

Seasons of Grace: LMF January 5, 2003

There is a man I'll call *Charlie* who has been involved with our program of prison visitation for many years. He also became part of the early years of work done by our own CJI in its serious and violent crime project. In that work, at times prisoners are brought together with their victims in a process of *therapeutic dialogue* that enables all parties to bring closure to the aftermath of violent crime.

Charlie was a serial rapist. Two victims confronted him in a prison setting, facilitated by Dave Gustafson and Sandi Bergen from this congregation. The staff person known as a case management officer who worked with Charlie in his process of rehabilitation observed the two separate encounters with Charlie's victims. I had the privilege, with permission from all participants, to view some of their encounter on video. At a certain point, the case management officer, a formerly very cynical prison guard, commented quietly on the "magic" that he had just observed. He indicated awareness that there was some dynamic in the room that had facilitated an amazing outcome of understanding and release for all concerned. The victims in their choice to go public with the story subsequently attested to this dramatically. Charlie also wrote about it as rediscovering some of his own lost sense of humanity. The case management officer said finally, "I guess I have to call it *grace*". This was a "season of grace".

So what exactly is grace? Definitions almost render its meaning more elusive, like grasping after a desert mirage. But I shall attempt one, nonetheless: *Grace is the serendipitous offer and experience of gratuitous joy, undeserved, unlimited, and steadfastly solid.* [Repeat]

Frederick Buechner, in his inimitable style, writes: "The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you *are* because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you.

"There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it.

"Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too (*Wishful Thinking*, p. 34)."

I wish to look at grace through the passages read this morning and through some stories and reflections.

Hosea' Story

Hosea married a temple prostitute named Gomer. The text says: "*When the LORD began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him, 'Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD.'* So he married Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she

conceived and bore him a son (Hosea 1:2-3). “ Hardly a very promising wedding invitation from God! It seems Hosea’s life partner choice was designed to be a living metaphor for God’s relationship to Israel. Hosea might rightly have said: “Thanks a lot, God!” And the story gets even more bizarre. Every time they had a baby, God named the child!: names like “Not-pitied-for-God-will-no-longer-pity-Israel-now-that-it’s-gone-to-the-dogs”, that meant, comments Buechner, “that every time the roll was called at school, Hosea would be scoring a prophetic bullseye in absentia (*Peculiar Treasures*, p. 43).”

To read Hosea is to read the agonized cry of a lover constantly jilted and rebuffed, rightfully crying out for acknowledgement of Israel’s (and Gomer’s) wrongdoing, but endlessly gracious and inviting to come home.

Does Hosea’s wife sound like us at times? Does Hosea remind us of God? Just listen to the agonized cries of God through Hosea:

Hosea 1:7

Yet I will show love to the house of Judah; and I will save them...

Hosea 2:19

And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy.

Hosea 2:23

I will plant her for myself in the land; I will show my love to the one I called ‘Not my loved one.’ I will say to those called ‘Not my people,’ ‘You are my people’; and they will say, ‘You are my God.’”

Hosea 10:12

Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap the fruit of unfailing love, and break up your unplowed ground; for it is time to seek the LORD, until he comes and showers righteousness on you.

Hosea 12:6

But you must return to your God; maintain love and justice, and wait for your God always.

Hosea 14:4

I will heal their waywardness and love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them.

Hosea 6:6

For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.

This last statement lines up with what is often called “the high water mark” of Old Testament spirituality, Micah’s call for a unique kind of faithfulness. It follows on the heels of several questions posed about the kind of worship God asks for:

Micah 6:6-8

With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

We are destined in our humanity to a journey of giving and receiving grace. To passing through “seasons of grace”. Failure to do so leads inevitably to lostness and profound alienation. And grace, in the story of Hosea, in the context of Micah, is ever the opposite of sacrifice, of wrath, of retributive punishment, of any and all forms of alienation or rejection. It is in fact in the very context of sacrifice and punishment that we read this story about Jesus and the Pharisees, in which Hosea is directly quoted:

Matt 9:10-13

While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew’s house, many tax collectors and “sinners” came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and ‘sinners’?” On hearing this, Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

This is why John’s Gospel records:

John 1:14-17

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth... From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Truth is never meant to condemn, rather it is to be a conduit for grace. “[S]peaking the truth in love”, Paul said in Ephesians (4:15). Jesus therefore says to those who believe in him:

John 8:32

“Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” And that is the work of grace:

Eph 2:8

For it is by grace you have been saved [liberated], through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—

In the Gospel scheme of things, grace and truth erupt together into liberation for oneself and service toward others.

Paul's Romans Letter

That is the theme of Paul's letter, bracketed by an understanding of overwhelming grace. Paul at the beginning of the book wishes grace on all his readers. At book's end, he signs off with grace. And throughout there is a recurring grace theme:

- ❖ We are justified freely by his grace
- ❖ Grace is at the beginning of Abraham's call, who is our spiritual father, claims Paul
- ❖ We stand now in God's grace, as a "geographical" location on our spiritual journey
- ❖ We are now not under law but under grace
- ❖ We are chosen by grace
- ❖ Grace is at back of the gifts we have received, such as prophesying, serving, teaching, etc., etc.

In the passage read, grace effects such reconciliation with God through Christ, that all enmity is overcome. This is model for us in turn to set aside all enmity in our human relationships.

But the central thrust of grace in the Romans 5 passage, and arguably of the entire Pauline letter, is the *superabundance* of God's grace.

Rom 5:15

But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!

