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JUNE 27, 2021

MARK 5:21-43 (p. 816)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Lord, we pray for Enlightenment. We ask you to come to us right where we are—with all of our questions and all of our doubts, with all of our worries and all of our fears. Come and shine the Light of Truth on the paths we tread. Illuminate us Lord, on our Journey towards you, so that we might brighten the path of others along the way. We ask this in Jesus' Name, Amen!

“GRACE”

I want to talk about Grace today. It seems appropriate with our texts! Only it's one of those allusive words that we toss around a lot in Church, but don't often explain what it means. And actually, I'd like to talk about why Grace matters. And maybe what we do with it. So, if it's okay with you, I'm just going to jump right in.

Let's say you are driving down the road, when suddenly you see flashing lights in your rearview mirror. That feeling, the one in the pit of your stomach, that's Guilt! You pull over to the side of the road and stop. The officer approaches. You both do your thing, license and registration and such. The Officer goes back to the Patrol Car and calls it in, then returns to your car. Now, when he tells you that you are being let off with just a warning, that's Grace, getting something that you don't deserved! Or Mercy maybe, not getting something you do deserve!

And when you leave the side of the road, and choose not to spin your tires, or take off like a “bat out of Honor”—when you decide not to speed, at least for the next several days—that’s Wisdom, right? But it’s also Gratitude! You respond to the “Mercy” of not getting a Ticket—or to the “Grace” in Forgiveness, being set free—and then act accordingly! It’s simple, right? A logical progression! You move from Guilt, to Grace, to Gratitude! It’s also the very core of the Heidelberg Catechism, one of the Foundational Documents of the Protestant Reformation! So, think of Guilt, Grace and Gratitude as Mile Markers on your Journey of Faith!

What I’m saying is, at some point most of us realize our Guilt, right? We’re sinners! Clearly! Far less than perfect! Not a single one of us deserves to stand in the Presence of a Holy God! “Guilt” then, is the first Mile Marker on the Journey! We leave that behind though, hopefully rather quickly, and move on to the State of Grace! We recognize that unmerited, unearned, undeserved Gift from God! We embrace Forgiveness! Mile Marker number two! And then, at Mile Marker three, we respond with Gratitude! Got it?

Think of it as realizing your own “Filthiness”. Followed by accepting Jesus’ offer to be “Washed Clean”. And finally, answering with “Overflowing Joy”! Like I said, it’s pretty strait forward. Guilt, followed by Grace, followed by Gratitude! Carolyn Waterson, in a Staff Devotion a while back, added “Glory” as step four. Which makes perfect sense! After all, that is our Final Destination, right!

Only some people don't make the entire trip. Maybe you've noticed? Some people actually get stuck along the way, or simply stop during their travels. Others arrive at each waypoint, just as they should, but then circle back on the trail and get lost! Still others jump ahead, skipping Waypoints. Or leap backwards even! And many, believe it or not, slam on the brakes before they even begin! They actually stop before ever reaching Guilt! "I'm a pretty good person," they think to themselves. "I have never done anything that bad!" "In fact, I go out of my way to do nice things for others, all the time!" Even though Scripture is clear, "All have sinned, and fall short of the Glory of God!", some people never make it to "Guilt".

And then there is the opposite. There are those who arrive at Guilt rather easily. But then they wallow around there way too long! They are clear on the Sinner part! Overwhelmed, in fact, with that truth! Their sin is "Always before them," just like David wrote in his Psalm! That makes Forgiveness difficult to accept, though! Many just don't feel as if they deserve it! Which, when you think about it, is the entire point of Grace! You don't deserve it!

And come to think about it, there are those who immediately leap to "Grace". But then, they never leave. All forward momentum stops right there. "I'm saved," they say! Which is true! "Jesus loves me!" Which is also very true! But they never ask what they should do with that. And therefore, never discover Gratitude! Imagine endlessly wandering around in a Wasteland of Thanklessness! Think of all the things you'd miss!

So, now that you've got your map, now that you know the lay of the land, where would you say you are, on the Journey? At Guilt maybe? Or Grace? Or Gratitude? Take out your spiritual GPS. Dust it off if you have to. Listen to what your heart is telling you, or more importantly, what the Holy Spirit is saying! Where are you currently standing!

