

New Hope Sermon Amazing Grace

I can think of nothing more appropriate on this graduation Sunday, when several of you are leaving for new programs and several are returning home for the summer or for good, to focus us all on the amazing grace of God. This is at the heart of what we believe about God; but today I hope we can go deeper and receive this grace in our own hearts and have it revolutionize our walk with God. Let's pray

An illustration

The book that came to mind as I was thinking about grace was Philip Yancey's book *What's so Amazing About Grace?* How many of you have read it? We start with a story from the book:

A vagrant lives near the Fulton Fish Market on the lower east side of Manhattan. The slimy smell of fish carcasses and their entrails nearly overpowers him. And he hates the trucks that noisily arrive before sunrise. But midtown gets crowded and the cops harass him there. Down by the wharves nobody bothers the grizzled man who keeps to himself and sleeps on a loading dock behind a dumpster.

Early one morning when the workers are slinging eel and halibut off the trucks yelling to each other in Italian, the vagrant rouses himself and pokes through the dumpsters behind the tourist restaurants. An early start guarantees good pickings; last night's uneaten garlic bread and French fries, nibbled pizza, and wedges of cheesecake. He eats what he can stomach and stuffs the rest in a brown paper sack. The bottles and cans he stashes in plastic bags in his rusty shopping cart.

The morning sun, paled through the fog, finally makes it over the buildings by the wharf. When he sees the sticker from last week's lottery, lying in a pile of wilted lettuce, he almost lets it go. But by force of habit he picks it up and jams it in his pocket. In the old days, when luck was better, he used to buy one ticket a week, never more. It's past noon when he remembers the ticket stub and holds it up to a newspaper box to compare the numbers. Three numbers match, the fourth, the fifth...all seven! It can't be true. Things like that don't happen to him. Bums don't win the New York lottery.

But it is true. Later that day he squinting into the bright lights as TV crews present the newest media darling, the unshaven, baggy pants vagrant who will receive 243,000 dollars per year for the next 20 years. A chic-looking woman wearing a leather mini skirt shoved the microphone in his face and asked: "How do you feel?" He stares back dazed and catches a whiff of her perfume. It has been a long time, a very long time, since anyone has asked him that question.

He feels like a man who has been to the edge of starvation and back and is beginning to fathom that he will never feel hungry again." (Philip Yancey – *what's so amazing about grace?* Zondervan, 1997 p. 46.)

What is grace?

Yancey says: "Grace comes free of charge to people who do not deserve it [just like that vagrant; then he adds] and I am one of those people. I think back to who I was – resentful, wound tight with anger, a single hardened link in a long chain of ungrace learned in family and church. Now I am trying in my own small way to pipe the tune of grace. I do so because I know, more surely than I know anything, that any pang of healing or forgiveness or goodness I have ever felt comes solely from the grace of God. I yearn for the church to become a nourishing culture of that grace. (Philip Yancey – *Ibid.*, p. 42.)

A line in one of the hymns we sang today says "marvelous, infinite, matchless grace, freely bestowed on all who believe." (Grace that is greater than all our sin, v.2). Those words contain a priceless description of God's grace. It is "marvelous" – actually it's almost unfathomable that the God who is holding the universe together by the word of his power (Co.1:17), chooses to care for us and give everything, everything the believer needs for life and godliness. (2 Pet.1:3). It is "infinite" because God's giving is unending and the supply is inexhaustible. And it is "matchless." When you do a comparative study of religions, you learn that there is no other spiritual being or god, lower case g, in the universe that has this personal relationship with the people He loves and redeems.

Grace is all God's initiative – made possible for us because of Jesus. Chuck Swindoll says “Jesus’ kingdom calls us to a...way...that depends not on our own performance but his own. We do not have to achieve but merely follow. He has already earned for us the costly victory of God’s acceptance” (*Grace Awakening*, Charles Swindoll, Word, 1990, p.72) By its very definition grace (the abundant goodness of God given to people) is free. We can’t earn it; we don’t deserve it. But, “grace is free only because the Giver himself has borne the cost (Swindoll, *Ibid.*, p.67). Paul explains this essential nature of grace, most clearly in Eph. 2:8-9: “*By grace you have been saved through faith – and this is not from yourselves. It is a gift of God – not by works so that no one can boast.*” God’s grace is what makes salvation possible.

