

Full of Grace and Truth

John 1:14-18

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In the quiet, think through the week. Remember a moment of grace. Something that is good. How it broke through in the busy-ness, in the intensity, trouble, and frustration. As we savor this grace, we are in your gracious presence, God. May you speak to us now out of the truth of your Word. May you fill us with your overflowing, gracious truth, through Jesus Christ, we pray, amen.

The Word became flesh and lived among us. That person, the incarnate Word, was full of grace and truth. From his fullness we have all received grace compiled upon grace. Grace from every angle and perspective. Law came through Moses. But grace and truth came through Jesus, the Christ. Grace and truth here are not philosophical categories; they're not laws of life; they're not concepts to be understood; they're not ethics to be valued; they're not organizational values to be implemented. Grace and truth are imbedded in the humanity of Jesus, the Christ. Jesus is the essence of healthy human being, the presence of a whole person, the impact of completeness and perfection. Truth and grace must be seen in human form.

Martin Luther, commenting on this text about the logos made flesh, said that there are people who can't stand an embodied God. As God becomes flesh for us, these people want to have a spiritual God. Though the use of logos without fact is simply a figment of our imaginations. John was speaking at a time when Gnosticism was growing. Gnosticism as a philosophical perspective was beginning to impact Christianity. Gnosticism divided that which was real and of the flesh from the spirit. John is taking that same philosophy and adapting it back into the Christian view, which is Jesus came flesh and blood into the world. There is no separation between and spirit and body. The logos cannot be controlled by concept.

We understand that grace must precede the truth. For God so loved the world that he gave his Son is preceded. This is the understanding that we develop because God has first loved us. God has loved the children that are baptized today. From that fullness of grace we receive the truth. The truth and grace together are like a multi-faceted jewel and every way you look at it there is only grace and truth. Anyway you look at Jesus, at his life, his words, his actions--you only see grace and truth connected.

What do we mean by grace? That wonderful Greek word, "khar." It means things that produce a sense of well being: favor, good will, kindness, pardon, forgiveness, affirmation, encouragement -- anything that sends a message to us as human beings that good is on our side. Khar is the root for charisma and charm and character. To be the presence of grace, to give a word of grace, to grace the room with your presence, to say grace at a meal, to be gracious in the midst of a conflict. These things cannot be controlled; they are simply gifts of the presence of a person. And they're found in the identity of Jesus, the Christ.

When these infants are born, we see the primal example of grace that leads to an understanding of truth. A child does not understand the concept of grace and truth. A child only understands that he or she is being held in the arms of a loving presence, a parent. And quickly the trust begins to develop as they feel the nurturing presence of a parent. The grace begins to open up the world of listening to the truth when the parent speaks because the child knows that she or he is loved. I noticed at the baptism that when we were speaking the creed, Jesus descended into hell, is when the real trouble started among the children. You know that reality will reflect the truth, that sometimes raising children is a kind of difficult place. And where do we get the grace? We can only get the grace by being in the presence of a God who is gracious to us and by receiving the grace that we receive from our parent. And if we did not receive enough grace from our parents, we must receive the grace of God.

As I was preparing this sermon the other night, I took a TV break and turned on the PBS concert of the New York Philharmonic with Lorin Maazel. I caught the first part of a Beethoven violin concerto. Suddenly I was moved to remember a gracious moment with my father when he had just bought a brand

new stereo tape recorder, and he was delighted to be able to play the Beethoven violin concerto as we sat together on the floor and listened. Grace pervaded my sense of memory because of my father's gift of music to us as children. In tough days I remember those moments when I cannot talk to my father because of his dementia. I remember the moments of grace. We need grace in families, grace from great composers, the grace of those who can sing well, the grace of people who can present us the best and bring us well being.

Grace is not just something we receive as individuals; grace is something that moves in our family system. Grace is something that moves when we have organizational gatherings. Peter Steinkey, a consultant for the church, published in the Alban Institute Quarterly recently that we need a family system that is full of grace and truth. There is a temptation when we are having a conflict in the family to become more reactive than respondent. Our instincts kick in: we have an automatic reaction, a defensive motif, reactive words, and mindless interactions. In this primal moment we instinctually respond with our backs up. And the instinct overcomes our ability to be intentional and reflective. Steinkey says that grace is the movement away from our instinctual reactions, from our impulse. It helps us calm down, let go of the anxiety, and be present for another human being without overreacting. Grace helps us to think and to get in touch with the truth.

Tomorrow night in our session meeting at about 9 o'clock, we're going to need a prayer from you for grace. The Cowboys and the Redskins are playing. I think I will call for an order of the evening. Let us pray: there is a blue truth and there is a red truth, depending on which side you're on. But, there are bigger things we need to pay attention to in grace besides football.

One of my favorite musical pieces is "Elijah" by Mendelssohn. In the debate between Julius Schubring and Felix Mendelssohn about the libretto, Schubring wanted the libretto to reflect more teaching and moralistic understanding, so people could walk out with a lesson. But Felix Mendelssohn said, that's not raw enough; that's not real enough. I want an Elijah that's full-bodied and full-blooded, a prophet who stands with zeal and energy. I want a real human being. Somehow that didn't appeal to the pastor's sense of decorum. But, as you listen to Elijah, you know that Mendelssohn won that battle. In the conversation Elijah is having with the widow of Zerah, there is emotion. The woman is crying out for her child, the child is dead, and Elijah is crying out to God: God, can't you raise this child from the dead. And the libretto slips in a wonderful phrase from Psalm 86, "Lord, for that art gracious and full of compassion, plenteous, goodness and mercy." Elijah reminds God that a god is of grace. And when the widow sees her son rise from the dead, she says to Elijah, now by this I know that you are a man of God and God's word is in your mouth, and it is true. The grace leads to an understanding of truth.

