

GRACE UPON GRACE

Ephesians 1:3-14

O Thou who art the source of light and life; and who hast given us the supreme gift of thy Son Jesus Christ, that we might know thee and find eternal joy in thy love; restore us to the way which is illumined by the love he bore unto us. We thank thee for the glory of thy creation and its many tokens of thy [providential] care. Where our lives are emptied of love, fill them. Where we are driven by hatred or walled in by indifference, restore us to our rightful mind. And where we let the lesser loves crowd out the greater, keep us ever mindful of our Lord who gave himself up for all, and who spoke from his cross the word of forgiveness for [all]. Amen. (Daniel Day Williams)

Back when Elise and I lived in Staten Island, New York, we went to visit a building that had been a manufacturing plant which had been turned into a retail location for a number of small independent stores. There was the charm of seeing the old building with its wide floor boards and lofts and nooks and crannies and some of the left over machinery. Merchants were selling clothing and food and crafts and various wares. Many of the items were made by the person selling it and it felt a bit like a country bazaar.

But there is only one store I really remember. They were selling horseshoes. They had taken old horse shoes and grinded and sanded and polished them until they shone. I still remember the sign next to their wares. It said, "What more could you want?" What more indeed? What more could you want than a shiny horseshoe? It is certainly a distinctive gift, but I had to wonder why you would want one at all. I know it is a good luck symbol, and maybe you could use it somewhere for something.

But did it occur to the sign writer that as nice as that shiny horseshoe may be there is a lot more? You could attach that same sign to many things we have wanted: cars and trips and homes and awards and positions – what more could I want? Paul wrote this letter to the Christians in Ephesus about the grace upon grace we are given by God, not as a single grace like being given a single gift like a shiny horseshoe, but grace upon grace.

He lays out a veritable collage of terms and phrases describing what happens as a result of God's good gifts to us. This is not a formula of faith but words that God gave to Paul that speak of the overwhelming graces which are

bestowed upon us. We have been blessed, adopted as God's own people, forgiven, redeemed, saved, and marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit. The expression "every spiritual blessing" highlights the completeness of the divine gifts.

Yet we may find our self on a search for riches and fame, and power and ask our self, "What more could I want?" This past week was the funeral of a man some have called "the greatest entertainer who ever lived." But his life is a testimony of how fleeting riches and fame and power can be. Celebrities gain and lose their star power quickly when they make bad career choices or lead shameful personal lives. Riches, fame, and power are transient. Applause is temporary. But the promises of Christ are eternal. The graces of God for those who receive them are followed by more grace from God.

To those living in the first century Greco-Roman world to whom this letter was written, these statements of faith would have been truly astounding. Their concept of the universe was of a predominately hostile place. It is much like the fears which are on display in movie after movie and now TV show after TV show – I personally believe written by people with little imagination and lots of fear and no particular faith in or understanding of the Gospel Jesus brought. It is the belief that whatever is beyond what we see is evil and destructive. It is the fear that the unseen forces moving history are seeking an evil end to us and the world.

The salvation many then and now long for is to escape life, to somehow rise above all difficulty. It is the promise in the fantasy commercials selling beer and cars – there is something beyond we can buy that will help us escape life. What the Gospel offers is salvation not as escape but as redemption of life extended to all things on earth and in heaven. The Gospel lifts up the hope that all of history is moving toward that promise.

It is the promise we hear in this lesson that "he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. (And that) he destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will." When it says we have been adopted it does not make each one of us an only child. We are adopted into one family, yet a lot of folks are missing the family reunion and the reading of the will and never know what they have missed.

Last February I flew out to San Diego for a pastor's conference. Wishing to be frugal I rented the cheapest car I could find to get me around. It was one of those little micro-mini compact little tin cars that get you the lowest rates. When I got to the airport I got on the shuttle to the car rental area. When we got on the bus the driver asked each one of us if we were "a preferred customer." As an infrequent flier I don't belong to such things and I began to wonder since I am not a preferred customer if this means I am an un-preferred customer or they prefer I not be a customer.

As we went from terminal to terminal along the road from the airport to the rental lot the driver kept chatting with the "preferred" customers, asking each by name how their flight was and telling each one what car was ready and waiting for them. "Mr. Jones you have a nice red Mustang just waiting for you. Mr. Brown you have a nice silver Camry waiting for you." As we drove by the parking lot of the "preferred customers" it was announced and we could see the flashers on their cars were blinking to greet them. They were the first let out at their own building. We were told to wait on the bus.

