

Grace!

Baptism of Jesus 2008 | Acts 10.34-43; Matthew 3.13-17

While we were on vacation in Illinois after Christmas, Amy really took off walking. Our hotel had a wonderfully long corridor, and she loved nothing better than to walk up and down holding on to my finger. She's strut along, looking up at us from time to time, making sure we were still there. This is a fitting analogy of the kind of trusting, intimate relationship God has with us by virtue of our baptism.

Season of "Epiphany" is about seeing what is "revealed" or "made manifest" about Jesus and God. This morning, our focus is on Jesus' baptism, and with it, the relationship that God and Jesus share. But also, the kind of relationship that Jesus invites us into by virtue of our baptism into Christ.

If we were to condense this into one word, it would be "Grace."
It leaps out to us from Peter's lips
and from Jesus' baptism at the Jordan River.

Grace

First, Peter:

*I truly understand that God shows no partiality,
but in every nation everyone who fears him
and does what is right is acceptable to him.*

Acts 10.34-35

Or, as another translation puts it:

*I am certain that God treats all people alike.
God is pleased with everyone who worships him
and does right, no matter what nation they come from.*

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I don't know about you, but this seems almost too good to be true. Do we really dare believe it?!
After all, you and I show partiality, or prejudice, all the time. In our culture as a whole, we show partiality according to athletic ability, ethnic background, beauty or body image, the kind of job we have, the school we go to . . . the list is endless. In some places, like India, the caste system defines this partiality quite formally.

In other places, like Jr. and Sr. High school,
partiality is defined less formally but just as clearly.
Way back in the dark ages when I was in school,
we had the jocks and the smokers and the geeks,
and the nerds and the punks and the stoners.
Do we know what the distinctions are today in school?
[Preps, rockers, hicks, rappers, computer geeks, band geeks, Goths,
skaters]

And yet . . . God is different.
God shows no partiality, no prejudice.
God treats each one of us the same.
But this might not amaze us too much;
after all, we'd expect God to see us this way.
But this is the kicker . . . this lack of partiality
involves the forgiveness of sins God offers us.

God models this wonderfully at the Jordan River
where Jesus comes to be baptized by John the Baptist.
Hear again what God says to Jesus:

*This is my Son, the Beloved,
with whom I am well pleased.*

3.17

What has Jesus done in his life so far
to receive such an accolade from God?
Has he healed anyone?
Has he performed any miracles?
Has he taught the people anything?
Nope! Nothing. Nada. Zip. Goose egg.
Jesus hasn't even opened his mouth in public yet,
according to Matthew's gospel.
His ministry hasn't even begun . . . and yet . . . God calls him
my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.

I'd like to suggest that this is the scandal of God's grace.
God's love claimed Jesus long before he had done anything.
And in the waters of baptism Jesus had his identity confirmed,
an identity that would stick with him for the rest of his life.

The same thing is true for us as well.
God's love claims us long before we do anything.
That's why I'm glad we baptize infants here at Hope.
After all, what have they done to deserve God's love?
Cleaned up their room? Put away their toys?
Maybe some day, but not yet.

What *have* they done?
Kept their parents up during the night?
Filled their diapers a few hundred times?
Sure, they're cute, but that'll only cut them
so much slack at three in the morning.
And yet God's grace claims them
and God's love begins to transform their lives.
And their identity as a child of God is confirmed,
an identity which will stick with them for the rest of their life.

Jesus' Response

Notice, then, how Jesus responds.
He is led out into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit
where he's tested. And after that, he's off on his ministry
of healing and teaching and loving and dying.
God's unconditional love and acceptance motivates Jesus
to accomplish the ministry God gives him:
to save us from our sins (Matthew 1.21).

That Jesus dies for us means that grace is not cheap and easy;
rather, it's difficult and painful.
Because through his life, death and resurrection
Jesus takes on the brokenness and pain and sin
for which we should be held accountable.

The story is told of a boy named Johnny
who misbehaved in school almost as often as he breathed.
After one such offense,
Johnny stood with back arched, head cocked back
and hands clenched defiantly.
"Go ahead, give it to me."
The principal looked at the young rebel.
"How many times have you been here?"
Johnny sneered rebelliously, "Apparently not enough."

The principal gave the boy a strange look.
"And you have been punished each time have you not?"
"Yeah, I been punished, if that's what you want to call it."
He threw out his small chest,
"Go ahead I can take whatever you dish out. I always have."