In our order of worship in the Reformed Tradition, we begin with a moment of grace, where God speaks to us, where we hear the one who pours out love and grace and adoration upon us. Out of that we are freed then to look at ourselves in the mirror and see that we are sinners. I think I understand why people don't want to get their pictures taken. You have to see the results of that picture, and the confrontation of truth demands a moment of grace. Aging is not a pretty picture at times. Truth has to be incarnate. Truth has to be authentic, real, and personal.

When Jesus was before Pilate, Pilate said, So you're a King? And Jesus said, You say I'm a King and for this I was born, for this I came into the world. I testify to the truth, everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice. Pilate says, What is truth? What Pilate misses is that it is not about the concept of the truth; it is about the presence of truth that is staring him right in the face. Jesus: incarnate, real. And Pilate cannot engage Jesus as the truth. Jesus himself said, I am the way, the truth and the life. You will know the truth and the truth will set you free. You will know Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ will set you free.

In the church we have some problems around truth. I saw a cartoon not too long ago that had a board adjourning after a long meeting and the person who's closing the meeting, the president, saying, Now let us adjourn to the parking lot where we can say what we really think. It's hard for us to talk about the truth sometimes at meetings because we're concerned there's not enough grace and trust to really say what we think. We're afraid the conflict is going to undermine the unity and the possibility that we can stay together. So we hold our peace, and we don't talk about the elephant in the room. We are polite and civil,

but we miss assertive forbearance because we don't speak the truth.

We don't speak the truth because there is not enough grace to sustain us in the conflict. Parker Palmer, commenting on churches and small groups, says there is an important discipline in speaking the truth. That is, opinions are audible, speak your mind, but they're also accountable. We will listen, and we will hold you accountable as to the truth of what you're saying. And that's gracious accountability. In communities, we need to be accountable and audible. Sometimes the audibleness puts us in some difficulty. Just talk to Dan Rather and CBS.

How do we know what is true? There seems to be a pervasive view of red truth and blue truth. Whether you are a Republican or Democrat, you have your own truth, and what is The truth. That's when we all bow before the living Jesus Christ and we say there is only one who is true and we're able to be gracious to each other because we are not arrogant about our own truth.

Some of the guiding principles of compassionate truth-telling are being able to be reflective, accountable, to be open to receive what others have to say; to respond without vindictiveness or pain or defensiveness. Jesus embodied the truth when he saw the woman who had been caught in adultery and, with these two phrases, he put grace and truth together. He said, I don't condemn you, (grace), go and sin no more, (truth). That's what Jesus invites us to, not a condemning telling of the truth.

Now grace without truth is a wonderful, warm and fuzzy thing. It's sentimental. It can be romanticized. It can be trivialized. It's what Bonhoeffer called a cheap grace. But truth without grace can also be a problem. It's condemning. It's attacking. It's like a hammer. It's predatory. It's impersonal. I'm going to get you with the truth that I know and use it against you.

There's a simple grid that is used in relational teachings. It's made up of five animal types. The vertical axis is grace and the horizontal axis is the truth. The person who doesn't want to exercise grace or know the truth is like a turtle. The person who is full of grace but doesn't want to hear the truth or speak it is like a teddy bear. The person who wants to use the truth but doesn't have any grace is like a shark. I have to confess to you right now that I err on the teddy bear side, a really big one. For those of you who are beginning to sharpen your teeth because you sense teddy bear-ness in me, let me say that I become a very tough teddy bear. There must be a balance between grace and truth.

One of the ways this is all put together is with the word fullness. The Gnostics used to declare that they had the full wisdom of God, the full knowledge of God. They used this word *klaroma* a lot. We are in touch with the fullness. But John takes that Gnostic word and turns it again, saying, no, only Jesus has the fullness. In that fullness it's not as if he's filled up one time and that's it. But the fullness has to do with Jesus being overflowing with grace and truth. It just keeps pouring out of him. It's like a wellspring from the inside flowing out to the people around him. More than enough for everyone, not just filled but overflowing, constantly new and renewing. That's the kind of grace that the church must exercise and exude. We don't want to run out of grace.

There are moments in the relationship between Karl Barth the theologian and Emil Brunner the theologian when they didn't have a lot of grace for each other. They fought huge battles over the great epic theological dissonances of the early twentieth century. And in their epic battle, they would often criticize each other and attack each other. But at the end of their lives, Karl Barth wrote a letter to Emil Brunner, "If I were more active after my two years of illness, I would take the next train to press Emil Brunner's hand again. If he is still alive and if it is possible, tell him that I commend him to our God and tell him the time when I should say no to him is long since past." We are all alive only by the fact that a great and merciful God who speaks his gracious yes to all of us is present.

There's a time when in the conflicts and battles grace must win in the truth. God has spoken a very huge yes to us today. He has sent Jesus the Christ to be among us, to be one of us, to speak to us, so we might hear and understand who God really is. He walks among us. He lives in our flesh. He reaches out to embrace us. He shows us grace in every possible way. He does not come to condemn. He does not come to blame or shame or attack or get even. He comes full of grace and truth. He comes to save us from dark places by being a person of light.

We here at National Presbyterian Church have affirmed that we are a ministry of grace. If we are truly to be a ministry of grace, we must also affirm that we are a ministry of truth. That grace will give us the freedom and the power to say what we need to say to each other and the world without apology, and that grace will cover the truth, and that grace and truth must also work together continually as we meet and talk to each other. In Jesus Christ, only in Jesus Christ, will we find the balance and the fullness of having grace and truth flow from us to one another and to the world. Let us be a ministry of both grace and truth.

Amen.