

Read lesson: Luke 7: 36-8:3

Let us pray: O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our rock and our risen redeemer. Amen.

Philip Yancey, in his book *What's So Amazing about Grace?* tells the story of a Chicago social worker who was working with prostitutes. A young woman was talking with the social worker, telling the reasons she became involved in prostitution—the money, the lifestyle, the near-impossibility of walking away, the living with a permanent sense of shame and guilt. The case worker wrote:

I could hardly bear hearing her story. . . . I had no idea what to say to this woman. At last I asked if she had ever thought about going to a church for help. I will never forget the look of pure naïve shock that crossed her face. "Church," she cried. "Why would I go there? I already feel terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse."

And Yancey reflects: "Women much like the prostitute fled toward Christ, not away from him. The worse a person felt about herself, the more likely she was to see Jesus as a refuge. Has the church lost that gift?" (p. 11).

The incident to which Yancey refers is found in Luke 7, our gospel lesson today. Jesus had been invited to dine in the home of Simon the Pharisee. Dinner was served in an open area, clearly visible from the street, with the guests reclining, leaning near the table. Servants of the host customarily poured cool water over the guests' feet as the event began. It was a common social ritual. But Simon had not done it, at least for Jesus.

So in the middle of the meal, a woman walks in—"a sinner." What kind of "sinner" she is, is suggested by what happens next. She's carrying a flask of perfume, which she breaks and pours over Jesus' feet. Then she lets down her hair—a gesture of intimacy—and dries his feet. Simon, the host, is appalled.

In a stage whisper audible to all, he says, "If Jesus knew what kind of woman this is—who she really was—he wouldn't be allowing her to touch him"

So Jesus told the story about two debtors, one who owes a large amount of money, the other a small amount.

The creditor forgave both. "Which will love the creditor more?" Jesus asked. "Why," Simon responded, "the one who was forgiven the most." And so Jesus said, "Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love."

That's what Jesus did—a radical and simple graciousness, acceptance and love that paid no attention to the rigid moral standards of the culture and religion and that reached out to all people, to everyone. He loved and accepted everyone, didn't seem to care about deviations from conventional social custom. He loved everyone the same, it seemed: Simon, the respectable Pharisee, and the prostitute off the street. No one had ever seen anything quite like it before. He got a reputation—"the friend of sinners". Wouldn't it be wonderful and faithful if his church earned and deserved the same reputation?

Now, fast-forward. After the crucifixion of Jesus and his resurrection appearance, his followers concentrated in Jerusalem, all of them Jews, and began to tell the story wherever they went. It never occurred to them that they were anything but Jews who believed that Jesus of Nazareth, the promised Messiah, had come.

One of them, a Pharisee by the name of Saul, who had been a fierce opponent of the early Christians, was converted, believed, and became a proponent, a missionary with the same energy and zeal that had formerly characterized his opposition. His method was to visit a town or city, go to the synagogue, tell the story of Jesus and the story of his own conversion. He did it successfully, apparently. Many believed, and inside those synagogues, were men and women and their families who constituted a new kind of religious group, followers of Jesus—not yet called Christians or a church, but getting close.

And then Saul, who is now calling himself Paul, ran out of synagogues. Up in Galatia, there were not very many Jews. So he told the story wherever he could. In the town square, in the marketplace, in public places and street corners where new ideas were proclaimed and discussed. Once he even did it in Athens, on Mars Hill, where the disciples of Aristotle and Plato gathered daily to talk.

He was successful in the Gentile cities of Galatia, but there was a big issue beginning to emerge.

Back in Jerusalem, the headquarters of the new movement, where Jesus' friends Peter and John, and James, Jesus' own brother, were in charge, word arrived that Paul had moved out and away from the synagogues and was baptizing Gentiles—something that had never occurred to those first Jewish believers.

So they had a big meeting—a kind of General Assembly. Paul was summoned and made his case that what God had done in Jesus was for all people. And after a while, everybody agreed, shook hands, and Paul went back to work among the Gentiles.

