s the human side of grace – grace received, if you will, grace *felt*. But grace is not simply a feeling, not foremost a feeling, not, at bottom, a feeling at all. Grace is a state of being, and my feelings about it are only the outward and visible sign, the surface.

So that’s a stab at the human end of grace. But what about the divine end? What about the Giver? What’s the meaning of God’s grace?

Throughout Scripture, grace characterizes God and God’s activity: grace is God’s forbearance, God’s long-suffering, God’s loving-kindness. And *grace* is frequently how biblical writers name God’s presence, God’s intervention, God’s gifts. The action of grace is a sign of the presence of God.

But grace is not a simple attribute, not a one-dimensional sign of God's mercy. Most of us have heard talk of 'cheap grace.' The Christian theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, "Cheap grace means grace sold on the market like a cheapjack's wares. The sacraments, the forgiveness of sin, and the consolations of religion are thrown away at cut-rate prices. Grace is represented as the Church's inexhaustible treasury, from which she showers blessings with generous hands, without asking questions or fixing limits. Grace without price; grace without cost!... Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, (it is) baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. (Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.)

Bonhoeffer seems here to be concentrating on the misapprehension that cheap grace doesn't cost much to us or to the Church that dispenses it. He wants to contradict the notion that we don't have to do anything to gain God's favor, God's mercy. And that is an error, I believe.

But another error, and one I want to focus on today, is the idea that grace is not costly to God. In other words, the idea that God's mercy, God's forgiveness,— those actions and attributes of God that heal and bless us — that those come free and easy to God.

What does our Hebrew Scripture for today tell us? *I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments to the Lord your God that I am commanding you today; and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn from the way that I am commanding you today, to follow other gods that you have not known.*

How often do the people of Israel turn away? We hear repeatedly of their straying from God's commandments, of their breaking covenant with God, of their violating trust and community. I'm saying *they*, but who are *they*, God's chosen people, but *us*? How often have we, as we confess to God in our Eucharistic Prayer, *...failed to honor your image in one another and in ourselves; ... would not see your goodness in the world around us; and... violated your creation, abused one another, and rejected your love.*

The prophets and poets of Hebrew Scripture tell us that God reacts to our betrayals, our sin and falling short, in several ways. First, God gets angry. God responds with indignation and wrath. God pronounces judgment.

And sadly, for many, that's where the understanding of God's reaction ends. We are left with a theology that tells us that certain acts of ours will automatically produce certain punishments.. All too often, that has been the Church's message. *That was your sin, here's your penance.*

But what that picture leaves out, I believe, is that it is the God of unfathomable love, the God of limitless creativity, the God of unspeakable generosity – that same God is the one whose anger is unleashed by human frailty and failure. God has brought us into the world God has made for us, and has lavished countless blessings upon us, and we keep forgetting, keep losing our way, keep turning against one another and, in so doing, turning away from God.

We abuse God's gifts, and God cries out in hurt and anger. If we don't understand God's wrath and judgment as a form of unendurable hurt, we are missing the point.

Now, this is a story I feel I know inside out. For one thing, I know what it is to feel anger as a first strike response to hurt. It's easier for me, in moments of personal devastation and pain, to feel rage rather than anguish. The ache and sorrow run deeper. They make me vulnerable to further wounding.

Moreover, in my experience, those who hurt me worst, those whose betrayals sting most harshly, are those to whom I have given most. How can they turn on me? How can they deny all I have done for them? How can they be so ungrateful?

Is any of this familiar? I expect so. I imagine I'm not the only one who finds anger a useful defense against heartbreak. Not the only one who's been bitterly disappointed by our nearest and dearest. After all, how badly can we be hurt by those we don't care about?

And if this is our human experience, is God so very different? I think not. I think the point of many biblical stories, the burden of so much biblical prophecy and poetry, is that God is deeply affected by how we live, by how we fall short of God's hopes for us, by how we betray God's promises. God notices, and God grieves.

And then, God forgives. Not easily, I think, and not cheaply. We must do our part. We must recognize and acknowledge, perhaps through a glass dimly, that we have wounded God deeply. We must confess our waywardness, our

falling short, and we must mean what we confess. We must resolve to return to the paths of righteousness, and we must mean our resolve. We must turn back toward God, and keep turning, always turning.

And then comes grace. Not easily, and not cheaply. Because our falling short, our misguidedness, our failures and our selfish forgetfulness, have cost God dearly. God has wept over our betrayals, as we weep over those who turn away from us and betray our trust. But God forgives. God forgives more than we can ever ask, or imagine. And God blesses us once again.

Now, all of this did not run through my mind and heart as I ran down Ledgemere Road the other morning in Maine. But the height and depth of my feeling carried with it some awareness of the spacious dimensions of God's grace. The awareness that such grace is hard-won, not by me, but by God, on my behalf.

Grace is God's movement toward me and in me, a movement to which I can only respond in humility, gratitude and awe. And I am as sure as I am sure of anything in this uncertain world that, in the words of that wise, true and beloved hymn,

'tis grace has brought me safe thus far  
and grace will lead me home.

Amen