

A Taste of Grace
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Thank you for inviting me to worship with you this evening. Because of your invitation I've studied scriptures passages that I might not have studied so in depth. For me, one of the blessings of teaching Sunday school is the discipline of studying scriptures. I might not be so disciplined otherwise. Serving on committees is also a blessing in that it requires that I do things that push me to step outside my comfort zone. Although I love telling stories and do it often, I rarely preach a sermon. This evening I will tell stories and bring you a message. A message about grace.

Nearly two months ago, Anita sent me the June 13 lectionary scripture passages. On one lectionary website, the title given for this Sunday's lectionary message was "It's a new day." This reminded me of the Anne of Green Gables series that my daughters and I enjoyed watching, first on PBS and then over and over again on video. Anne, the main character, is a feisty orphan who has a knack for getting into predicaments. Her teacher, Miss Stacie, walks Anne home from school one day and listens to her lament over her habit of getting into trouble. Miss Stacie says simply, "Remember Anne, every day is a new day with no mistakes in it."

How Biblical! Whether the author knew it or not, that exact message is found in scripture. Lamentations 3: 22 & 23 says, "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness." Great is the underserved gift of grace.

I've served on many committees over the years. At the beginning of one meeting, the chairperson asked each committee member to share how they had experienced grace. Two stories came to mind. One was about a cookbook that the youth group at my church, Grace Mennonite Church, put together. After the recipes were collected, a title for the book was needed. One Sunday morning during sharing, the youth group advisor asked for suggestions. This was during a trying time for me in the life of my church family. As the advisor was making the announcement, my eyes settled on a woman with whom I had a strained relationship. She was a fine cook and I was sure she had submitted recipes. I thought to myself, "What would it be like to eat a meal with her, using some of her recipes; would it be a taste of grace." I wrote the thought down and submitted it for the name of the cookbook—*A Taste of Grace*. It was selected. Probably for most, it was

simply meant recipes from Grace Mennonite Church, but for me it meant much more.

The other experience happened on a family outing to Central District Conference in Middlebury, Indiana. It was the first time my husband and I had taken all of our children with us. At that time the sessions ran from Thursday evening through Sunday morning worship. As we ate dinner with our children on Friday evening we realized that we had time to go into Goshen to visit friends we hadn't seen for a long time—that is, if we didn't take time to eat dessert. The children were disappointed, so I said, "How about for lunch on Sunday we stop for a banana split?" That plan was a hit! Very early Saturday morning our youngest daughter awoke with croup and a fever. She was having difficulty breathing and I hadn't brought her medicine or a vaporizer. As we left for sessions on Saturday morning we told our hosts that we probably wouldn't be staying another night, but would return if Maria was better. By the end of the afternoon session on Saturday, Maria was sound asleep on my lap, and had a higher fever. We collected the other children from childcare and head out for dinner. After we had driven for a short time I told Tom, "Let's just go home." This was not a popular decision with the children. Jenny was especially distraught, "I won't get to say good bye to my new friends; and we'll miss the puppet show." To calm her, Tom and I put her between us in the front seat. (We had a station wagon—seats down with a sleeping bag spread across the floor.) Jenny was finally calming when Chrissy said, "What about the banana splits?" and Jenny began crying again. In Ligonier, Tom noticed a small restaurant. He stopped to see if they had banana splits—and they did. However, they said they didn't often get orders for six banana splits in March so they would have to go to the grocery store to get bananas. We waited in anticipation. Finally Tom came walking out with the first two banana splits. He gave them to Lizzy and Josh, sitting across from each other in the back of the station wagon; then he went back in to get the next two. No sooner was he out of sight when Josh was crying. I looked back to find his banana split upside down. Lizzy had gotten her foot too close... Carefully I laid Maria down and went to the back and scooped up the ice cream and put it back in the boat. I said, "Eat it Josh, it's still good; and Lizzy, get your foot back!" Soon Tom was back with the next two splits. He handed one to Chrissy, who took hers to the back of the station wagon and handed one to Jenny, in the front seat. He noticed the tears in Josh's eye and gave me a curious look. I gave him a look that said, "Don't ask!" Again, Tom was just out of sight when Josh was crying again. I looked back to see the split upside down for the second time. Lizzy had gotten too

close again. Very carefully I laid Maria down and went to the back, scooped up the ice cream, toppings, whipped cream and banana again, and said, “Josh it’s still good, eat it; and Lizzy, get your foot back! I returned to my seat, carefully picking up Maria so she wouldn’t awaken. Soon Tom returned with the last two banana splits. He handed one to me and settled in his seat to enjoy his ice cream—when Josh was crying for the third time—for the first time in Tom’s mind. We looked back to see Josh’s banana split upside down. By now Maria was awake. I opened the glove compartment door and placed my banana split on the door, set Maria on the seat beside me and leaned over the seat to scoop up Josh’s ice cream for the third time. There’s more to the story, but I’ll stop here for now.

