

## GRACE AND PEACE

Scriptures: Philippians 4:1-9; Ephesians 2:11-22

Several years ago there was a story in the *San Francisco Chronicle* by Eileen Mitchell entitled, "In this troubled world, try to love like Rover." She writes,

I wish I could love like a dog, unconditionally and with total purity. Elvis [her greyhound dog] won't notice if I'm wearing brand new Manolo Blahniks or 10 year-old Birkenstocks. He doesn't give a hoot about how much money I make, whether I'm Christian or Jewish, black or white, Democrat or Republican. ... Maybe I battle chunky monkey thighs or am blessed with a bod like Beyonce. Doesn't matter. Not important. Elvis is wholly and utterly devoted to me for one reason and one reason only: because I'm me. Okay, that and I can work a can opener.

I'd love to wake up each morning absolutely thrilled for no reason other than it's yet another day. Sure I'm in good health, have wonderful family and friends, a roof over my head and food in my cupboards. Yet still, I complain. Where's my whirlwind romance, best-selling novel or Caribbean cruise? Why can't I make more money, lose more weight, have more fun? And is it Friday yet? Ah, but to a dog each and every boring, monotonous, repetitive day is an absolute adventure. Just the mere appearance of their guardian is enough to elicit an unbridled joy that's the human equivalent of winning the lottery. ... Enthusiastically, they embrace each second of the here and now, be it a day in the field guiding cattle, a Sunday in the yard chasing squirrels or simply a restful afternoon snoozing in the pool of sunshine. ... When mistreated, dogs forgive. When ignored, they still love. When abandoned, they remain loyal. When neglected, they don't judge. They want for one thing only. To hear their human's voice, feel their human's touch, revel in the nearness of the person they love so unconditionally. Without prejudice, bias, or discrimination, our canine companions epitomize the best of human nature. Or what human nature should be. All of which leads me to believe there's a reason why it's often pointed out that dog is God spelled backward. Because deity and dog have traits we human should all aspire to resemble.

What I find interesting about this story is the combination of grace and peace. Grace means unconditional love. Peace means joy and satisfaction in life despite circumstances. A dog has both, and it is the combination that makes it work. If you believe in grace, you can experience peace. If you believe in God's unconditional love, you can experience joy and satisfaction even in difficult circumstances.

Notice how this works in the Bible. In Romans 5:1-2 the apostle Paul says, "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand." Do you see the combination? Because we are justified by faith in God's grace, because we believe in God's unconditional love, we have peace with God. We need not be anxious or afraid.

Paul makes that point again in our second scripture lesson. In Philippians 4:6-7 Paul says,

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

If you believe in God's grace, if you really believe that God cares for you and your needs, then you can have peace.

It is no accident that the apostle Paul begins every one of his letters in the Bible with the words: "Grace and peace." Every single letter from Paul in the Bible begins with those two words: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." I don't think this is merely a traditional greeting. It is a deep theological insight. Grace and peace go together.

This is true not only in our relationship to God but in our relationships to others. If you believe in grace, you will experience peace. Let me go back to our first scripture lesson from Ephesians 2. Earlier in the chapter, in verses 8-9, Paul says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast." Then in verse 14 he says, "For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." Paul is talking here about the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the church, but he could have been talking about any factions in the church. Once we recognize, once we get it into our heads, that we are saved by grace, it changes the way we look at each other. It strips us of the pride that allows us to look down on others and takes some of the sting out of the anger we feel toward other people.

Notice how this works in our second scripture reading. In Philippians 4:1 Paul says, "Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved." Look at the words Paul uses to describe the Philippians. He calls them my joy, my crown, my beloved. He is almost like a dog in his enthusiasm. I bet anything there were some real problem people in that church. We know there were because of verse 2. In verse 2 Paul says, "I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord." We don't know what the problem was between these two ladies, but it must have been something big and something public for Paul to name them by name in this letter. I probably would have urged them to become Baptists. But not Paul. He says to one of his church leaders, "I ask you to help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel." Paul does not consider them a pain in the neck. He considers them co-workers and co-recipients of the gospel. At the end of the verse he points out that their names, along with our names, are written in the book of life.

Do you see what he is doing? Paul looks at these two ladies through the eyes of grace. He does not see them as squabbling troublemakers in the church. He sees them as precious co-workers who have been specifically chosen and called by God to receive eternal life, just like he has. He appeals to grace as the basis for peace.

Let me close with two stories. The first is from Robert Coles' book, *Children of Crisis, Volume 1: A Study of Courage and Fear*. During the time of school desegregation in Mississippi in the 1960s, Robert Coles interviewed a number of school children, both black and white, and their families to see how this experience affected them. One mother of five children in Mississippi described the struggles she had explaining to her children why they had dark skin and others had light skin and why it made a difference in how people treated them. She told Robert Coles,

But to tell the truth I never have been certain what to say. That's why I try to talk about God. No one knows what color He is. I tell the children that it's a confusing world, and they have to get used to it. You have to try to overcome it, but you can't hide it from the kids. When they ask me why colored people aren't as good as whites, I tell them it's not that they're not as good; it's that they're not as rich. Then I tell them that they should separate being poor and being bad, and not get them mixed up. I read to them from the Bible, and remind them that the Lord is a mighty big man, and what He thinks is not the same as what white folks do, or even black folks. He's bigger than all of us, I tell them, and I hope that makes them feel satisfied, so they don't dislike themselves. That's bad, not liking your own self (p. 64).

Believing in God's grace is the key to experiencing God's peace—peace with God and peace with ourselves.

It is also the key to experiencing peace with others, which brings me to the last story. In the spring of 2002, Cameron Gray, a sophomore at Whitworth College, was struck by a car and killed as she crossed a street near the campus. Not only her family but the whole campus community was devastated. But it was Cameron's mother who told President Bill Robinson in a barely audible voice, "Somehow I know that God loves Cameron even more than I do, and I know she is now with him." If we believe in God's grace, we can find peace, even in the face of unspeakable tragedy.

But it does not stop there. A month later Bill Robinson told this story in the Whitworth College newsletter:

A catastrophe of the proportion of Cameron Gray's death can leave some of its victims in utter ruin. Last Thursday I witnessed a miraculous effort to reclaim one of those victims. At 3 that afternoon I stood in a small circle held together by abject pain and overflowing grace. Cameron's family had asked to meet with the driver of the vehicle that brought her life to an end. Tears flowed as a heartbroken young man searched for words to express his regret and sorrow. On the night of the accident, he was actually on his way home from training as a volunteer firefighter and he simply did not see Cameron crossing a dark corner. In a split second, his life became one of unimaginable torment. But last Thursday afternoon, Cameron's family literally held him in love and support and forgiveness as they prayed for his full restoration. ... As they quietly explained, their source of strength was the amazing grace that they themselves had experienced (*Of Mind and Heart*, April 2002).

If you believe in God's grace, you can experience God's peace, a peace that surpasses understanding.

- Ken Onstot  
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