

Breaking the Cycle of Ungrace
Luke 7:36-47
May 24, 2009
St. John United Methodist Church
Anchorage, Alaska
David Beckett, D.Min.

Humorist Erma Bombeck wrote about her experience in a church. “I was intent on a small child who was turning around smiling at everyone. He wasn’t gurgling, spitting, humming, kicking, tearing the hymnals, or rummaging through his mother’s handbag. He was just smiling. Finally, his mother jerked him about and in a stage whisper that could be heard in a little theatre off Broadway said, “Stop that grinning! You’re in church!” With that, she gave him a belt and as the tears rolled down his cheeks added, “That’s better,” and returned to her prayers...”¹

When I was pastor in Soldotna a woman from another denomination had come to our church. She had been divorced recently and her pastor refused to serve her communion. In tears she asked if she could receive communion with us.

Countless people are plagued with guilt over a past sin. We cannot forget our past mistakes and relive them sometimes every day. People are looking for grace. They turn to the most obvious place on earth for this grace, the church. But mostly what they find is shame and judgment. Phillip Yancey in his book, “What’s So Amazing About Grace?” calls it “ungrace.”

Luke tells us a story of grace and ungrace. A Pharisee named Simon invited Jesus to his house for a meal. While they were at the table a woman considered by many to be a sinner began to bathe Jesus’ feet with expensive ointment and her own tears. When Simon saw this he had one of those judgmental thoughts that we often can’t prevent from creeping into our consciousness. “If only he knew what kind of woman is now touching him.”

Jesus perceived in his heart what Simon was thinking and offered this story. A creditor had two debtors: one who owed him 500 denarii, the other, 50 denarii. When they could not pay he cancelled the debts for both of them. Which of them will love him more? Simon answered, “I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt. Jesus said, “Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” Here was a woman determined to come clean, determined to find grace, determined to break the cycle of ungrace.

Phillip Yancey tells a story about a cycle of ungrace in one family. Daisy was born in 1898 into a working class Chicago family, the 8th child of ten. Her father was a mean drunk who kicked his wife out of the house one day. All ten kids crowded around their mother, crying. It was a horrendous day for this family. Through her tears Daisy watched through the bay window as her mother walked down the sidewalk until she disappeared. The children were separated, grew up, and had families of their own. After many years of non-communication

¹ What’s So Amazing About Grace? Phillip Yancey, Zondervan, 1997, p. 32

the father came back to his family. He had found God at a Salvation Army rescue mission and had become sober. For the first time in his life he felt clean and loved. And now he was going to each of his children to ask for their forgiveness. In time the father convinced his adult children that his conversion was real, all except for Daisy. She just didn't want to have anything to do with "that man." Even when he was sick and dying, and living only eight houses down the street, Daisy still refused to see her father.

All her life Daisy determined not to be like her father. She never touched alcohol, but ruled her family with an iron fist. Hard as steel, Daisy never apologized for abusing her six kids. One of Daisy's kids, Margaret, vowed that she would never treat her kids the way she was treated. When her kids became teenagers in the 1960's she felt she was losing control of them. Margaret kicked her son, Michael, out of the house when she discovered he was smoking pot. In a fit of anger she said to him, "I never want to see you again as long as I live." That was 30 years ago and she has not seen him since.

Talking with Michael, Phillip Yancey learned that he and his wife, Sue, were divorcing. At one point he said emphatically, "I hope I never see her again as long as I live!" Yancey writes, "Like a spiritual defect encoded in the family DNA, ungrace gets passed on in an unbroken chain."

I never quite understood the Bible when it talks about the sins of one generation being passed down to another. But now it makes sense that the pattern of sin, the cycle of ungrace can repeat itself down through family lines. We repeat what we know, what has been burned into our memory. Even though we say we will never be like this parent or that relative, we lack the ability and strength to break the cycle.

Do you know what pattern of ungrace is lurking in your heart? Perhaps your ungrace has its roots in your family tree. Perhaps it comes from your own prideful heart. Isn't there some desire in your heart to be a forgiving person? Don't you want to break the cycle of ungrace in your life?

In his book "What's So Amazing About Grace?" Phillip Yancey writes about grace and ungrace. There are three steps towards breaking the cycle of ungrace. The first step involves a change in our thinking. The first step is to understand that *grace is unfair*. Grace does not operate under the same rules of conduct as law. It is the nature of grace to upset the balance of guilt and blame.