Let’s look at the scriptures that were read; first the Old Testament, I Kings 21:1-21. There are three main characters, Naboth (a Jezereelite), Ahab (king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel) and Jezebel (Ahab’s wife). Ahab was not in God’s favor. He took as his wife Jezebel, and served and worshiped Baal. In Kings 16:31, 33 we read “Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him.” You might remember that the prophet Elijah was an enemy of Ahab throughout his reign. Naboth was a mere subject of Ahab’s kingdom. He had no choice in how he related to the king. To fully understand the story, we need to understand why the vineyard was so special to Naboth.

Naboth owned a vineyard near Ahab’s palace and Ahab wanted it for a vegetable garden. He told Naboth he would give him another vineyard or would pay him outright. Seems like a good deal for Naboth, but his refusal was passionate, “The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance.” The issue was the “land.” Naboth was not being stubborn, he was striving to protect and preserve the land—the source of income and stability—that was his family’s God-given gift. According to earlier scripture in Numbers and Joshua, the land of promise had been divided among the children of Israel and each family’s division was to be kept forever. Ahab’s offer asked Naboth to forsake his birthright, his own inheritance from God, for the mere sake of a whim of the king. So Ahab pouts and his wife takes over, devising a plot that would end in Naboth’s death and her husband getting the vineyard.

The role of the Israelite king was to provide care and protection for his subjects. However, Ahab, under Jezebel’s influence, had no regard for his people and relished his power over them. He acted as though he was

beholden to have whatever he wanted, merely because he was king. In his eyes, he was justified to have it all.

That brings us to our New Testament scripture, Galatians 2:15-21. Here Paul talks about the most basic truth of scripture, justification by faith. To have a better understanding of what's happening in these verses we should review what had taken place prior to this. Paul, Barnabas and Titus took a trip to Jerusalem, to visit the leaders—in fact, the pillars—of the new church—Peter, James and John. The reason for their visit came about because Paul was moved by the Holy Spirit to make the trip in order to demonstrate that the mission of those in Jerusalem was the same as the mission given by God to Paul and Barnabas. Even though they were reaching different groups of people, their efforts and their message were the same—people were made right with God (were justified) through God's grace and His grace alone. Actually, in this scripture passage Paul is scolding Peter—calling him a hypocrite.

After the meeting in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas went back to Antioch, a largely Gentile city of about 500,000 people. Soon after, after being made aware by God that even the Gentiles were receiving God's grace, Peter made a trip to Antioch. During his visit to Antioch, Peter witnessed the moving of God among those whom the Jews had categorized as outside of God's grace—sinners, because they didn't observe the laws—dietary laws and the law of circumcision. Even so, he ate and socialized with them. Then, when visitors came to Antioch from Jerusalem, Peter withdrew from his Gentile brothers and sisters. Paul spoke out against Peter's hypocrisy saying "Peter, you shared the table with Gentiles. You ate what they ate so you must have agreed in principle that there is only one way for both Jews and Gentiles." The pressure to draw back from the Gentiles was overwhelming.

Peter's answer was that if he ate with the Gentiles—eating what they ate—he would become a sinner. Paul told him that no amount of observance of the law can make a person right with God. That is a matter of grace. A person cannot earn, but must accept the generous offer of the love of God in Jesus. Therefore the whole business of law is irrelevant; so quit trying to earn a relationship with God, throw yourself, without reserve, on the grace of God. This is what Jesus taught....are you saying that Jesus taught you to be a sinner? Obviously there is only one conclusion that can be drawn—the old laws are wiped out!