Turning the tin man into a live man

And we need that salvation desperately because we are like tin people with hearts of stone. We need the new heart and the new life that only God can give. C.S. Lewis said to Christians “The Son of God is at your side...beginning, so to speak, to ‘inject’ his kind of life and thoughts into you, beginning to turn the tin man into a live man. The part of you that does not like it is the part that is still tin” (quoted in Swindoll *Ibid.*, p. 199). Chuck Swindoll writes of 4 areas of our tininess: our insecurity, our weakness, our abrasiveness, and our pride. So let me give you two examples of how God’s grace has transformed the tininess of two Christians.

The Apostle Paul is Exhibit A. He recognized that he was the chief of sinners because he persecuted the early believers. He understood the condemnation he rightly deserved, yet he reveled in God’s acceptance and forgiveness. He told the Corinthians “*but by the grace of God I am what I am and His grace toward me did not prove vain*” I Cor. 15:9). Similarly, with his superior intellect and impeccable religious observances, in the flesh he would never admit his weakness. Yet Paul suffered from a thorn in the flesh which God did not remove from him because God said ⁹, “*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*” Paul internalized that word from God and it transformed his attitudes toward suffering. He said: “*Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.* ¹⁰ *That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*” Only when we know God’s grace in the midst of our weaknesses, can we celebrate those weaknesses and point people to our great Provider of strength and help. Third, I expect that Paul, as a church persecutor and proud Pharisee was more than a bit abrasive in his speech. Yet God’s grace turned him into a man of love and gentleness in his care for the believers. We see this throughout his pastoral letters. And finally, pride. Ah pride. Swindoll says, “Pride is a classic grace killer.”(Swindoll, *Ibid.*, pp. 199-209). It is what fuels our self-sufficiency and arrogance and self-centeredness. When we receive God’s grace, He will pursue us to a place of humility and replace our self-centeredness with a total dependence on Him. We can’t make these character changes in our own strength. But God has provided unending grace to Christians to empower us to choose, again and again, to put to death our tininess and be fully clothed with Christ’s own attributes and power.

Bethany Williams is exhibit B of how God’s grace can transform a person. *The Color Of Grace* is her book which describes one Caucasian woman’s journey from brokenness and despair to a partnership with African Christians who are ministering today to former child soldiers, child survivors of war and young sex slaves. I purchased the book and reviewed it because I was intrigued by the title and the byline “*How One Woman’s Brokenness Brought Healing and Hope to Child Survivors of War.*” Bethany’s brokenness involved a divorce, “admittance into a day program for post-traumatic stress disorder” and depression that verged on suicide. (Bethany Haley Williams, *The Color of Grace*, Howard Books, 2015, p.xx). She writes: “This is a story of the gospel and the redeeming power of Jesus, and it’s a story of second chances that turn into third chances...even fourth” [That’s grace!] She writes, “In one of my lowest periods of depression, I wrote a few words on a postcard and carried them with me for a year: ‘It will not be this bad forever. Hold on.’ I read those words at least 20 times a day, willing myself to believe they were true” (Williams, *Ibid.*, p. 85). Yet God was her restorer through grace, and enabled her to pursue her masters in therapy through the arts. Her own brokenness enabled her to bond so deeply

with the African children of war who also had PTSD and depression and thoughts of suicide. Then, through her art therapy she was also able to bring them to a place of healing and hope. A double work of grace. She says, “I am a broken woman who is still in the process of being mended by the Creator of grace. Still falling. Still getting up. Still trying to learn how to live and love better, still often getting it wrong. This is a story about grace – in all its many colors and wonder.” (Williams, *Ibid.*, pp.xx1,) “Mended by the Creator of grace. Still falling. Still getting up...a story about grace.” It’s a powerful book.

Psalm 84:11 says *The Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord gives grace and glory; no good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly.* Another of the hymns we sang today is by Annie Johnson Flint – “He giveth more grace.” Her backstory proves this truth of Psalm 84. She lost her birth parents at age 6 and then her adopted parents died as well when she was in high school. At that time arthritis began to cripple her severely and she was confined to a wheelchair. But, as the hymn testifies, she experienced first-hand that God’s grace was everything she needed moment by moment:

“He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater,
He sendeth more strength when the labors increase.
To added affliction He added His mercy, to multiplied trials, His multiplied peace.
Refrain: His love has no limit, His grace has no measure,
His power has no boundary known unto men,
For out of his infinite riches in Jesus, He giveth and giveth and giveth again!
When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
when our strength has failed ere the day is half done,
When we reach the end of our horded resources, Our Father’s full giving is only begun.”
Refrain.