Finally I got off with the other un-preferred customers, dragged my bags inside and waited in line. When at last I got to the front of the line and handed the clerk my papers he said, "Mr. Terry, I see that you have rented one of those little micro-mini compact little tin cars. Would you like an upgrade to something nicer?" "No, thank you. I will stick with the little micro-mini compact little tin car."

He did the paper work, handed me the keys and told me the parking space number and I dragged my bags to the far end of the lot looking for a little micro-mini compact little tin car. To my surprise while I had paid for a little micro-mini compact little tin car he had given me keys to a nice shiny new red Mustang just like the preferred customers got. I just didn't have to pay for it.

Sometimes we think all that is in store for us is a little micro-mini compact little tin car. God does not have preferred and un-preferred people. It is a promise to all and an invitation to all and grace upon grace for all. There are not some who are preferred by God over others, not some blessed more than others because they signed up for the club.

"He chose us (not me or you but us) in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. (And that) he destined

us (not me or you but us) for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will.” None should ever feel neglected because the promise is to each and every one of us.

These graces are not personal gifts; they are gifts for us – and the word “us” is used a half a dozen times in these 11 verses, “we” 3 times, along with the pronouns our and your. “You” is mentioned once, but it is a corporate “you.” When people talk of the church as family, it is family in a way unlike anywhere else, unlike our bowling league or Rotary or a knitting circle. We are family because one and the same God has adopted us into his family and graced us.

Our faith in Jesus is personal but it is not private. I am blessed, but that is not the focus of what Paul wrote about. We are blessed. That is the focus. We are to be a blessing. Faith is at once personal – it affects me as a person – but faith is primarily corporate – it is a hope and faith we have inherited together. Today increasing numbers of people believe or at least practice a faith detached from community of faith. That is not the faith of the scriptures. What we have been given – the grace upon grace – is not a private possession but a community gift.

What if I bought a baseball and glove and a uniform and spikes and built a baseball field in my back yard. I kept the diamond mowed and watered. I kept my glove oiled and the baseballs dry, the uniform and spikes clean but there was never a game played in the field. I could claim to embrace baseball because I have the elements of baseball. I might enjoy looking at them. But it would just be a collection of things I was keeping for myself and useless to the world and ultimately unsatisfying. It would not help other baseball players or the game of baseball.

I could practice daily Bible reading each morning and say prayers throughout the day and read a devotional guide each night. It might make me feel better and maybe even act better, but outside of a community of faith it would be at best a blessing to me but would not make me a blessing to anyone else. It would be a gift to me and no one else. The message of Jesus was addressed to the disciples, not to a collection of individuals. It was not just a message to enjoy the benefits of faith but also to bear the cost of discipleship. That is part of being a holy and blameless people. It was not just a call to belief but a call to go and make disciples bringing the good news given us to the whole world.

The letter was written as a reminder of the great gifts of God to all the people of God to sustain us in good times and in bad. Ray Stedman, for years pastor of Peninsula Bible Church in California, tells the story of an old Navajo Indian who had become rich because oil had been found on his property. He took all the money and put it in a bank. His banker became familiar with the habits of this old gentleman. Every once in a while the Indian would show up at the bank and say to the banker, “Grass all gone, sheep all sick, water holes dry.”

The banker wouldn't say a word. He knew what needed to be done. He would bring the old man inside and seat him in the vault. Then he would bring out several bags of silver dollars and say, “These are yours.” The old man would spend about an hour in there looking at his money, stacking up the dollars and counting them. Then he would come out and say, “Grass all green, sheep all well, water holes all full.” He was simply reviewing his resources. That is where encouragement is found — when we look at the resources which are ours, the riches, the grace upon grace bestowed upon us.

From the beginning God has lavished grace upon us. It is for us to receive it. The words of Paul wash over us with promise after promise that God has for us. We have been blessed with every spiritual blessing. It is not the prosperity gospel but something far greater and richer and enduring than the shiny horseshoe. It is not something in a future we can clearly see now, though perhaps we can look at the past and realize it is God's grace that has brought us safe thus far. God will give what God has promised. It is for us to live as those who trust in these promises of God and to share the blessings by being a blessing to others.

Almighty God, we come before you today unworthy of your love, and yet basking in your forgiveness. You have lavished your grace on us. You have given us every spiritual blessing. You have even seated us in the heavenly places alongside Jesus Christ, not because of who we are, but because of who you are. And so today we simply say, “We love you. We praise you, and we thank you.” In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

July 12, 2009

The Federated Church of Hyannis

Dr. John A. Terry, Pastor