Paul speaks from personal experience. He had tried the way of the law; with zealous ambition he tried to put himself right with God by following the

letter of the law. All it did was make him realize that it would never put him right with God. Suddenly he abandoned that way and cast himself on the mercy of God. It was such a drastic change that all he could say was that he had been crucified with Christ so that the person he once was, was now dead; and the life within him now was Christ living within him.

Paul says, if we can become right with God by following the law, then what is the need for grace? If I can win my own salvation, then why did Christ die? William Barclay, a New Testament scholar and interpreter, says it this way, "When Paul took God at his word, the midnight of law's frustration became the sunshine of grace.

Now, let's look at one more story. An alternate scripture listed in today's lectionary guide, Luke 7:36-50 and 8:1-3. I will read from *The Message*.

³⁶⁻³⁹One of the Pharisees asked him over for a meal. He went to the Pharisee's house and sat down at the dinner table. Just then a woman of the village, the town harlot, having learned that Jesus was a guest in the home of the Pharisee, came with a bottle of very expensive perfume and stood at his feet, weeping, raining tears on his feet. Letting down her hair, she dried his feet, kissed them, and anointed them with the perfume. When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man was the prophet I thought he was, he would have known what kind of woman this is who is falling all over him."

⁴⁰Jesus said to him, "Simon, I have something to tell you."

"Oh? Tell me."

⁴¹⁻⁴²"Two men were in debt to a banker. One owed five hundred silver pieces, the other fifty. Neither of them could pay up, and so the banker canceled both debts. Which of the two would be more grateful?"

⁴³⁻⁴⁷Simon answered, "I suppose the one who was forgiven the most."

"That's right," said Jesus. Then turning to the woman, but speaking to Simon, he said, "Do you see this woman? I came to your home; you provided no water for my feet, but she rained tears on my feet and dried them with her hair. You gave me no greeting, but from the time I arrived she hasn't quit kissing my feet. You provided nothing for freshening up, but she has soothed my feet with perfume. Impressive, isn't it? She was forgiven many, many sins, and so she is very, very grateful. If the forgiveness is minimal, the gratitude is minimal."

⁴⁸Then he spoke to her: "I forgive your sins."

⁴⁹That set the dinner guests talking behind his back: "Who does he think he is, forgiving sins!"

⁵⁰He ignored them and said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

The scene is a courtyard at the home of Simon the Pharisee. Homes of the well-to-do were built around an open courtyard. It was the custom that when a Rabbi attended a meal in this kind of home, all kinds of people also came in. It was alright to do so, so that they could listen to the wisdom brought on by dinner conversation. This explains the presence of the woman.

When a guest entered a home, three things were done. The host would place his hands on the shoulders of the guest and offer a kiss of peace. Water was provided to wash the guest's feet after traveling on foot on hot dusty roads. Then either a pinch of sweet-smelling incense was burned or a drop of rose oil was placed on the guest's head. These good manners were demanded but were not done in this case. At the dinner table, guests reclined, with sandals off, explaining how the woman had access to Jesus' feet.

Simon was a Pharisee. He seemed to be curious about this new teacher but he didn't seem to think he deserved the common courtesies of a guest in his home.

The woman was a "bad" woman—In *The Message* she is called a harlot. No doubt, she had heard Jesus teaching; probably hanging back at the edge of the crowd. She must have recognized him as someone who could lift her out of her mistaken ways. Like most women, she wore a small vial of very expensive perfume called an alabaster around her neck. Probably, her desire was to pour the perfume on Jesus' feet. But when she saw him, she wept, "raining tears on his feet." She loosed her hair so she could wipe his feet. No decent woman of that day would let her hair down in public. As she knelt at the feet of Jesus, she had forgotten everyone else around her, except for Jesus.

There are two attitudes in this story: Simon felt he was a good man before God and everyone. He was conscious of no need and therefore felt no need for forgiveness. The woman was conscious only of her need for forgiveness. She was overwhelmed with her love for Jesus, the person who could provide forgiveness and so she received it. It was because of her great love that she experienced forgiveness, a gift of grace.

And finally, Luke 8:1-3, the verses following the story about the woman (From *The Message*):

¹⁻³He continued according to plan, traveled to town after town, village after village, preaching God's kingdom, spreading the Message. The Twelve were with him. There were also some women in their company who had been healed of various evil afflictions and illnesses: Mary, the one called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out; Joanna, wife of Chuza, Herod's manager; and Susanna—along with many others who used their considerable means to provide for the company.

