

A "REEL" EPIPHANY

"Tender Mercies" 1) Grass Roots Grace

2 Corinthians 5: 16-21 -- Luke 19: 1-10

Rev. Ron Dunn

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The story of Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus is one of my favorites. So much happens within the span of ten short verses. It's a story of hope and fulfillment, a story of challenge and change, a story that beautifully illustrates the transforming power of the good news of the Gospel.

But, have you ever wondered what happened to Zacchaeus after this dramatic conversion experience? Did everything simply fall neatly into place in his new life as a follower of Jesus or did he have struggle with the consequences of decisions made in his self-centered past? I would imagine that life was not instantly easier for this tax collector who suddenly took a turn for the best. I would imagine that there was a lot of residue bitterness and anger that Zacchaeus had to deal with. I would imagine that the grace he experienced so powerfully at the hands of Jesus was grace was not shared necessarily by those he had cheated and hurt in the past.

After all, this is real life that we are talking about here. Even experiences of dramatic transformation are no guarantee that everyone will live happily ever after. So often, when we read the stories of Jesus' encounter with various individuals (including Zachaeus), we have this tendency to believe that this moment of transformation somehow made everything fall neatly into place even as it removed the stress and struggle of the issues of day to day living. But the experience of God's grace, even in its most dramatic form, does not necessarily translate into joy filled, stress free life—as much as we wish it were so.

Indeed, the experience of grace is often one that is made known to us not in certain singular moments of dramatic grandeur, but more often than not, in the quiet, unassuming moments in which we experience a nudge, a glimpse, a scent, or a sound that provides a hint of the holy and the awareness that in some mysterious and unexplained way, God is at work within us. I call this experience of grace, "grass roots grace," which refers to the grace that unfolds over time in ways that may sometimes be noted only in looking back, only in retrospect. I tend to believe that many of our experiences of grace are like that.

The film, "**Tender Mercies**," does a wonderful job of portraying grace from this "grass roots" perspective. It is a film that never was a big box office draw, but has been, nevertheless, critically acclaimed for the story it tells and the way it tells it. Robert Duvall would win the "Best Actor Academy Award" for his performance in his role as Mac Sledge.

Mac Sledge is a washed up country singer and song writer who has allowed his desire for a bottle of whiskey to become the most important focus in his life. After awaking from a drunken stupor in cheap motel in rural Texas, Mac finds himself faced with the challenge of picking up the pieces of his shattered life. He begins to do so only reluctantly. In need of a place to stay and something to eat, he asks the Rosa Lee, the owner of the motel if he can work as a handyman to pay off his bill. Hesitantly, she agrees—with one demand: Mac must give up his drinking. Desperate for a new start, Mac agrees. As the days pass, Mac becomes something of a fixture in the lives of Rosa Lee and her young son, Sonny. Even though the film does not call attention to the moment, it eventually becomes apparent that Rosa Lee and Mac have married and that Mac has become Sonny's step-father.

As a widow who lost her husband in the War in Vietnam, Rosa Lee has walked her own difficult road, raising Sonny who never had the opportunity to meet his father. While she was challenged to put food on the table and a roof over their heads, she has managed to do that. Although she rarely smiles in this film, Rosa Lee, possesses an inner strength and faith that becomes apparent as the film unfolds. Mac even agrees to attend church with her. In the scene we are about to see, she introduces Mac to her pastor on the way out of church....

That sounds like a pastor, don't you think?! The irony is, of course, that God's Spirit, in the form of the love and acceptance of Rosa Lee was already hard at work in Mac's life. There wasn't anything that the preacher needed to do.

In one particularly difficult moment of despair, Mac explodes in anger when a song that he had written was summarily rejected. It was a moment that could have easily evolved into a return to his reliance upon the bottle. **But, Rosa Lee, gently touches him on the arm and looks him in the face, reminding him that she loves him and that when she says her prayers and gives thanks to God for his tender mercies, he and Sonny head the list.** To that, Mac simply offers a heartfelt, "thank you." Somehow, it was the word he needed to stay the course.

