

Amazing Grace

Rev. Glenda
Simpkins Hoffman

Ephesians 2:1-10

Sermon Series:
Calling People to Faith

“The world runs by ungrace. Everything depends on what I do.”

- Philip Yancey

As Americans, we have just celebrated this wonderful national holiday of Thanksgiving—a day to remember and give thanks for all the blessings of our lives. It’s a weekend of abundant food and time with family. And today is Christ the King Sunday. We remember and celebrate that he is the ruler of all things and, as His people, we live in His grace. Today, I want to reflect on God’s amazing grace and share some pictures or images of the saving, surprising, sufficient grace of God.

One of the stories I often shared with our new members classes back in River Forest is from Philip Yancey’s book, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* It is a beautiful picture of God’s **saving grace**. Yancey writes: “Each year in spring, I fall victim to what the sport announcers diagnose as ‘March Madness.’ I cannot resist the temptation to tune in to the final basketball game, in which the sole survivors of a sixty-four-team tournament meet for the NCAA championship. That most important game always seems to come down to one eighteen-year-old kid standing on a free throw line with one second left on the clock.

“He dribbles nervously. If he misses these two foul shots, he knows he will be the goat of his campus, the goat of his state.

Twenty years from now he’ll be in counseling, reliving this moment. If he makes these shots, he’ll be a hero. His picture will be on the front page. He could probably run for governor.

“He takes another dribble and the other team calls time, to rattle him. He stands on the sideline, weighing his entire future. Everything depends on him. His teammates pat him encouragingly, but say nothing.

“One year, I left the room to answer a phone call just as the kid was setting himself to shoot. Worry lines creased his forehead. He was biting his lower lip. His left leg quivered at the knee. Twenty thousand fans were yelling, waving banners and handkerchiefs to distract him.

“The phone call took longer than expected, and when I returned I saw a new sight. The same kid, his hair drenched with Gatorade, was now riding atop the shoulders of his teammates, cutting the cords of a basketball net. He had not a care in the world. His grin filled the entire screen.

“Those two freeze-frames—the same kid crouching at the free throw line and then celebrating on his friends’ shoulders—came to symbolize for me the difference between ungrace and grace.

“The world runs by ungrace. Everything depends on what I do. I have to make the shots. Jesus’

“Jesus’ kingdom calls us to another way, one that depends not on our 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.”

- Philip Yancey

kingdom calls us to another way, one that depends not on our 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.”

I like this illustration because I can relate. As a teenager, I was very involved in athletics—especially basketball. And the picture of the person at the free throw line, with everything depending on him, is the picture of my life. I was a very serious teenager, and I felt everything was on my shoulders—the success of my team, the well-being of my high school, my grades.

And that translated into my relationship with God, as well. I was raised going to church and did believe in God, and was considered a very “nice” person by most, but on the inside, for whatever reasons, I knew I wasn’t as good as I appeared on the outside. And I certainly didn’t believe I was good enough to be acceptable to God. During my freshman year in college, I began to really understand that God was inviting me to step away from the free throw line—from the life of ungrace, where everything depends on me. And He was inviting me to receive the free gift of grace. We’ve already heard the passage from Ephesians 2, but let me read verses 8-10 again.

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s

workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

I love that passage because it shows that God takes the initiative in revealing Himself to us human beings, and it is God who makes our salvation possible, who gives of Himself and every good thing that we have. And even the good works we do were prepared in advance for us to do. It’s all God’s grace.

Grace is an invitation to receive the gift of a relationship with God and the forgiveness of sin and salvation that comes with that relationship. There is nothing I or any of us can do to earn it. We simply need to reach out and receive all that God had already done for us in Christ.

Grace is stepping away from the free throw line and the life of ungrace to receive the free gift of grace and to be celebrated as God’s beloved child.

But grace is not just saving grace. Grace is for all of life. Dallas Willard defines grace as, “God acting in your life to accomplish for you what you cannot accomplish on your own.” That is true in relationship to our salvation, but it’s also true for all of life.

Jesus came not only to free us from our sins but to make it possible to live an abundant, fruitful and joy-filled life. The picture I have of God’s **surprising grace** comes from my own experience. Years ago, my husband, Stuart, and I had just moved to Chicago, and I had begun my seminary studies. I hadn’t been a student for quite awhile, so I was very engrossed in my studies trying to keep up with the reading load and

***Jesus came
not only to free
us from our
sins but to
make it
possible to live
an abundant,
fruitful and
joy-filled life.***

assignments. I remember one particular weekend when I had planned my schedule so that I would work almost the entire weekend, but Stuart and I had planned to take a break on Saturday afternoon so we could go to a matinee. I was really looking forward to seeing a movie, but when we got to the theater, we learned that the time printed in the paper was wrong and that the movie had already started 30 minutes earlier. I was bitterly disappointed. There wasn't another movie at that time for us to go to, and I was upset because I had worked really hard and so carefully planned this well-deserved break.

We drove home, and, I confess, I was grumbling about the unfair nature of life. I was getting ready to start studying again and Stuart was getting ready to leave the house when the phone rang. It was some friends of ours from Kalamazoo. They were calling from a phone on a bus arriving in Chicago. They were with a group of people who were on their way to the Lyric Opera, who happened to have two extra tickets and wondered if we would like to join them. Well, of course, we did.

We quickly changed our clothes and raced downtown. All the way, we kept thinking about how amazing it was that we were home when they called. If the movie had been at the time we expected, we would have missed their phone call and this wonderful opportunity. We were amazed at, and thankful for, God's providence and this surprise gift.

What was even more amazing was not simply that we got to go to the opera. We were included in an extravagant dinner party in the exclusive dining room of the Lyric Opera beforehand. Then, when we received our tickets and proceeded to our seats, we discovered that they were front and center. Plus, at each intermission, we returned to the Green Room for refreshments. It was an extraordinary evening for us—one that we didn't deserve,. And we certainly couldn't have planned or prepared for it or put it together by our own resources. It was an experience of sheer, surprising grace.

The experience has become a metaphor for me and my life. I have spent a great deal of energy trying to figure things out and prepare for every outcome. But I have learned that my plans, my preparation, my agenda are not really in my control. And that I really can't know, let alone prepare for, everything that is ahead. I continue to need to be freed from my own compulsions and what I think life should be like, so that I can trust God's grace, His goodness, His providence, and sovereignty—to believe that He really loves me and wants the best for me. I can trust His generous heart. I can trust His surprising grace. That is true for all of us.

We may have to let go of ideals and expectations but, in opening our hands to let go, we receive the grace of God and experience the unspeakable joy, peace, and love. The truth is that God is always acting to accomplish for us what we cannot accomplish on our own.

*We have to
arrange our
lives to
connect deeply
with God and
with others
and to live in
those unforced
rhythms of
grace.*

One of my favorite verses is from Matthew 11:28-30. I like the paraphrase from *The Message*, which I have shared with you before. Jesus says:

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out...? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace.”

God is liberating me and teaching me the unforced rhythms of grace. We all have come to believe God’s plan for us will exceed our wildest dreams, and the calling of our lives is to live, walk and work with Christ. We have to arrange our lives to connect deeply with God and with others and to live in those unforced rhythms of grace. As we do, we will experience God’s surprising grace and the abundant, fruitful and joy-filled life Jesus promised.

But I don’t want to paint the picture that everything is roses. I know some in this room are in the midst of real struggles. Life is painful and difficult, and the idea of such a delightful evening or an abundant experience of grace seems far away. I have felt that way myself over the past 25 years, as I have suffered a lot of disappointments, dealt with various struggles, even grieved the loss of loved ones. But I have learned that it is in the midst of our most difficult circumstances of life that we learn to rely on God’s **sufficient grace**. The Apostle Paul is an inspiration in this regard. The

picture or snapshot I have of God’s sufficient grace is the Apostle Paul sitting in a Roman jail, chained up and singing praises and writing words like those in Philippians: “Rejoice always, again, I will say rejoice.” Listen to what he writes in 2 Corinthians 12:8-10 regarding Jesus’ words to him:

“To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses so that Christ’s power may rest on me. 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.”

This is a spiritual truth that I don’t understand and don’t even like, but our suffering does transforms us. We are so helpless, so vulnerable that we rely on God and His grace in ways we don’t even know we need to when things are going well. Our weakness provides the opportunity for God’s power to be manifested in and through us. In the midst of disappointments, struggles and pain, we can trust in God’s grace to accomplish for us what we could not accomplish on our own. And we see the faithfulness of God in so many ways. God’s sufficient grace leads to deep transformation and to a deeper sense of His love and goodness.

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.”

The final snapshot is of **sharing God's grace**. Tony Campollo tells a wonderful story of an experience he had while attending a conference in Honolulu. He couldn't sleep one night, so around 3:30 a.m. he went to a diner to get something to eat, and to his dismay, eight or nine prostitutes came in, and one of them, named Agnes, mentioned that the next day was her birthday and that she had never had a party. Campollo learns they come in every night about the same time, so decides to throw a birthday party for her the next night. The guy behind the counter agrees to it, but he wants to make the cake. Here is where we pick up the story:

“Two thirty, next morning, I was back at the diner. I had crepe paper, decorations, a big sign on pieces of cardboard that read “Happy Birthday, Agnes.” I decorated that diner from one end to the other. I had that diner looking good. The woman who did the cooking must have gotten the word out on the street cause by 3:15 a.m. every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. It was wall-to-wall prostitutes and me. Three-thirty on the dot, the door of the diner swung open and in came Agnes and her friend. I had everybody ready. I was kind of the MC of the affair, and when they came in we all screamed ‘Happy Birthday.’ Never have I seen somebody so flabbergasted, so stunned, and shaken. Her mouth fell open, her legs seemed to buckle. Her friend grabbed her arm to steady her. She was led to one of the stools at the

counter. We sang Happy Birthday to her. When we came to the end of our singing ‘Happy Birthday dear Agnes, Happy Birthday to you,’ her eyes moistened. Now, when the birthday cake with all the candles on it was carried out, she lost it, just cried. Harry gruffly mumbled, ‘Blow out the candles, Agnes. Come on blow out the candles. If you don't I'm gonna have to blow out the candles.’ After a few endless seconds, he did. Then he handed her a knife and said ‘Cut the cake, Agnes. Yo, Agnes, we all want some cake.’

“Agnes looked down at the cake. Then without taking her eyes off it she slowly and softly said, ‘Look Harry, is it alright with you if I... what I want to ask you is...is it OK if I keep the cake a little while? I mean, is it alright with you if we don't eat it right away?’

“Harry shrugged and answered ‘Sure it's OK. If you want to keep the cake, keep the cake. Take it home if you want.’

““Can I?” she asked. She looked at me, ‘I live just down the street, a couple doors. I wanna take the cake home, OK? I'll be right back, honest.’

“She got off the stool, picked up the cake, carrying it like it was the Holy Grail, walked slowly towards the door. As we all just stood there motionless, she left. When the door closed there was a stunned silence in the place. Not knowing what else to do, I broke the silence by saying “What do you say we pray?”

“Looking back on it now it seems a little strange for a preacher to be leading a prayer meeting

“Wouldn’t we all join a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning? Well, that’s the kind of church that Jesus came to create.”

- Tony Campollo

with a bunch of prostitutes in a diner in Honolulu at 3:30 in the morning, but then it just felt like the right thing to do. I prayed for Agnes. I prayed for her salvation. I prayed that her life would be changed and that God would be good to her. And when I finished, Harry leaned over the counter, and with a trace of hostility in his voice he said, ‘Hey, you never told me you were a preacher. What kinda church do you belong to?’ And, in one of the moments when just the right words come, I answered, ‘I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning.’ And Harry waited a moment, and then almost sneered as he answered, ‘No you don’t. There’s no church like that. If there was, I’d join it. I’d join a church like that.’

“Wouldn’t we all? Wouldn’t we all join a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning? Well, that’s the kind of church that Jesus came to create.”

God’s saving, surprising, sufficient grace is such a blessing to us. We have been loved, found and celebrated by God. But God’s grace is meant to be shared as we go forth into the world to love and celebrate others. We are to be party throwers—not just for those like us but for all who are so in need of experiencing the tender mercy of God.

There are three parables in Luke 15 that I encourage you to read on your own later about a lost coin, a lost sheep and a lost son. And, when the lost is found, there

is much rejoicing and people gathering for parties. At the end of each parable is a closing remark. Listen as I read them:

“I tell you that in the same way there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.... We had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

As believers, we can give thanks for God’s amazing grace and how He has touched our lives. But I also encourage you to consider how you can share the abundance of God’s grace with others. There are so many who are still living the life of ungrace, so many relying on themselves. Next week begins Advent, and for the next month we are having a birthday party. We are celebrating the birth of our Savior. We have been given a great gift in Jesus Christ our Lord. But this gift is to be shared as we tell others the good news of Jesus and his saving, surprising, sufficient grace. Let us begin praying and thinking about how we might do that this Advent and Christmas season, when many are more open to hearing. As you can see in the bulletin, there are many opportunities to invite others to the celebration and many opportunities to share the good news through service. Let’s celebrate God’s grace and share the good news with as many as we can

