

## **THE PSALMS' GREATEST HITS**

### **Volume 5: Grace**

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During our current series on “The Psalms’ Greatest Hits,” we have considered the way these ancient texts speak with a contemporary voice in the music that we listen to. Thus far, we have considered the themes of God’s absence and presence, the importance of trusting God and our need to make our confession to God. In doing so, we have listened to the musical witness of Van Morrison, U2, The Pretenders, and Leonard Cohen teaming up with our own Greg Zema. It has been fascinating to consider the ways in which the meaning and the message of the Psalms have found their way into our contemporary music.

This morning, we continue in our series as we move from last week’s focus on confession to this week’s theme of grace. It is a fundamental premise of our faith that it is in and through our confession that we open the door that enables us to experience the grace of God’s forgiveness and love.

Grace, of course, is one of those words that we can easily use, but there is something about its depth and its meaning that just as easily eludes us. The reason for that is that we live in a time in which grace is often suspect. Many of us have been taught, in the name of pulling ourselves up by our own boot straps, of paying our own way, to be wary of grace.

Ours is a culture that believes in playing by the rules—rules that would have us prove our worthiness and our value through our accomplishments, our degrees, and our resumes. Those who don’t play by those rules, those who don’t have impressive resumes are often excluded from the realm of acceptability. Not only do we tend to play by these rules, but there are also, among us, those who choose to keep score of the faults and failures of others while taking it upon themselves to decide who is worthy and who is not, who is in and who is out. Sadly, and even tragically, some of these score keepers tend to take up residence within the Church and other religious institutions.

Jesus understood this tendency. In his own time, he understood that the religious institution of the Temple was essentially built upon a system of inclusion and exclusion, of clean and unclean. And so it is that in our reading from Matthew’s Gospel this morning, Jesus tells a parable that is aimed directly at those who seek to play God in their judgments.

The parable of the vineyard workers tells the story of a vineyard owner who hired workers during the course of the day—early in the morning, at 9:00 a.m., at 12 Noon, at 3:00 p.m., and finally, at 5:00 p.m. When the work day ended, he paid the workers according to the amount that they had agreed upon. As it turned out, the amount was exactly the same for all of them—regardless of whether they had been working in the vineyard all day or for the last hour. Those who had worked all day were not pleased and promptly filed a compliant with the Labor Board!

The owner, however, made it quite clear that he was faithful to their hiring agreement. He paid them what he had promised. Yet, he also made it clear that is what his right to pay the others whatever they had agreed upon—whether or not it was the same amount of pay for those who had worked all day. By the standards of the rule keepers and the score keepers of the day, it wasn't fair.

And I suspect that the rule keepers and score keepers of our own day would be in solid agreement. What they fail to understand is that God has chosen to play by a different set of rules. God's grace is large enough to include those who have worked all day in the hot sun and those who have only worked for an hour in the cool of the evening. Go figure!

In an interview with Bill Hybels, Bono, the lead singer of U2, reflects upon his own understanding of grace in relationship to karma—the concept that you will reap what you sow, that what you put out, will come back to you. This “eye for an eye” way of thinking, of course, is embedded in the rules that we would eagerly impose if the matter of grace was up to us and our understanding of what is fair. Take a look...

Grace, says Bono, defies reason and logic. Love interrupts the consequences of your actions. It puts an end to the vicious cycle of karma. In other words, it changes everything.

Some of you may be wondering why I have quoted Bono so often during my messages and the answer is quite simple. I find his witness of faith to be especially authentic, open and honest. While he would tell you that he is a Christian, he will also tell you that he is suspicious of many so called “Christians,” whose witness simply does not support their words. I find his desire to live out his faith in the stances that he takes in regard to matters of poverty and justice to be refreshing and inspiring. When he speaks about grace, he is not speaking from a theoretical point of view, but from a point of view that is both personal and practical.