"And no thought of your punishment enters your head
the next time you decide to break the rules does it?"
continued the principal.
"Nope, I do whatever I want to do." the boy replied.
Ain't nothin' you people gonna do to stop me either."

The principal looked over at the boy's teacher who stood nearby.
"What did he do this time?"
"Fighting." the teacher replied.
"He took little Tommy and shoved his face into the sandbox."
The principal turned to look at the boy,
"Why? What did little Tommy do to you?"
"Nothin', I didn't like the way he was lookin at me,
just like I don't like the way your lookin at me!
And if I thought I could do it, I'd shove your face into something."

The teacher stiffened and started to rise
but a quick look from the principal stopped him.
He watched the child for a moment and then quietly said,
"Today, Johnny, is the day you learn about grace."
"Grace?" Johnny sneered. "Isn't that what you old people do
before you sit down to eat?
I don't need none of your stinkin' grace."
"Oh but you do." The principal studied the young man's face
and whispered. "Oh yes, you truly do."

The boy continued to glare as the principal continued,
"Grace is unmerited favor.
You can not earn it, it is a gift and is always freely given.
It means that you will not be getting what you so richly deserve."

The boy looked puzzled. "Your not gonna whip me?
You just gonna let me walk?"
The principal looked down at the unyielding child.
"Yes, I am going to let you walk."
The boy studied the face of the principal, "No punishment at all?
Even though I socked Tommy and shoved his face into the sandbox?"

"Oh, there has to be punishment," said the principal.
"What you did was wrong
and there are always consequences to our actions.
There will be punishment. Grace is not an excuse for doing wrong."

"I knew it," Sneered the boy as he held out his hands.
"Lets get on with it."
The principal nodded toward the teacher. "Bring me the belt."
The teacher presented the belt to the principal.
He carefully folded it in two and then handed it back to the teacher. The
principal looked at the child and said.
"I want you to count the blows."

The principal slid out from behind his desk
and walked over to stand directly in front of the young man.

He gently reached out and folded the child's outstretched, expectant hands together and then turned to face the teacher with his own hands outstretched.
The principal said one quiet word: "Begin."

The belt whipped down on the principal's outstretched hands.
Crack! The young man jumped in the air.
Shock registered across his face, "One" he whispered.
Crack! "Two." His voice raised an octave.
Crack! "Three..." He couldn't believe this.
Crack! "Four." Big tears welled up in the eyes of the rebel.
"OK stop! That's enough. Stop!"
Crack! Came the belt down on the principal's callused hands.
Crack! The child flinched with each blow,
tears beginning to stream down his face.
Crack!
Crack! "No please", the former rebel begged,
"Stop, I did it, I'm the one who deserves it. Stop! Please. Stop!"
Still the blows came,
Crack!
Crack!
Crack!
One after another.

Finally it was over.

The principal stood with sweat glistening across his forehead and beads trickling down his face. Slowly he knelt down. He studied the young man for a second and then his swollen hands reached out to cradle the face of the weeping child.
"That's grace, Johnny."

What a gift!
Jesus took on the consequences of our sin, of our selfishness.
He paid the price we should have paid.
That's grace.

Our Response

If Jesus is our model, then we too
have a ministry to live out and accomplish.
Not because we fear God,
but because we're motivated by the love of God
we have been given so freely.

At times, it may seem like a ministry we can't bear;
too hard, too long, no end in sight, ineffective, overwhelming.
At other times, it may be the circumstances at church

that we can't bear. Being in community together can be messy.
We disappoint one another. We make mistakes.
Like porcupines, we prick each other with hurts large and small.
Living and dealing with the consequences of those hurts
can be messy; it may take us in new or uncomfortable directions.
Yet from God's great storehouse of strength
comes all the grace and all the energy we will ever need.

Annie Johnson Flint's poem captures this beautifully
when she writes,

*God giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater,
He sendeth more strength when the labors increase;
To added affliction he addeth his mercy,
To multiplied trials, he multiplies peace.*

*When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,
Our Father's full giving is only begun.*

*His love has no limit, his grace has no measure;
His power no boundary known unto men.
For out of his infinite riches in Jesus
He giveth and giveth and giveth again.ⁱ*

May we trust that God will continue to give us
all that we need as we need it,
and may we trust in God's strength
when our own seems to falter.

Amen

ⁱ Quoted in *The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart* by Charles Swindoll (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 1996), 252.