Remember, "Grace" and "Mercy" are quite similar! "Mercy" is not having to pay the Traffic Fine, "not getting what you deserve". It's being "Let Off the Hook". Which, if you're not careful, makes Forgiveness feel like "Ignoring the Hook"! "Grace", however, is somewhat more. It includes naming the fact that you are Guilty, at least to the Lord, and to yourself. You are definitely "On the Hook"! There is a penalty that must be paid! But someone else steps in and does it for you!

The Judge at your trial renders a "Guilty" verdict! But then, just before the Bailiff hauls you away in Handcuffs, Jesus jumps up and says, "I'll serve his Sentence for him!" That's Grace! It's something you can't earn, no matter how hard you try! And there is no way you could ever repay it! All you can do with Grace is accept it as the Gift that it is! Embrace it! Appreciate it! And then respond accordingly!

"Brothers and Sisters in Christ," writes Paul, "we want you to know about the Grace that God has given the Macedonian Churches." In fact, we'd like you to have a similar opportunity. The Churches in Philippi and Thessalonica have been exceedingly generous, even in the midst of personal adversity. Maybe you've noticed?

They gave themselves fully, first of all to God, and then, because of that relationship, to others in His Name! When the chips were down, even, they responded in Gratitude! Paul is writing to the Church. And he is writing about Church people. And his goal is to encourage them on their Journey of Faith. And he uses an example right in front of them!

So, think back, if you will, to a difficult time in your life, when you reached out to help someone else in the midst of that. Picture Paul in prison maybe, writing to encourage others. In fact, let me share with you an excerpt from an actual Prison Letter, written in modern English. Maybe it will help?

“What a great card to get in Jail. It does wonders to my Heart! It builds my Faith so much that I can feel the Body of Christ wrapping its lost Sheep with unconditional Love! My passion to give back God’s Love is to let you all know, that without the support of believers in Jesus, we are all swimming without Life Jackets. Thanks for the Life Jacket!”

“Being in a cage puts my spirit to (the) test. (But) rather here, or out in the world, the test will always go on day-to-day. I am rejoicing in this transformation. One thing I know for sure (is) I have been saved, and it’s not I, but He who lives in me!”

And it goes on! “To the Body of Christ at Putney Corners in Blaine Church, I give thanks! What a wonderful life you have! It’s great to have pen pals that will be in Heaven (with me) someday. (Signed,) Your Brother in Christ”, followed by his name!

That letter is from a former member of this Congregation, who got into some trouble a while back, who then got his priorities straight, and sent a letter encouraging the rest of us on our Journey! It's Humbling, isn't it!

Paul is writing to the Church in Corinth because, quite frankly, they seem to be stuck at Grace! He wants them to move on to Gratitude. Stop flirting with the Lord's affections, he says! Stop dallying with the idea of Grace, and yet taking it for granted! You have a relationship with The Lord, he says, one that you need to take seriously! Don't you realize what you've been given? Stop and count your Blessings, and then pass Blessings on to others! It's simple, right? Give of yourselves, first to God, and then to others in His Name! Take stock of your Guilt, embrace God's Grace, and then move on to Gratitude!

You know, He might have used Jairus as an example, don't you think! He could have said to the Corinthians, don't you remember what our Lord did for him? Or, do you think he, and his wife, and their daughter were Grateful after that healing? Or how about the woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years? Do you think she appreciated her gift, and then tried to live accordingly? Don't you remember what happened?

Jesus had just returned to our side of the Sea of Galilee, after crossing over to work among the Gentiles. Granted, He didn't have a whole lot of luck over there. He preached from the Hebrew Scriptures, but they didn't understand! They had no idea what to make of Him in fact! They were even terribly afraid when Jesus healed a man possessed by a whole legion of evil spirits, remember! They even pleaded with our Lord to leave!

The people “over there” wanted nothing to do with the Grace of God! Except of course the man who had been possessed by the demons. He realized his Guilt, and knew he was healed by Grace! He then wanted to follow Jesus, and even ended up Preaching the Good News to his family and friends, all out of Gratitude! Remember?

And when Jesus came back among us, back to His own, back among Fellow Believers, most of us didn't know what to do with Him either! In fact, several of the good, “synagogue-going folks” respond to the Grace offered by Jesus, by laughing! Can you imagine! Right to His face!

How would that make you feel? They didn't throw rocks or anything. They didn't drag Him into court and accuse Him falsely, at least not that time! They didn't even outright reject Him! But they laughed at Him! Have ever been laughed at? Mocked, maybe? Mocked when you were trying to do something nice for someone else? It may be the worst form of rejection there is?

“My little girl is dying,” implored that frantic father! “Please come and place your hands on her so that she will be healed!” He was a Synagogue Ruler too, a Clergy Person, whose young daughter was near death! He ran up to Jesus, remember? He fell at His feet and begged for help! It certainly wasn't a typical posture for an Ecclesiastical Official! I get that! But it was for a scared parent, right!

All of Jairus' colleagues in the Synagogue had pooh-poohed Jesus! A Faith Healer from Nazareth, they said, traveling around the countryside, healing folks, and teaching about the Kingdom of God"! But Jairus needed Him, remember! So, he dropped to his knees and begged! "Come Lord Jesus, hurry please!"

And on the way, that sick woman interrupted the plan! She wanted Jesus to stop her from bleeding to death! She had spent every last shekel she had on useless medical care, going from one doctor to the next, with absolutely no results! In fact, she was worse off then, then she was before! She had been dealing with her malady for twelve years! She was so frustrated, so fed up! She must have been emotionally spent, don't you think, not to mention physically exhausted? And anemic to boot, from the loss of all that blood! She had no money, and no energy! She was trapped in poverty, in a hopeless economic mess! There was simply no way out!

Because of the bleeding, she was a social outcast! She didn't have any support of any kind! And on top of that, she was ritually unclean! If any of us came into contact with her we would have be declared unclean ourselves! If any of us had sat where she had sat, or slept where she had slept, or heaven forbid, touched her in any way, then we too would have been treated as if we had the plague! She was unclean! By Law! A religious outcast! She couldn't even go to the Temple to pray, to ask God for help in her desperate state! Remember her sense of hopelessness? The guilt? The shame?

But she had faith, didn't she! And more than her share of determination! She didn't even beg Jesus to heal her! That might be too much to ask! She just slipped in behind Him and touched His robe! Just that much contact with the "Fountain of God's Grace" made her well! But she was scared, remember? She trembled in fear! Then Jesus called her "daughter"! He invited her to be part of the family! He then turned His attention back to the other daughter, remember, and continued on to Jairus' house!

But just then those men arrived and told the Synagogue Ruler that his little girl was dead! He was devastated! And by the time Jesus arrived at the little girl's bedside, everyone was weeping and wailing! "Don't bother," they all said. "She is dead"! To which Jesus replied, "She is not dead, she is just sleeping". And with that, the entire crowd started to laugh! "We know dead when we see it, Rabbi! You're just a Carpenter's son! Stick with what you know!"

And here's the thing! In the midst of that laughter, in the midst of all that unbelief, Jesus bent down and invited that little girl, "to rise"! It was Grace, wasn't it! Pure and simple! It was sort of a preview of Easter Morning, and of the Resurrection of all Believers at the End of Time! In the face of laughter, surrounded by fear and doubt, with the dismissal by many with little Faith, the Grace of God defeats death and begins new life!

It's Guilt, Grace, and Gratitude, isn't it! And of course, our final destination in Glory! The first question is, where are you on your Journey of Faith? Followed by, is that where Jesus wants you to be? Guilt, Grace, and Gratitude! And all of God's People said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Most Holy God, we are so privileged to come together in your Name to Praise and Worship you. We are proud to be Christians, proud to be Americans, and proud to be united as your people. But Lord, too often we have sinned. We have forgotten your decrees and commands. We have ignored your Word, and just gone our own way. We have been selfish and rebellious, as a Nation and as a Church, and we humbly bow before you now seeking forgiveness.

Please bless us Lord. Please fill us with wisdom and compassion, and your sense of justice, not our own. Please convict us of who you really are, and what you want for this world—and then empower us to faithfully carry it out. Fill our hearts with your Holy Spirit Lord, our lives with your Grace, and our world with Blessings. We need you Lord. We need your guidance and your values, your Word and your Truth. We have fallen away from these things, in so many ways, and we ask you to rectify that, even now as we pray. We know that you hear our prayers, and we thank you in advance for your response. We know that you are aware of the deep longings of our hearts. And so today Father, we pray for our Nation and for our Church, for our world and for our environment, for our families and for our friends, for ourselves and for those next to us. And particularly, Lord, we pray for.....

Bless us Father, and heal us. Smile upon your children as we lift up before you the very prayer that Jesus taught us saying, Our Father...