The point Paul makes is: *we are the many!* And we have been offered grace that translates into a life of practical righteousness.

"Righteousness" is generally in modern usage a pious, religious term. Yet in Paul's understanding, "righteousness" invariably has a profoundly ethical dimension. One author writes: "Modern scholarship is virtually unanimous that the leitmotif [leading theme] of the epistle to the Romans is the 'righteousness of God'. The phrase recurs eight times in the letter, and righteousness-terminology features more than 60 times... (Chris Marshall, "Paul and Christian Social Responsibility".)" The problem is that the word does not, in usual English usage, imply a social dimension. Yet it is for Paul centrally a justice term, one with radical sociopolitical implications. The same author writes: "The basic idea behind the biblical notion of righteousness is 'doing what is right', living in a condition of 'all-rightness', maintaining right relationships, both with God and with other members of the community. To be righteous is to do justice, that is, to bring about harmony and well-being in *all* one's relationships, both individual and communal, and especially by defending the oppressed. Righteousness and justice are relational categories before they are moral or legal ones. So when the biblical writers ascribe righteousness to

God (as Paul does in Romans), they are referring primarily to God's faithfulness in his relationships with people, and to God's actions in the world to secure justice for the oppressed."

The book of Romans adds a tall order to the notion of grace. It is none other than consequent living out a lifestyle of restored and restoring relationships towards all, including the creation itself.

In My Life

So Hosea reminds us of a grace that never gives up in which we may revel, and are called to imitate. And Paul reminds us of a grace that is lavishly prodigal – like the father in the "Prodigal Son" story, that leads to a "righteousness" that is to the core "justice-making". It is the kind of justice-making that liberates rather than oppresses; that forgives and restores rather than condemns and punishes.

This is all rather "heady", and a tad, maybe a lot, beyond our reach.

In addressing the reader at the beginning of *The Alphabet of Grace*, Frederick Buechner writes: "Any Christian who is not a hero, Léon Bloy wrote, is a pig... (p. vii)." I don't know about you, but most days on this planet, I do not feel much like a hero... So, according to Léon Bloy, I know my normal porcine, pig-like, lot in life already.

Most of our lives, in fact, are taken up with the mundane day-to-day. It is the common stuff of existing, and not too often given to the heroic. But into that daily existence, God sends shards of perceptible, audible grace if we can only "listen to our life", as Buechner encourages. Or if we have ears to hear, as Jesus often said...

Several years ago, when I had completed my first round of studies at Regent College, I was well on my way to working with Latin American Missions in Bogotá, Colombia. Then a letter arrived from the area director that raised doubts about that life course. I yearned to discuss its contents with my best friend at the time. The problem was, he had just left that morning to resume living in New Jersey. At supper that evening, a knock at the door revealed my friend in living flesh! He sheepishly asked to stay the night, since his plane had been returned from Seattle to Vancouver due to fog, and the flight had been postponed 24 hours. That evening I also was not working night shift at Oakalla Prison. Into the wee small hours we discussed amongst many things my future. He asked me one question and made a suggestion that together dramatically changed my future life course. "Why can you not do mission work in Canada too?", he asked. And he suggested I reconnect with the Mennonite Central Committee that I had first heard about that summer in the UBC Job Placement office. I did reconnect to MCCBC, and consequently did "mission" with the first North American Victim Offender Reconciliation Program as a VSer (voluntary service worker) in Kitchener. The next year, Esther's and my romance flowered, culminating in a June wedding.

However motorists may have cursed the fog that day in Seattle, I know that part of God's grace was for me to have spent that time into the wee small hours discussing my future, which forever was altered, thanks to God's grace through my friend Jim.

Along similar lines was a dramatic phone call in 1989 that led to an invitation to take over for the rest of the fiscal year a position with Mennonite Central Committee Canada. And that meant eventually staying in that position until 1998. It enabled a continuation of work in criminal justice that had become my passion. Another season of grace, I know.

And something similar occurred in how I took on this current position with M2/W2, continuing criminal justice ministry.

They are some of the spectacular "grace" moments in my life. Seasons of grace.

Frederick Buechner tells of a crucial time of doubt in his life, when, looking up, he saw a car pass by with the simple word on the rear license plate : "Trust". As it turned out, that car belonged to a person senior in a trust company... But it was Buechner's word, nonetheless for that *kairos* moment in his life...

The brilliant scholar Augustine tells in his *Confessions* of hearing a little child in a game of some sort say repeatedly, "Take and read". Which he did. It was the book of Romans he read. And suddenly his mother's longstanding prayer was answered in his hard-won conversion to Christ; and the entire West was ever after shaped in part by his brilliant Christian mind. All thanks to the serendipitous play-time words of a little child.

The title for the sermon came from a CD by Helma Sawatzky. And the fact is, if not attentive, we can miss out on "seasons of grace". Though all around us, abundant, and amazing, we can miss its ubiquitous dynamism. In the mundane. In the ordinary. In the daily grind. The food on the table; the welcoming smiles; the struggle and the pain. "For in [God] we live and move and have our being", Paul quoted the poet Epimenides of Crete before the Athenians in Acts 17. God's grace is his presence with us *today!* A song captures it: "Another day of grace..." Everything we are and have, the very air we breathe, is all grace.

We miss it to our own loss... Just as we fail to forgive to our own detriment. Just as we lack gratitude for the sheer wonder of being alive to our own bondage.

Grace is the serendipitous offer and experience of gratuitous joy, undeserved, unlimited, and steadfastly solid.

If we have ears to hear. If we have eyes to see...

Amen.