A powerful life testimony.

Grace brings salvation; (Rom.3:24, Eph.2:8-9); grace provides God’s power and promises (as we saw in our scripture reading in 2 Pet.1. He gives us *all we need for life and godliness*). God provides restoration and the ability to stand against Satan and suffering’s ravages (1 Pet. 5:10). God gives the Holy Spirit; God gives (note the verb – that’s the cornerstone of grace) believers authority over evil spirits and victory in all areas (Mt. 10:1, I cor. 15:57); Christ gives His peace to all who will receive it. And the list goes on. Grace is God’s goodness poured out on those who believe and will receive it all throughout the day.

Beloved, grace IS the centerpiece of the Christian life, springing right from the very heart of God. My hope and prayer is that each of us would become more “grace conscious,” being “grace aware” , experiencing a “grace awakening” so we become “grace-full” (Swindoll, *Ibid.*, 1990, pp.197-198).

Therefore, let me ask you this question: How have you experienced God’s grace in your life this past semester or year at Wheaton? Remembering this will help bolster your faith and give you the strength and courage to go on through hard situations. Whatever you are going through or will go through in the coming months and years, God’s grace is sufficient and He wants to shower it on you and provide all you need. May we have eyes to see His grace and gratefulness to give Him the praise He deserves in the midst of all the mountains we are trying to overcome.

Grace Close At Hand

I close with two current stories of grace here at New Hope. The first is from Alex in Hong Kong to all you in his “home church.” He wanted to “share a witness that could be an encouragement for those church fellows who are facing next steps:

I know my home church fellows are continuing to pray for me about my next step after graduating from my JSD degree [that’s the Ph.D. inlaw]. And some of you may know that I study law, but I am more interested in Christianity in China, particularly from the legal perspective, e.g., legal rights to have freedom in faith, church development in the period that is full of pressures. Anything that works with Law, Sociology and Christianity would be interesting to me.

Yesterday, I attended a paper workshop in my university about Christianity and the War on Drugs in the Philippines. It's a wonderful topic to me because it covers what I'm interested in. I had a chance to talk with the speaker and other professors who have spent decades studying this issue. One of the professors who graduated from Cornell University was very interested in my proposal of future study about Christianity in China, and one of his PHD students actually did a thesis about the underground churches in China. The professor also gave me good advice in selecting universities that could provide a post-doctoral position – my hoped for next step in the States.

It's an encouragement to me that God always hears our prayers, knows our heart, and gradually answers our prayers and leads us to the direction that could maximize our given gifts, please Him, and glorify His name. In this way people won't just see the work we've done, but see His mighty and His Love in us, through us and with us. Blessings. ” Alex

The second is my testimony of God's grace throughout the visa application process that involves both Evan and New Hope. God's goodness has been poured out on us in these weeks of endless paperwork and requirements from the government in Evan's visa process. I would lie if I said it hasn't been stressful – sometimes inordinately stressful. But, as Paul said of his calling, we believe “*the grace of God has not been in vain.*” I have only needed the eyes of faith for “grace awakening” to find strength in God's character and provisions.

The story starts with Evan's call from God to build God's global church. That's been a conviction several years in formation. From his involvement at New Hope for the last three years, our diverse family of faith was a microcosm of that vision of a global church and a reinforcement of his call. As his OPT was coming to an end, he needed to know what his next step was – just like Alex and several of you. His sponsoring agency in Singapore had required him to come back to Asia as a prerequisite for the funds they gave him for his Masters in the States, but his growing conviction was that if he returned to Asia, he would work within a predominantly monocultural context and he wanted to reach internationals from many backgrounds. So he began to think about staying in this country and working with the great diversity of internationals here. Many of you prayed as he applied to work with an international ministry in Columbus OH and went during spring break to check that out. They were very interested in him but they had to have recommendations from his Indonesian work colleagues before they could hire him, and those recommendations wouldn't come until Singapore had released him from his obligation to them. But that process got v-e-r-y delayed. At this point, I'm reminding us of his story. Now let me complete the next chapters of the story from the New Hope perspective.