As the film unfolds, Mac's daughter, Sue Ann—a daughter that his former wife had kept from seeing him for nearly 8 years, unexpectedly pays him a visit. While there is an awkwardness to their reunion, it is clear that Mac is deeply touched that his daughter would seek him out after enduring the consequences of his earlier drinking days.

Impressively, Mac owns up to his responsibility for the destruction he brought to himself and his family. In the scene that we are about to see, Mac is careful not to criticize or disparage his former wife in the presence of Sue Ann. In fact, he strives to make her aware of the fact that it was her mother that took the songs that he wrote and made them famous. This scene then concludes with Sue Ann asking her father about a song that she could remember him singing to her as a little girl. Let's watch...

At this point in his journey toward recovery and redemption, Mac is unable to tell his daughter the truth about this song that gives voice to the experience of God's grace. There is, one might suspect, too much pain and too much shame within him to acknowledge the truth of the fact that he had indeed, sung this song to her at a time when she was a little girl and life seemed to hold such possibility. In his broken and bruised state, he finds himself unable to acknowledge this tender moment of his relationship with Sue Ann as a little girl.

While Mac was, in fact, in the process of being healed by the grace of God and the love of Rosa Lee, it is clear that his healing is still a work in progress. Grace, you see, often unfolds not quickly and dramatically, but quietly and slowly. It is, more often than not, a work in progress.

This point is brought clearly into focus in the conversation that Mac and his new step son, Sonny have on the drive home after they have been baptized. Let's watch...

Mac and Sonny discovered that there is nothing magical about baptism. One doesn't necessarily look or feel any different than before. But that does not mean that grace is not at work, bringing about a transformation far larger than either of them may have realized at the time.

While on a shopping trip to town, Mac is stopped by a woman who thinks that she recognizes Mac Sledge, the famous country singer and song writer. A bit timidly, she says to him, "**Mister,** were you Mac Sledge?" With a mild chuckle, he nods and replies, "Yes Mam, I guess that I was." The old Mac, you see, was no longer there. A new Mac had been born—one who was gradually discovering the grace of God in the love of a woman willing not only to accept him, but believe in him.

Given this focus, it is not surprising to discover that "Tender Mercies" does not conclude on a joyous, "happily ever after" note. For just as Mac finds renewed hope for the revival of his singing and song writing career with the release of a new record, he receives the tragic news that Sue Ann has been killed in a car accident. Her new husband had been drinking while driving.

While his grief and sense of loss is overwhelming, it is not enough to deter him from his path of sobriety and new found love. He stands his ground and faces down the demons of his past and the grief of his present. But, significantly, he does not allow his agony to lead him into a relapse. He stays the course on the new road of redemption that he has chosen.

The last scene in the film begins with Mac alone by the side of the road, picking up trash in front of the motel. As he does so, he is singing something softly to himself. Listening very carefully, the viewer can barely hear the words... "On the wings of a snow white dove, he sends his pure sweet love..."

I find it intriguing to note that the film ends with this game of catch between step-father and son. It is, in its own quiet way, a testimony to the grace that Mac has found in his life. Despite the heartbreak and tragedy that he has endured, he Mac is making the choice to be the father that he had truly wanted to be with Sue Ann. By the grace of God, he has a second chance.

While this is not exactly a classic “Hollywood ending,” it provides a subtle, and yet, powerful, witness to the way in which grace often quietly unfolds in life as we know it. As was the case with Mac, we often find God’s grace to be at work, not in bold and dramatic ways, but in quiet and subtle ways—the “grass roots ways” in which we discover that, in spite of our pain, our discouragement and our disappointment, the redemptive power of God’s “tender mercies” at work within us—often through the kindness and care of those who have chosen to walk with us.

In our lesson from Second Corinthians, the Apostle Paul summarizes it so well:

“So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.” (2 Corinthians 5: 17)

To be sure, we may not always notice the new creation we are becoming or, if we do, it may only be in hindsight, but the fact is that in God’s tender mercy, each one of us heads the list. Thanks be to God! Amen.