By now Jesus was no longer welcome to preach in synagogues. He took to preaching and teaching on hillsides, in the streets and on the lake shores. The Scribes and Pharisees who were present while he taught came not to learn, but to trap him. It was considered to be a worthy act to support a Rabbi, so the fact that a group of women traveled with Jesus and his disciples was not so unusual. The group of women mentioned here was a very diverse group. Mary, from Magdala, was a woman with a dark, questionable past; there was Joanna, the wife of Chuza who took care of King Herod's finances; and there was Susanna.

To read again from William Barclay, "It is one of the supreme achievements of Jesus that he can enable the most diverse people to live together without the least losing their own personalities or qualities. G.K. Chesterton (an English writer and Philosopher) writes about the text from Isaiah which says that the lion will lie down with the lamb. *'It is constantly assumed that when the lamb lies down with the lion the lion becomes lamb-like. But, can the lion lie down with the lamb and still retain his royal ferocity? That is the problem the church attempted; that is the miracle the church achieved.'* There is nothing which the church needs more than to learn how to yoke in common harness the diverse temperaments and qualities of different people. If we are failing it is our own fault, for, in Christ, it can be done—and has been done." I believe it is a gift of grace.

This summer my daughter Jenny and I are teaching Sunday school for a group of 19 energetic children, ages kindergarten through grade five. We've been talking about listening for God's voice—how do we hear God's voice—birds singing, wind blowing, thunder, prayer, teachers, preachers, parents, friends... Just as God speaks to us in many different ways, I believe God's grace is revealed to us in as many different ways.

This brings me to the end of my banana split story. I was leaning over the seat to scoop Josh's banana split back into the boat for the third time. All of

us, even those whose boats had not turned over were getting stickier by the second for the contents were way more than the boats could hold. Like Tom, Maria was completely unaware of what had already taken place. As she stretched to turn around to see what has happening in the back of the car, she closed the glove compartment door. My banana split was closed inside. The car was completely silent and my anger was raging. Suddenly the silence was broken by uncontrollable laughter from Lizzy. Then Tom started laughing; finally I started laughing and then the rest. The gift of grace that I received that day came from the laughter of a child. It released my anger—anger that could have driven me to actions I would regret.

Sometimes families—biological families, church families, extended families, families of all sorts—are faced with sticky business. In a week and a half members of Central District Conference will gather for it annual gathering, or family reunion – as you remember from the regional meeting the Board of Directors conducted last winter, we said CDC member relate to each other as a family of adult children. One of the joys of this gathering will be to welcome Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship as a member. But there are other issues. We will wrestle with issues that are difficult. My prayer for CDC is that delegates come to the gathering with an awareness of God’s deep love and a spirit of grace; a gift that cannot be earned but is the result of our deep love for Jesus Christ and his love for us—it is totally undeserved mercy.

I will close by reading Psalm 32 (from The Message) A Psalm of David in response to the incident with Bathsheba. As Samuel confronts David, David owns his sin and rejoices at being forgiven—a gift of grace.

- ¹ Count yourself lucky, how happy you must be— you get a fresh start,
your slate's wiped clean.
- ² Count yourself lucky—
GOD holds nothing against you
and you're holding nothing back from him.
- ³ When I kept it all inside,
my bones turned to powder,
my words became daylong groans.
- ⁴ The pressure never let up;
all the juices of my life dried up.
- ⁵ Then I let it all out;
I said, "I'll make a clean breast of my failures to God."
Suddenly the pressure was gone—
my guilt dissolved,

my sin disappeared.

⁶ These things add up. Every one of us needs to pray;
when all hell breaks loose and the dam bursts
we'll be on high ground, untouched.

⁷ GOD's my island hideaway,
keeps danger far from the shore,
throws garlands of hosannas around my neck.

⁸ Let me give you some good advice;
I'm looking you in the eye
and giving it to you straight:

⁹ "Don't be ornery like a horse or mule
that needs bit and bridle
to stay on track."

¹⁰ God-defiers are always in trouble;
GOD-affirmers find themselves loved
every time they turn around.

¹¹ Celebrate GOD.
Sing together—everyone!
All you honest hearts, raise the roof!

A taste grace! There is no way to receive the undeserved gift of grace but
by loving Jesus.