

Our God of Grace

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Acts 11:19-26

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

They were ordinary people like you and me who were willing to speak about Jesus and his resurrection and his encouragement so that others were drawn to believe in the resurrection and to follow Jesus.

We continue to move through the elements of God's Big Story: creation, fall, redemption. The story of God's creation of our world and universe, our fall as in sin we turned away from God, and our redemption through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which restores our ongoing relationship with God. We have been seeing the story of redemption unfold through the book of Acts in the explosive growth of the church outward from Jerusalem.

There is the new use of the word "viral" on the Internet. When a website goes viral, the number of people checking it out grows like crazy. My sister sent me a Youtube video link of a wedding processional with the title "JK Wedding Entrance Dance" that turned out to be marvelous, as the wedding party literally dances down the aisle. Then I noticed the number of people who have seen it. Twelve million. Today, three days later, the number of viewers has grown to over fourteen million! That's a website that has gone viral.

Last week, we saw how the Christian faith broke a cultural barrier and moved beyond the Jews as it was embraced by Cornelius, a Roman army officer, and his family and friends. Today, we see the Christian faith going viral and spreading like wildfire among

the non-Jews, the Gentiles, as it travels to Antioch, three hundred miles north of Jerusalem. We pick up the story in Acts, chapter 11.

"¹⁹ Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews." So we see that the persecution that arose in Jerusalem against Christians was used by God to spread the faith, because where the Christians went they spoke about Jesus. "²⁰ But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch [Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman empire] some men of Cyprus and Cyrene spoke to the Hellenists [Greek in language and way of life] also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus." What I love about that is that the men are not named. It just says, "some men." They weren't eloquent preachers and famous evangelists. They were ordinary people like you and me who were willing to speak about Jesus and his resurrection and his encouragement so that others were drawn to believe in the resurrection and to follow Jesus. "²¹ The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord." So, suddenly, there is a huge number of brand new Christians in a secular city who know very little about the Hebrew faith, our Old

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Testament and not very much about Jesus, either.

²²News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.

²³When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion;

²⁴for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord.”

The reaction of Barnabas upon reaching Antioch is marvelous. He saw the grace of God and he was glad! He rejoiced. He was thrilled to see what God was doing. He could have had the opposite reaction. We could have read “and when he came and saw the grace of God, he was ticked off!” Three times in the book of Acts, when large numbers of people turned to Jesus, we read of the anger and jealousy of the religious authorities who saw the crowds gathering around the apostles to learn about Jesus. For example, Acts 13:45: “When the Jews saw the crowds; they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying.” (See also 5:17 and 17:5) Barnabas could have said, “Hey there, hold on. I’m from the Mother Church in Jerusalem. You haven’t asked us for permission for this. What do you think you are doing?” He could have been a person of grumble. He chose to be a person of grace. Barnabas realized it wasn’t the doing of the Antiochian Christians that had led so many people to believe in Jesus. It was the doing of the grace of God.

So when Barnabas saw the grace of God, he reacted as a person of grace, and not only was he glad, he went on to encourage the Christians there. So, when you see the evidence of the grace of God in your home life, in your work life, in your church life, in someone else’s life, how do you react? Are you a person of gripe and grumble or a person of grace?

Rick Warren’s book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, begins with the words, “It’s not about you!” Yet, in American culture, everything is very much about us. We want what we want when we want it. We like what we like, and we are willing to speak out immediately if we don’t like whatever it may be. A friend of mine has just assumed responsibility for a national blog on health issues. She told me she nearly quit at first, because people who like the previous writer have responded in such an intensely critical manner. That is characteristic of our whole culture. If we see something that is a blessing of God to many other people but for whatever reason we don’t like it personally, instead of gladness and grace, we often react with a grumble in our little moment of pique.

