

"The Works of the Spirit: Graceless"

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Acts 11:1-18 CEB

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Grace. It's a word we use all the time, particularly as Methodists. In New Member classes and confirmation classes, there's always a good chunk of time spent talking about GRACE. It's a very churchy word, I think the only time we hear it used in not churchy ways is like, "Did you see Sally's dance recital, she's so graceful!" Right?! And in those types of contexts, it typically has a physical, visual aspect to it, the idea that someone walks or dances or just carries themselves in a beautiful, gentle, liquid sort of way. {Very much UNLIKE the first outdoor service we did here after months of only virtual worship, and I, being me, chose like 5-inch heels, and when I got to the church, I realized that Joe and I were going to be sitting up by the Bowker Hall doors so that every time we went to the pulpit, we'd have to walk down a fair amount of stairs as everyone watched. I was definitely like, "Well, this will be the moment that I forget how walking works." I didn't trip, but I was also a little bit like toddler learning how to walk. We might also hear it as a courtesy, "She graced us with her presence" or "They had the grace to talk to me in person". That sort of thing.

But GRACE. A churchy word we use a lot, but let's be honest, many of us probably have a really difficult time

describing what grace is when used in that churchy context. "God gives us grace", "God has bestowed grace to us", for our sacraments, we'll say it's an outward sign of an inward grace - not something we're doing but God's doing.

I'd love, actually for a second, for you to really take a moment and think of what the first word that comes to mind is when I say, "GRACE". I bet there's a number of varying thoughts that people are having, and I'd truly want to hear what word came to mind after service, please let me know! When I was giving the example of the graceful dancer, I said, "Beautiful, gentle, liquid", and I think these are very applicable here also, just in a more abstract way. Biblical, God-given grace IS beautiful, it IS gentle, it IS this liquid-malleable-fluid like feeling and experience. If you want the theological answer, the answer is it's a gift - plain and simple. Grace is a gift from God, given to us without any strings, anyone can accept it, anyone can experience it. No amount of money, or worship attendance, or characteristics can alter our access to this gift. It's given to everyone freely. Period. So, we may not always be the best at describing grace but I can tell you what we are really good at - deciding who we think should have it or not. We rock at that!

And that is exactly what's happening in today's scriptural text. Let's take a look.

Peter's taking the ministry world by storm. He is truly someone who has embraced his faith and is living that faith out as a disciple in the world, he's preaching and teaching and he makes his way to Jerusalem. Now, the people there were well acquainted with Peter's work and mission, and they had heard

that he had been dining with and offering God's love not only to those of the Jewish background, but also Gentiles and this didn't sit well with them. They were walking into this meeting with Peter with the idea that there are pre-requisites, as it were, to be a follower of Christ.

Peter does something both interesting and brilliant: he doesn't just go for the theological, "but Jesus said" sort of answer. He begins by telling his story, by contextualizing the concerns they have. He begins by going, "Oh, you're mad because of such and such dinner party I went to. I see, let me give you all the details about this dinner that the gossip-mill left out."

He tells about being in Joppa and praying when he had a vision of this linen sheet coming down from heaven and all these wild animals and the voice of God telling Peter to kill the animals to eat. Peter refused 3 times stating that he can't because it would be impure and God rebukes that by saying that nothing is impure that God has said is pure - keep that line stored away in your brain for a moment - and with that, everything goes back to normal, and these men show up, and Peter gets that Holy Spirit itch to go with them so he does and meets up with even more people who said they went and found Peter because an angel told one of them to. So, Peter begins to share the Word of God and everyone in the place gets that Spirit, gut-twirling, fire igniting feeling within them. Peter remembered that it's the Holy Spirit that falls upon people in baptism, in this fellowship and sharing and community, and life-altering energy that brings us into new life. And so he comes to the conclusion that God is doing a bunch of work that he is just a

vessel for, just a sharer of. And that God isn't differentiating who the Spirit moves based off of identity or age or gender or race or ability or sexual orientation or anything, none of that. So who's he to try to stifle the Spirit's gift of grace in people's lives?

And that's his story, his testimony, his perspective on why he's doing this thing that's making people mad, but by contextualizing it, by sharing the details, and the emotions, and relating it to the way God has acted in their lives, the people calm down and agree that God is just a whole lot bigger than they had previously thought. Thank goodness, because we often think WAY too small.

We are the people angry with Peter in this story. We are the people who want God to only be offering something as beautiful, and gentle, and as liquid as grace to people like us. We want that reassurance we have it and that so-and-so for whatever reason, does not. It's that classic, someone gives us a wonderful, thoughtful gift, and we are moved to tears until we see them give that same gift to someone else. Then we decide it's not so special, or that ours HAS to be different and better in some way. We spend a lot of time throwing around a word as churchy as "Grace" yet don't offer a whole lot of it.

But it's the Spirit that can guide us to a place where we can shake the notion that some have God's grace and others don't. "You don't need to be a member of this church, NOR ANY OTHER..." right? You hear us say it every time we have communion! We don't come to church to get grace, we already have it. We come to church for many other wonderful purposes: community,

expressing our faith, learning, witness, service, all those things - but not to get grace.

Remember what God said to Peter when Peter decided that he couldn't eat because the wild must be impure. God responds with, "Who said they were impure? You? 'Cause I sure didn't." We are constantly deciding who must be graceless, impure. But it's like this shirt I once saw with a drawing of Jesus on it and below it, it said in quotes, "'I never said that' - Jesus".

I want to leave you with a closing illustration. An author once relayed this story about a man who had gotten fired from his job, not because his work wasn't good, he was excellent at whatever it was he did, but that he was wildly inconsistent and unreliable. Well after months of not working there, he one day returned, seemingly a new person to his old colleagues. When asked about the change in his life, he told his own story, his own testimony to how he finally got his life together, and he shared his own testimony about back in college when he was in a fraternity, there was a wild party, the alcohol ran out and he was voted as the one to go buy more even though he had been drinking. It was dark, he was intoxicated, so when he was driving and a boy appeared on his bike, he didn't respond fast enough, hit him and the boy died. His father was able to afford a good lawyer who, in his words, "twisted the facts" and got him off the hook. He then left college, got married, had kids but was haunted day and night by what he had done, which led him to just real instability and heavy drinking. That's when he got fired and the family was fully reliant on his wife's income.

As he tells it, it was early in the morning one day when he was drinking like usual, and the doorbell rang. There at his

door was a woman he recognized but couldn't place. She was that boy's mother, the one he had killed. They sat down together, and she shared the anger she had felt for years, how she wanted this man to get what he deserves, to pay for what he did to her son. It was through Christ, through the Spirit, that she was there that day, not in a place of anger but in a place of gentleness, of forgiveness, of grace. She said, "I have come to let you know that I forgive you and I want you to forgive me for hating you. Jesus told me my life is too precious to lose to hate - and your life is too precious to lose to guilt." With that, as he puts it, he "...saw deep within her the permission to be the kind of man [that he] might have been had [he] never killed that boy." He went to church with her and found freedom from the guilt he felt that only the Spirit could offer him.

Both he and the boy's mother had spent year's thinking he was an outsider from God's gift of grace, yet even he could receive it.

As we spend these next few weeks holding the Spirit up to the light and examining the many facets it holds, a good place to start is grace. And when we say, "God, not them. Not me. Not the impure." We have to remember that we're a whole lot of years too late to make our case. God's already given the gift.