

## “Growing in Grace”

1 Samuel 26:17-25/Matthew 18:23-35

During our growing-up years in Georgia, my siblings and I enjoyed an annual summer trip to Greensboro, North Carolina. Our grandparents lived there and the two-week visit held all kinds of routines. There were outings to Winston-Salem to see our cousins and swimming at the Elks Lodge. I would mow the grass for a great aunt who then gave me cash afterwards and a ginger ale ice cream float. Our grandfather would take us on secret trips to Krispy Kreme and our grandmother prepared delicious meals usually accompanied by some mention of her grandsons' need for a haircut. And on Sundays, we would go with them to the Buffalo Presbyterian Church.

My grandparents were members of that congregation, but we had an earlier history with that body of faith as our father had served as its pastor from 1957 until 1962. My sister and I were born in Greensboro and baptized in that sanctuary. A nurse in that congregation had been present at my birth. Thus, when we worshiped there as teenagers it was Old Home Week for us.

As a result, those Sunday worship visits involved another routine as long-time members would walk up to us and exclaim "My, how you've grown!" Before and after such times, the five of us would privately grumble about that annual ritual while secretly liking it as we would have been disappointed if no one commented on our being taller. Still, for my siblings and me, the phrase of "My, how you've grown!" became an enduring symbol of that church.

I'd like the same to be said of DPC and beginning today we're going to ponder how God calls us to grow. In this case, we're not talking about inseams or waistlines, but how God wants us to keep growing in our spiritual lives. That fact stands behind our Flourish initiative and in preparation for Commitment Sunday on November 12 when we will present our best financial estimate for the next two years, we are going to focus on some of the ways God wants us to grow. Such reflection will help us see places where growth has already occurred and ways it is still needed. We begin today with the one that might be the hardest of all—growing in grace.

At its most basic level the word “grace” speaks of an unmerited gift; a kindness we did not earn, but received even so. A key affirmation of our faith is that we are saved by the gracious gift of Jesus' sacrifice for us. While certainly there are times persons need to grow in accepting that truth, fearing there must be something more God requires, on this day we focus on growth as it relates to other people; namely to grow in extending grace to and accepting it from others.

Our two Biblical texts demonstrate that call by telling of a fictional person who did not demonstrate such grace and a real person who did. We begin with the one who fell short.

He appears in the parable that Jesus told of a king settling accounts with his servants beginning with a man who owes him ten thousand talents. At its most literal level, that amount was fifteen year's wages, causing us to wonder how a servant could get into that much debt or how a king could have been so free with a line of credit. Whatever the circumstances, the man cannot repay it and the king decrees he will be sold into slavery along with his family. The servant falls on his knees: “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.” His vow is unattainable, yet the king shows mercy and forgives him all that is due. What joy the man must have felt in the face of such grace. Yet it quickly disappears when he leaves the king and sees someone who owes him 100 denarii—only three or four month's wages. The forgiven one seizes his fellow slave and demands immediate repayment, hearing virtually his own words in reply: “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.” The man refuses and has his debtor thrown into prison. When word gets back to the king, he angrily summons the first servant and says “Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?” The king orders the man

to be tortured until the debt is erased. Jesus concludes “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

In contrast to that outcome, our Old Testament reading tells of the final encounter between Saul, the first king of ancient Israel, and David, the one who would succeed him. Their relationship was complicated, due both to what is described as an evil spirit in Saul and jealousy over David’s popularity with the people. On two earlier occasions, Saul throws his spear at the younger man only to miss. David fled and hid in the wilderness. Once, he was in a cave when Saul appeared, but the sovereign did not see him. David managed to cut off the tassels of the king’s robe without notice and later showed them to his sovereign from a safe distance to prove he had spared his life. Saul vowed then to stop hunting David. He did not keep his word.

As just prior to our scene, Saul is seeking David again and rests for the night. David and an aide creep up next to him. The soldier urges him to kill the sleeping adversary, but David will not do it. Instead, he takes the king’s spear to show how near he had been, goes to a safe spot, and shouts. The king awakens and the conversation we read begins. “Why does my lord pursue his servant?” David asks “For what have I done?” Saul realizes that David has shown grace to him again. “I have done wrong,” he answers “come back...for I will never harm you again...I have been a fool, and have made a great mistake.” Even though he has heard similar promises before, David accepts that confession and Saul offers his blessing.

Growing in grace. In those two Biblical moments we see one who was able to take that step and one who did not. What made the difference?