Perhaps it will help for us to think about a scale. On one side is guilt, that feeling we have when we express ungrace. It's what I felt as a kindergarten student when I dropped Janet's clay project I was ridiculing. We do not live very well with guilt. Guilt depresses us, weighs us down. Guilt upsets the natural balance of the human spirit. So what are we tempted to do in order to ease this imbalance? We push on the other side of the scales with blame. As long as we can justify blaming others for the damage they have caused us, we do not feel the effects of guilt. But this "balance" is not a healthy balance. And then grace comes along and speaks a scandalous word to our hearts, "Remove the blame. Just let it go and let the power of God's grace fill your heart."

According to the way our world operates this is so unfair. In a gathering of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, a Jewish woman remarked, "I believe we Jews

have a lot to learn from you Christians about forgiveness. I see no other way around some of the logjams. And yet it seems so unfair, to forgive injustice. I am caught between forgiveness and justice.”²

Are you caught between forgiveness and justice? I suspect many Christians are for the simple reason that we live in two worlds. We have the human world of laws and we have the spiritual world of grace. We live in both and struggle to understand what it means to forgive others when they hurt us. If we are to break the cycle of ungrace in our lives we must come to that point where we understand that grace is unfair.

The second step towards breaking the cycle of ungrace is to take initiative. Helmut Thielicke, a German pastor who lived through the horrors of WW II, wrote, “This business of forgiving is by no means a simple thing... We say, “Very well, if the other fellow is sorry and begs my pardon, I will forgive him, then I’ll give in.” We make of forgiveness a law of reciprocity. And this never works. For then both of us say to ourselves, “The other fellow has to make the first move.” And then I watch like a hawk to see whether the other person will flash a signal to me with his eyes or whether I can detect some small hint between the lines of his letter which shows that he is sorry. I am always on the point of forgiving...but I never forgive. I am far too just.”³

Yancey writes, “At the center of Jesus’ parables of grace stands a God who takes the initiative toward us: a lovesick father who runs to meet the prodigal, a landlord who cancels a debt too large for any servant to reimburse, an employer who pays eleventh-hour workers the same as the first-hour crew, a banquet-giver who goes out to the highways and byways in search of undeserving guests.”⁴

No human coerced God to come to us as a baby in Bethlehem. No human forced God to reach out with such grace that God was willing to go to the cross. God was the one who took the initiative coming to us. And God continues taking initiative and risk in coming to each one of us personally, in this day and age. And one of the ways God comes to us is through our acts of forgiveness and reconciliation with others.

The third step in breaking the cycle of ungrace involves an act of faith. Forgiveness is an act of faith. Yancey writes, “By forgiving another, I am trusting that God is a better justice-maker than I am. By forgiving, I release my own right to get even and leave all issues of fairness for God to work out. I leave in God’s hands the scales that must balance justice and mercy.”⁵

Do you trust God to be God? Maybe the reason we have difficulty dispensing grace is that we don’t fully trust God. We rather like to be in control. I will decide who is worthy of my forgiveness, thank you very much. I will choose the time and place when I offer my grace to another.

We need to understand that forgiving others does not mean that the hurt disappears. What disappears is the burden of being their judge! Yancey writes,

² What’s So Amazing About Grace? Phillip Yancey, Zondervan, 1997, p. 91

³ What’s So Amazing About Grace? Phillip Yancey, Zondervan, 1997, p. 91

⁴ What’s So Amazing About Grace? Phillip Yancey, Zondervan, 1997, p. 91

⁵ What’s So Amazing About Grace? Phillip Yancey, Zondervan, 1997, p. 93

“Though a wrong does not disappear when I forgive, it loses its grip on me and is taken over by God, who knows what to do. Such a decision involves risk, of course: the risk that God may not deal with the person as I would want.”⁶

So breaking the cycle of ungrace involves faith. It involves giving up control. It involves letting God be God.

Remember Erma Bombeck’s story about the child caught smiling in church? She writes, “Suddenly I was angry. It occurred to me the entire world is in tears, and if you’re not, then you’d better get with it. I wanted to grab this child with the tear-stained face close to me and tell him about my God. The happy God. The smiling God. The God who had to have a sense of humor to have created the likes of us. If he couldn’t smile in church, where was there left to go?”

The promise of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that we can break the cycle of ungrace. We can have grace in our thoughts, our words, and our actions. And we can smile in church!

⁶ What’s So Amazing About Grace? Phillip Yancey, Zondervan, 1997, p. 93