In April, when he still had not heard from Singapore or Indonesia or Columbus, the idea came to have New Hope sponsor him. You know this part of the story. It is very unusual for a small house church to sponsor an international for an R1 religious worker visa. But we started the process. We went to a lawyer who was recommended by the College but she didn't know anything about house churches. I did not feel comfortable hiring her, although we paid her initial fee, when I knew a friend whom I have discipled who is a top notch immigration lawyer. She had been Chicago based but now Dayna lives in New Orleans. I told her about our situation and asked if there was any way she could handle our case from a distance and she said yes, she handles law cases long distance all the time. That was God's grace gift to us number one.

We got from the first lawyer and from Dayna two different lists of all the documentation we would have to provide to support this case. One piece of that was our affiliation with a denomination. I am an American Baptist pastor and am on the National Registry for American Baptist pastors. I assumed that would qualify our church as an ABC church. But I was wrong. I was told by a leader in the denomination that we didn't sound like a church because we didn't have the name “church” in our name. So we hired another lawyer to help us process a 501 C3 name change for the church. We had been officially recognized as New Hope Bible Fellowship in 2010. I have all that documentation but we were supposed to file annual reports, descriptions of what we're doing and list our board of directors. As I began my process with lawyer 3 I began to worry if perhaps we had not kept up to date with filing

our annual reports and the yearly fee required to maintain our status with the government as a 501 C3. I could find no record of those reports here.

Have you ever had a recurring thought that is a doomsday thought? Negative...negative. That is what this thought was for me. The name change has gone through, that's blessing 2, but in the process I asked the third lawyer to confirm our status as a 501 C3. The government will look at every piece of our documentation and if it is not accurate, it will hurt Evan's case. But grace gift #3: We are current! The annual reports have gone in on time each year; the fees have been paid and we are good. That was a lesson for me. Satan will often lie to us about things we can worry about. What if? Various issues of doubt or condemnation or accusation. I was grateful to know that was all fine. We are now New Hope Bible Fellowship Church – in good standing with the government☺.

Next, we had to go meet the denominational leaders because to help Evan's case as a small house church we had to be properly associated with a denomination. When I called the American Baptist executives to talk about this, I got a rather negative response. I was told three times, "there's a process." I felt we had another mountain to climb and asked you for prayer. Evan and Keith and I went for that interview two weeks ago and met the husband and wife that are the executive directors of the American Baptists of Metro Chicago. Grace gift #4: they gave us a very warm welcome. They were accommodating, very gracious, supportive of our global vision and mission as a house church, and very glad for us to go through THE PROCESS (which takes about a year to be accepted in the denomination.) Still, I'm so grateful there was no cool reception and God went ahead of us. We have started the application process, with a different set of documents, and have very positive relationships with the executives.

Grace gift #5. This past week Evan heard from Singapore (finally!) and they have released him from the obligation to return immediately to Asia and given him permission to be in the States for five years to work in International ministry. How long beyond that can be negotiated but that was a burden released for Evan and for us because the question was whether we would have to repay the money they paid for him to come to Wheaton if he stayed in the States. We do not. He's free and clear and can pursue ministry here. That's blessing five.

Finally, blessing #6: for Evan's filing we had to prove the church had enough income to support his 35 hours a week with a salary above the poverty level. So the pledge requests were sent out. We have never done that before at New Hope. But God has blessed - the projected income is ABOVE the projected expenses. And actually significantly above for the first time in our church history. Wonderful, wonderful. So now all our paperwork is sent in and we wait.

Blessing #7: I heard from Dayna today. Two more documents need to be sent in and then she's ready to file for the R1 visa – a whole month earlier than the first lawyer had promised!

There's another hymn I just sent out with Shepherd's Daughters: "Count your blessings, name them one by one. Count your many blessings; see what God has done." All these many blessings are an evidence of God's grace.

Grace is not just a theological centerpiece of our faith. It is God in action. I hope this is what each of you who are graduating will internalize. God is able to open doors and reveal His goodness to you in your process of climbing mountains and going through all kinds of institutional red-tape. He will go before you as you go home to your home country for the summer or for good. His steadfast love and faithfulness is new every morning. You can trust Him. That's the good news of the gospel- God is always pouring His goodness and blessings out on His people – just because of His love. He gives; and how we live in that grace comes from our open hands to receive all those gifts- with thanksgiving!

Let's pray.

Dr. M.L. Codman-Wilson Graduation Sunday 4/29/18