

Boundless Grace

by

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Readings: Romans 5:12-19

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Genesis 2:4b-9, 15-17, 25-3:7

Why would anyone want to be like God? I mean, really, do you want that much responsibility? Oh sure, there is the power thing, and you can do anything you like without permission from your board of directors, or your township zoning office. But really, it is a huge job, 24/7, all over the world.

You know everything but have to give your human creatures the freedom to act like they know something too about matters such as hunger, healthcare, learning. Your

children around the world never sleep. Somewhere it is always another day dawning, no matter the hour. The lawyers blame you in court for “Acts of...God” that you may or may not have had anything to do with. Who wants such broad responsibility? Who wants to be on call every night of the year, the century, the millennium? You don’t want that, really, nor do I.

None of us wants to carry God’s portfolio.

But, on the other hand, the *power* part is intriguing if you think about it, as we all have from time to time. You know how it goes: You hear yourself saying, “If I were God I would end the earthquakes and tame the torrent of the seas. If I were God, we say, I would clean up the atmosphere and bring an end to global warming. If I were God I would...well, you get the idea.”

It’s the *power* of God we are drawn to, become enamored of, want a bit of for ourselves. It is the *power* of God that we think we need and even have sometimes. While others must live by the rules, we consider ourselves different. The limits that apply to most of humanity do not apply to us.

Rather than live in obedience to God and responsive to God's love for us we prefer, in these moments of self-righteous rebellion, to live apart from God. And there, my friends, in that darkness is the heart of our dilemma: *As we seek to live as though we have no need for God we deprive ourselves of the very power of God, the love of God that we seek.* If we seek to know the power of God in our lives we have to get off of our pedestal above all others and drop to our knees, joining the legions who know already the great paradox of God's power: It is not through control of our lives that we join the power that is of God, but in humble obedience to God's call to live in love.

This paradox of God's power is the great lesson of Lent: we cannot achieve for ourselves what only God can provide. That is to say, the way to our moving beyond the power of sin in our lives is not in "trying harder" to be good. It is, rather, in our resolve to let go and let God shower us with the grace that only God can provide. However attractive we may think it would be to have the power of God so that we could do things in the world our way, it is not to be. Such wishful thinking only leads to further distancing from the very heart of God we want to embrace.

We cannot deliver ourselves. Only God's grace can do that. We do not have the power to deliver ourselves and *that* is the truth we seek to obtain during these forty days of Lent. We are, apparently slow to grasp this great paradox, thus the forty days of study, reflection and prayer. Our world gives us little help with such a paradox. For Christians to announce to the world that it is in admitting weakness that we find strength, and that it is through obedience that we find power is to make a declaration the world considers nonsense. The world prefers to believe that any of us can make a miracle happen, even the miracle of our own salvation. Paul counters that assumption in his letter to the Romans. In his commentary on the text, Paul Achtemeier summarizes the Apostle's argument, saying:

“Grace...throws the light that lets us see ourselves for what we are: incurably prone to the idolatry of regarding ourselves rather than God as the final hope of our redemption. It is in that way that grace leads us to the only repentance that matters: placing our trust finally and totally in God, not ourselves.”¹

¹ Paul Achtemeier, *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching Romans* (Atlanta, John Knox Press; 1985).

Here is the true work to be accomplished during Lent that is so much more than just giving up chocolate or picking up a new exercise discipline in our pursuit of better health. It is the hard discipline of genuine humility. It is the painful admission that we cannot do for ourselves what only God can do: lift us out of our sin (death) to grace (life). In Paul's letter the way of sin and death is associated with the first man, Adam. But the way of grace and life is associated with the new Adam, the one who reveals God's true purpose for humankind, grace and life. Adam personifies the life lived for self in rebellion with God. Christ represents the life lived for others in obedience to God.

I have struggled with this text for a number of days, if not years. Perhaps it shows. As I composed this sermon I bumped along like a kangaroo, bouncing along from one paragraph to another. It wasn't until yesterday morning that the creative juices began to flow again and my heart was moved. "What did it?" you ask. "What did I do to get unstuck?" you may wonder. I came over here and listened to the choir and orchestra in rehearsal for Messiah, rehearsal for the performance you will hear this afternoon at 4:00 PM. Here is Handel's masterpiece, composed by a man of faith for people of faith. The work tells the story of God's chosen one in our midst, "a man of sorrow and grief...despised,

rejected”, eventually killed and buried, only to rise again on the third day. We know the story well, perhaps too well to comprehend the miracle of grace, God’s powerful, amazing grace that it presents.

Perhaps we have lived with this remarkable story for so long that we fail now to hear it as the declaration of God’s power of life over even the power of death that it presents. Familiarity breeds...a skeptic’s mind, a disbelieving soul, an unstimulated heart. Sometimes it takes a trip to this place, to this room, to bring us to ground, where we hear the miracle of grace presented once more, in order that we might soar with the angels in the heights. Something like that, I think, is what got me unstuck in my writing this weekend. I had heard the story of God’s grace winning out over sinful death so many times that it no longer made the impression it once did. It was as though the truth had become so familiar that I was no longer hearing it as the unique declaration it is. But the truth set to music broke through the morning fog of my tired mind and lazy heart.

There is a scene at the close of a British-made film of recent times called *Amazing Grace*. Perhaps some of you have seen it. The actors include Michael Gambon as a

Member of Parliament at the time William Wilberforce presents his bill to end the slave trade in Great Britain. John Newton, played by Albert Finney, figures into the formula, of course: He who was brought to faith by the Wesleys and gave up his life as a captain of slave ships in order to be a cleric...and a writer of some three hundred hymns. The hymn Newton gave words that we know best is, of course, Amazing Grace. It is presented with restraint, sung only once in the film before we hear it again at the end in magnificent full dress by a band of pipers, horn players and drummers. It is that concluding presentation of Newton's simple little tune that just knocks me out every time I hear it. The closing credits begin to role and we are told how the story of William Wilberforce ends and what becomes of the principals in the story, and that because of them the slave trade ended for Britain by mid nineteenth century.

And then begins the drone of the bagpipes, followed by the tune every school child learns. But this time the tune is presented by the largest band of pipers you have ever seen or heard, slow-stepping across the green outside what appears to be a castle. And as the camera pans back, the lens' widening view captures the horns as now we hear them joining the pipes. Finally, as though to conclude with the gravitas that is deserved of such a declaration of grace, we

see and hear the drums, bass drums and muffled snares,
calling out the beat of Newton's simple and grand song.

I think this is an image, for me at least, of the way we
can be struck again with the truth of Paul's gospel,
transcribed in Newton's lyric: "I once was lost, but now am
found, Was blind, but now I see... When we've been there
ten thousand years, Bright shining as the sun, We've no less
days to sing God's praise Than when we'd first begun."