**Psalm 32** is a psalm that was written by someone who understands, first hand, the power of God's forgiving grace. In verses one and two we read: **“Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.” (Psalm 32: 1-2)**

The Psalmist is here celebrating the joy and happiness that comes from the knowledge that the past is no longer binding, and that there is the freedom to live a new life. Two weeks ago, I referenced Walter Brueggemann's designation of the three distinct types of Psalms. Psalms of orientation where everything fits neatly together and life is good. Psalms of Disorientation are expressed when it all falls apart and life is chaotic and disorienting. And finally, says Brueggemann, there are Psalms of New Orientation which are offered after one has survived the storm and outlasted the darkness. These are Psalms that are sung with a new and deeper level of gratitude and joy simply because the writer wasn't even sure that he would ever live to see the day when life would be good again.

Psalm 32 is, therefore, a Psalm of New Orientation. It is a Psalm in which the writer has survived the long dark night of the soul and the experience of sin that had separated him from God. His struggle, as we see in **verses three and four**, was not only a spiritual one, but

also a physical one. His choice to keep his sin to himself was one that caused his body to waste away and his strength to dry up.

There is, of course, a psycho-somatic reality that suggests our bodies absorb the stress and struggle that we face in our psychological and spiritual lives. If we are troubled in our spirit, if we are not whole mentally, our bodies will often suffer the consequence of illness and disease. This appears to be the case with the Psalmist. His refusal to name his sin and to openly confess it before God has led to the consequence of serious illness.

Then, in **verse five**, the Psalmist recounts his choice to “come clean” with God and to name his sin. There is no intent to hide or cover up his brokenness—only the desire to be open and honest with God. And the result is that he experiences the forgiving grace of God. The remaining portion of the Psalm is then devoted to offering praise to God for God’s deliverance and instruction to those who are seeking guidance and direction.

I believe that when all is said and done, the essence of our faith can be summed up in this one simple word...GRACE. It does indeed, change everything—including you and me. I’m curious as to your own experience of grace. In what ways has it touched your life? In what ways has it changed your perspective? In what ways has it challenged you to think and live more deeply and compassionately?

I came across a poster recently that grabbed my attention. It said, **“One day you will need the same grace that you will not give someone else.”** I think that it is an element of truth in this statement that many of us can identify with. There were times in my young life in which I was so sure and so confident about all the rules and who was following them correctly and who was not that I was not nearly as graceful as my later life would teach me to be. The fact is that once you have experienced what it means to be broken and then, what it means to be made whole through love and acceptance, you can never again be the same. There is, as in the case of the psalmist in Psalm 32, a new orientation. Grace, you see, changes everything!

Some time ago, a colleague of mine told me a personal story about her experience of buying a house. She happened to mention the fact that she had “closed” on her house to one of the members of her church who replied with thinly veiled resentment: “It must be nice,” she bitterly replied, “to be able to buy a house.”

It was hardly the response she hoped for and so she went to the meal that her church was providing for the homeless with a feeling of sadness and frustration. One of the homeless men noticed she wasn’t herself and asked if anything was wrong. She mentioned to him that she had just purchased a house and was feeling anxious about it.

Without batting an eye, the man responded, “Well, then, this calls for a celebration!” He then stood up and announced to the 150 people who had gathered, “Hey everybody! Pastor’s got a house! Pastor’s got a home!” That announcement was received by the other homeless guests with shouts and cheers and a standing ovation. That is, I think, a wonderful example of what grace looks like...of what grace feels like. Those who might logically be expected to

be envious and even bitter were those who, instead, rose to their feet and cheered. They possessed a freedom of spirit that the other person knew nothing about.

What the Psalmist knew and, I trust, what we know as well, is that our God is a graceful God, a God who does not hesitate to forgive and give, accept and include. Bono has written a song as his own witness to the power of grace at work in his life. As you listen to it, I invite you to reflect upon your experience grace— the times you have received it in unexpected and even lavish ways... and also, the times in which you were able to offer it to others. Grace does indeed, change everything. In what ways have you been changed by the power of God's grace? And in what ways have you been able to bring about change by the fact that God's grace was at work within you?

The song is entitled, appropriately enough, "Grace."