In the book *Girl Meets God*, Lauren Winner tells of a day she experienced grace. “My mother taught me, early on,” she says “how to write proper thank-you notes, how to set a table, and how to tell people I’d done something wrong. It was grueling, that third lesson. I came home from kindergarten, smart in my new green rain-slicker, which I adored and wished to wear even in the loveliest weather, and presented her with a quarter. ‘Where did you get that?’ she asked. ‘Did you forget to buy your milk at lunch?’ ‘No,’ I beamed, ‘it came from Mrs. Smith’s desk.’ I did not pretend embarrassment, for I had done nothing wrong. I had just found something valuable and brought it home for the family coffer. I was a teacher’s pet, even then, and Mrs. Smith had asked me, and second-pet Christina, to tidy out her desk drawer during recess.

“My mother handed me my green coat, steered me toward the car, and drove the four miles to Ira B. Jones Elementary. We walked to my classroom. ‘Why Lauren,’ exclaimed Mrs. Smith, ‘did you forget something?’ I squirmed. ‘No,’ my mother said, ‘but she has something to tell you.’ I pulled the quarter out of my slicker and handed it to her. ‘I took this from your desk today. I’m sorry.’ Mrs. Smith smiled kindly, and hugged me and thanked me for coming back and giving her the quarter. ‘It was probably not a very easy thing to do, to come back to school in the middle of your afternoon and give me this quarter. I am very grateful that you did. I forgive you for taking my quarter.’ The next week, at recess,” Winner continued, “Mrs. Smith asked me if I would like to clean out her desk drawer.

In thinking back on that second invitation she writes, “I think God is a little like Mrs. Smith. I think He forgives us the way Mrs. Smith did: only a fool, God, or a saintly kindergarten teacher would allow a known, convicted, desk-drawer quarter thief to tidy her desk not seven days after the first crime. Mrs. Smith did, though, because she believed repentance had been done. I was truly sorry, she had truly forgiven me, and that was all there was to it.” (Winner, Lauren T. *Girl Meets God*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2002, pp. 206-7)

That outcome warms our heart and displays a response from Mrs. Smith that I suspect most of us would have extended to a six year-old, too. Yet when the stakes are higher and when the hurt runs deeper, it is then that growing in grace becomes a challenge.

Grace by definition is unexpected and undeserved, but our Scriptural accounts reveal that our sharing of grace is not dependent upon receiving it from other people. David had not experienced grace from Saul and instead faced years of being threatened by him. One servant in Jesus' parable received grace beyond measure, but refused to share it with one who owed him far less; choices that reveal our offer or acceptance of grace must be based on something more.

David demonstrated that fact when he said to Saul "The LORD rewards everyone for his righteousness and faithfulness." In other words, David's grace grew out of recognizing what he had received from God, thus enabling him to give Saul what he did not deserve, too.

That is the starting point for us to grow in grace as well; the understanding that despite our weakness and imperfection, despite the mistakes or horrific acts we or others carry out, that our ability to offer or accept forgiveness is to be a reflection of the grace received from God. That when we choose to act based upon that underserved gift, grace can abound.

Last month, there was a powerful PBS series on the Vietnam War. Created by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, that 10-part program reminded persons who had lived through those years and educated ones who had not about all that had happened in that land and in the United States during that era. One episode recalled the Pulitzer Prize winning photograph of 9 year old Phan Thi Kim Phuc. Even if you don't recognize the name, I suspect you know the photo as it depicts a naked child running down a dirt road, burned over thirty percent of her body by a napalm attack. For John Plummer, a United Methodist minister in Virginia, that photo always held added meaning for during his time in Vietnam he had set up the air strike on the village. He had been assured at the time there were no civilians there and only learned the truth after the fact.

In June of 1996, Mr. Plummer saw a news story about Kim Phuc and learned that she would be speaking at the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in Washington, D.C. He told a reporter later he wanted to go thinking, "Maybe there can be an end to this story. Maybe she can take this burden from me." During her speech at the Memorial, Ms. Phuc said if she ever met the pilot of the plane from that event she would she forgave him; how they could not change the past but could work together in the future. As she was leaving that day, word reached her that the man she was speaking about was present in the crowd. Kim Phuc agreed to meet him and in an article published at the time Plummer told what happened: "She saw my grief, my pain, my sorrow. She held out her arms to me and embraced me. All I could say was, 'I'm sorry; I didn't mean to hurt you...At the same time she was saying, 'It's alright; I forgive; I forgive.'" That pastor learned that Kim Phuc had become a Christian only a few years before. (*Interpretation*, Fall 1997, p. 75)

Growing in grace is tough work but it is part of our calling as people of God. Not with the hope of ever repaying God for what he has given to us, but resolving instead to pass it on.