Just take the matter of music selection in worship. I have been associated with three incredibly wonderful healthy congregations over the past thirty years, including VPC, where the evidence of the grace of God is evident everywhere. I have listened to people express opinions about music. It’s too loud. It’s too soft. It’s too repetitive. It’s not repetitive enough. It’s too slow. It’s too fast. For thirty years I have listened to people asking why we

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sing hymns that were written two hundred years ago or why we sing contemporary songs. A week after 9/11, the congregation I was serving had a memorial worship service in the evening. A person walked into the sanctuary and said to me, “Will there be any worship songs tonight?” I said, “Yes, we will sing both the great hymns of the church and some worship songs.” Immediately, the person turned around with chin up in the air and stomped out of the church. No joy in the grace of God there.

Here at VPC, our worship planning team makes a very serious effort to take an ancient-modern approach to music. We enjoy the leadership of Lance Vining and Kerry Wilkerson, Terry Sisk’s excellent work on the organ, our wonderful adult, children and youth choirs, the handbell choirs, the brass and orchestra, our wonderful soloists such as Catherine Dehoney and Polly Lohrmann this morning, the worship leadership of the team led by Andrew Schmidt and our praise groups, Work in Progress and the Lohrmann family. Most weeks our services have both ancient-traditional and modern-contemporary music, although some tilt more ancient and some tilt more modern. If you’re patient, you will hear what you love and you will probably hear what you don’t love. That’s okay! Music is an aesthetic—an art form. You like what you like and don’t like what you don’t like, and it’s perfectly okay to have an opinion and a preference. However, we miss the

mark when we allow our preferences to blind us to the wider blessings God is giving to the congregation as it worships. I have watched people listen to a contemporary piece of music and sigh and start to read their bulletin. I have watched people listen to a classical piece of music and sigh and read their bulletin. Neither respects the significance of a diverse music ministry to encourage a congregation of very diverse tastes in music.

Now, if something about the quality of the music concerns you—and let’s push pause on music for a moment as it is only an illustration—if anything about the quality of anything in your home, in your place of work, in your church, in your life concerns you, then by all means have the grace to express yourself gracefully to those who are in charge. If it’s the music that isn’t your cup of tea, focus your thoughts on the grace and blessing of God, and be glad that others are glad. Barnabas saw the evidence of the grace of God and could have reacted with a grumble. Instead, he became an expression of the grace of God and encouraged a lot of people. How about you?

There is a fascinating word in the original Greek language version of the New Testament, the word *makrothumia*. The *makros* part of *makrothumia* means “long” and the *thumia* part means temper. So *makrothumia* is literally a long temper—the exact opposite of a short temper. It is often translated as “patience” in our English Bible. A while back, I was at the grocery store and approached the checkout

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counters, trying to pick the quickest line. So, of course, I picked the shortest line. There were only two people in front of me. A line formed behind me. A friend was in the back of a long line. I thumbed my nose at him and smiled. The lady in front sees the amount due, opens her purse slowly and, moving with the speed of syrup, pulls out exact change. Meanwhile, my friend is checked out and at the door catches my eye, thumbs his nose at me and mouths the word *makrothumia*! Give me *makrothumia*, the long temper, Lord.

Makrothumia is often translated patience or long-suffering in our English Bible. I think it is more useful to say that *makrothumia* is the God-given grace of getting along. I was driving down a highway with a pickup truck in front of me when another pickup truck merged onto the highway and tried to occupy the same space as that occupied by the first pickup truck. The two trucks were side-by-side, each half in and half out of the lane. I could see the drivers lower their windows and offer various gestures of affection to one another. That is not *makrothumia*, the grace of getting along! The grace of getting along is the quality of God-inspired self-restraint in the face of provocation that treats people with love, dignity and respect.

In our society today, we tend not to practice long-temper. Instead, we often react quickly, sometimes explosively, when we don't like someone or something that is going on. We keep track of

the number of times we don't like something and dwell on it. Given the choice of grace or grumble, we grumble. We often express ourselves to our buddies and to anyone who will listen in private and public settings. The grace of getting along is the quality of God-inspired self-restraint in the face of provocation that treats people with love, dignity and respect. "23When he [Barnabas] came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced." He saw the grace of God and became a person of grace.