But then the folk down in Jerusalem had second thoughts. Paul's making it too easy. Here we are, abiding by all the rules and laws and dietary restrictions, keeping feast days, circumcising our male babies—and Paul seems to have forgotten who he is, who Jesus was, after all. So they sent teams of teachers to the cities where Paul had been, to talk to the new Gentile believers. And this is what the Jerusalem teachers said: "If you really want to be a follower of Jesus, there are some things you need to do that Paul neglected to tell you. You need to become Jewish: keep the law, follow the dietary restrictions, observe the feast days, and your men must be circumcised."

Paul was livid. He decided to write a letter to his Galatian friends. It is an angry letter. It does not contain the conventional gracious beginning of his other letters. It does contain harsh language. But it also contains the basic gospel message of God's unconditional love in Jesus Christ, God's love that no one can earn, no matter how many religious rules, laws, customs are followed, God's grace, which comes as a gift—to everyone—Jews and Greeks, male and female, slave and free, sinner and righteous.

Paul used the language of the legal system: "We are justified not by works of the law," he said, "but through faith in Jesus Christ." "No one," he said, "will be justified by the works of the law."

Two thousand years after Jesus, and after Paul wrote his letter, the Christian church is still arguing about what you have to do, or refrain from doing, in order to be faithful. The issue for the Galatian churches of the first century was how two communities—Jewish believers and Gentile believers—could

live together in the church, each respecting the particularities and peculiarities of the other. It is still the issue.

Paul's argument and Jesus' radically inclusive love tells us this: we are all sinners. Prostitute and Pharisee, new Gentile Christians and traditional followers of the law—and we all get in the kingdom, not because we deserve to be there or have earned the right to be there, but because God in Jesus Christ has invited us to be there. It's not our goodness or merit or deserving or good works. It's God's grace—GOD'S grace, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Religion has a notorious way of forgetting that; religion has a way of setting up moral and theological barriers or boundaries and then categorizing people on the basis of how they live. Jesus didn't do that. Paul argued against it. We can't seem to resist it, however.

The problem is that grace is contrary to common sense. Common sense tells us that everything must be paid for, that there is no such thing as a free lunch, that we are constantly being evaluated and judged by God.

The great theologian Karl Barth, wrote, "We don't like hearing that we are saved by grace. We do not appreciate that God does not owe us anything, that we are bound to live by God's goodness alone" (*Deliverance to the Captives*).

The gospel of Jesus Christ is not a prescription for making us deserving of God's love. It is, rather, the startling news that God loves us; that in Jesus Christ, God has laid down life itself for us; that what God wants most for us is that we should know that, understand it, receive it, and then live in joyful gratitude all our days.

In Karen Blixen's wonderful short story—made into an equally wonderful movie—"Babette's Feast," a community of grim, rigidly moral pietists is living on a small island off the coast of Denmark. They live a rough, mean life; their daily diet is a gruel of boiled cod fish and dry bread. And then Babette arrives and prepares to give the little community a banquet, extravagant beyond their wildest imagination—the best food, best wine, best desserts—simply because Babette wants to give it.

At the banquet, grim, rigid moralism begins to melt, old wounds begin to be healed, old divisions begin to be closed, slights and insults are forgiven. At the end, one of the small group, a retired general, says:

We have all of us been told that grace is to be found in the universe. But in our human foolishness and shortsightedness, we imagine divine grace to be finite. Then the moment comes when our eyes are opened, and we see, and we realize that grace is infinite. Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude.

Isn't our ultimate goal to be held in God's presence in a new way without guilt, without pain, simply with love and forgiveness?

None of us gets into that presence because we deserve it or have earned our way in. We are in because of God's grace—perfectly revealed in that man Jesus and his accepting, gracious, unconditional love.

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,

That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.
Amen.

Dear God, we pray for your church this morning, holy, catholic, apostolic, in every part of the world, so richly diverse in character and personality, yet one church in your love and in the grace of your Son, Jesus Christ.

And we pray particularly for our church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Bless it. Keep it in your care in these difficult and fragile times. Bless its mission in the world, its ministers and members, its worship and witness.

Give it a new vision of your kingdom and its place in it.

And, O God, bless us here, in this place, that we might be a faithful church in all we do and say and that your saving love for the world may be clear and pure and gracious in our own life together, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