Many years ago, I received one of my greatest lessons in life and ministry from a man by the name of Lyle Shaller. Lyle is a prolific author and consultant to churches around the world. He was speaking to about fifty people at a retreat center in northern Indiana. As he was discussing various issues, he posed the following question to us. "Suppose you are at a baseball game and crack, the batter hits a line drive directly toward third base, but just before the ball reaches third base, it flies just slightly to the left of the third base as it heads out into left field. Is the ball fair or foul?" What do you think?

Immediately, all fifty of us in one voice said, "It's foul," and thought to ourselves what a silly question. Except that when he asked is it fair or foul and we said it was foul he replied, "Wrong." Wrong? And then he said, "It's whatever the umpire calls." He got us. And then he said, in words I will never forget, "In life there are many situations that can be viewed two ways, situations that have difficult, doubtful aspects to them and that also have good and

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hopeful aspects to them.” He paused, looked us in the eye, and said, “Learn to call things good.” *Makrothumia*. Have the grace that gets along, that offers grace, especially when things might not be going the way you prefer them.

“Look at your home, your church, your husband, wife, child, parent, and your place of work, your community, city, schools, and those who govern through the eyes of Barnabas. Sure, you have an internal check list of what you like and don’t like, and sure, you can find things wrong and you can pick, pick, pick finding fault. You can always find fault. You can always criticize. You can always see the problems. Learn to see the grace of God and be glad. This is not a denial of the difficult or the uncertain, or a denial of your own personal preferences but the affirmation that God has given you grace even in the midst of the troublesome, and in that grace there is gladness.”

There is a story of an old monastery that had fallen upon hard times. “Once a thriving monastery, now only five monks lived there, and they were all over seventy years old. This was clearly a dying order. One day, as the monks agonized over the impending demise of their order, they decided to visit a hermit whom they believed to be a prophet to see if he might have advice for them. The hermit welcomed the five monks to his hut and showed compassion to them. ‘Is there anything you can tell us,’ the abbot, the head monk, inquired of the

hermit, ‘that would help us save the monastery?’ ‘No, I’m sorry,’ said the hermit. ‘I don’t know how your monastery can be saved. The only thing that I can tell you is that one of you is an apostle of God.’ The monks were both disappointed and confused by the hermit’s cryptic statement. They returned to the monastery, wondering what the hermit could have meant by the statement, ‘One of you is an apostle of God.’ For months after their visit, the monks pondered the significance of the hermit’s words. ‘One of us is an apostle of God,’ they mused. ‘Did he actually mean one of us monks here at the monastery? That’s impossible. We are all too old. We are too insignificant. On the other hand, what if it’s true? And if it is true, then which one of us is it?’

“Do you suppose he meant the abbot?’ ‘Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant the abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man—a man of wisdom and light. He couldn’t have meant Brother Elred. Elred gets irritable at times and is difficult to reason with. On the other hand, he is almost always right. Maybe the hermit did mean Brother Elred. But surely he could not have meant Brother Philip. Philip is so passive, so shy—a real nobody. Still, he’s always there when you need him. He’s loyal and trustworthy. Well, he could have meant Philip. Of course, the hermit didn’t mean me. He couldn’t possibly have meant me. I’m just an ordinary person. Yet, suppose he did?’

***See the
evidence of the
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Suppose I am an apostle of God? Oh God, not me. I couldn't be that much for you. Or could I?' As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one of them might actually be an apostle of God. And on the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the apostle spoken of by the hermit, each monk began to treat himself with extraordinary respect.

"Now because the monastery was beautiful, many people came there to picnic on its tiny lawn and to walk on its paths, and even now and then to go into the tiny chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out of them, permeating the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, people began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. As more and more visitors came, some of the younger men started to talk with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. Within a few years, the monastery had once again become a thriving order, thanks to the hermit's gift."¹

Be a Barnabas. See the evidence of the grace of God and be glad. When you don't feel glad about what is blessing other people, practice *makrothumia*, the grace of getting along, and treat

others with extraordinary respect and you will become the grace of God to others. That's a *hinnainee* response. The servant of Christ who says, "Here I am, Lord," and means it.

¹ Wayne Rice, Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks

