

Grace for Sale

Series: The Gospel of Stewardship

Numbers 6:22-17, Ephesians 1:3-14

First Presbyterian Church

October 8, 2017

Numbers 6:22-27

22 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ²³Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them,

²⁴ The LORD bless you and keep you;

²⁵ the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;

²⁶ the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

27 So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.

Ephesians 1:3-14

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight ⁹he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹²so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Sermon

You may have heard the story of the Jewish man who bought a condominium next to a Roman Catholic family. Every Friday the Jewish man would grill out a big, juicy steak... and since this was back in the days when most Catholics didn't eat meat on Fridays the aroma of the grilling beef about drove them nuts. Well, because they couldn't afford to move... they decided the only alternative was to convert the Jewish man to Catholicism – that way he would stop grilling on Fridays. And sure enough, they got him converted... and presented him to a priest who baptized him saying: “You were born a Hebrew... you were raised a Jew... I now baptize you a Catholic.” Now everybody was happy and everything was fine until the next Friday when there he was, out behind the condo grilling a big ole roast. The Catholics were dumfounded! “How could he backslide so soon? Maybe he doesn't understand.

I'll go down and explain it to him," the man said to his wife. Well, just as the Catholic man rounded the corner, what did he see?... but his Jewish neighbor looking over the big slab of beef on his grill, and saying in a slow and sanctimonious tone: "You were born a calf, you were raised a cow... I now baptize you a fish!"

My friends, I fear that the church has done the same thing with stewardship – we have dealt with stewardship by changing the name... while the game has remained the same. The name has changed, but the game has been to raise money for the church. You may remember the New Testament story of Simon, a magician, coming to Simon Peter, an apostle, saying "I want some of that miracle power. Just name your price... I'll pay it!" Then in the time of Constantine, the name of the game was security. A strong church meant a strong empire... and people gave to the church to ensure their safety. And then after Constantine, the name was legacy – people left everything they had to the church to guarantee their salvation. After that, the name was indulgence – purchasing pardon for sins – both the sins you had already committed AND those you would probably commit in the future.

After indulgences came the sale of relics – little swatches from the shawl of Mary... splinters of wood from the cross of Christ... even bits of bone from the bodies of the saints. Different name, the same game. Henry VIII used the power of law and military to raise much needed funds – his troops collecting the tithe, rather than a well-dressed usher on Sunday. When the church in New England struggled for funds they found a new name – pew rent and raffles and rummage sales and bingo. Actually, I've been thinking about reviving pew rent – have a feeling it might be very effective with some of you! Still later, when church leaders quickened our consciences about the social ills of our time, we were told to give to the church to defeat hunger and homelessness. And finally, when that didn't work, somebody re-discovered the old biblical notion of tithing with the expectation that God would then "prosper" you ten-fold or even a hundred-fold what you give. You see how it goes, don't you? The name changes, but the game has always been the same: to raise money for the church.¹

I think back over the dozens of fall stewardship campaigns and the handful of capital campaigns... and I'm embarrassed to say I see the same thing – that we have mostly been trying to sell something – at times trying to sell the feeling of being a part of something that is bigger than ourselves... at times it was the sense of making spiritual progress by releasing our grip on material things... at times it was the salving of our guilt over having so much by offering the good feeling of helping others. But as I look back I realize that we almost always had an angle... we almost always had something to sell.

I'm convinced that part of this is the fact that you and I are consumers through and through – it is how we see ourselves... it is the air we breathe... the water we swim in. We EXPECT to be sold something – even in church – and the church has been glad to oblige.

But I am also convinced it's because we Christians STILL have not wrapped our minds and hearts around the very essence of our faith... for all our sermons and lectures and books, we still do not grasp what has been... is... and always will be the very essence of our faith...

¹ From "The Gospel of My Stewardship" by Thomas L. Are (Lay Renewal Publications-Tucker, GA.-1977), p.1-2

the free GRACE of God – God’s unconditional, inclusive love for us made known so radically... so vividly... in Jesus the Christ.

H. Richard Niebuhr, once said, “The great Christian revolutions come not by discovery of something that was not known before. They happen when someone takes radically something that has always been there.” ... when someone takes radically something that has always been there. Such it is with the unconditional, inclusive grace of the God... it is something that has been revealed to us, both in the Scriptures and in our hearts. Would that God would help us to take radically this love that has always been here. Would that we might truly know the gospel of God’s grace... for it is then (and only then) that we can sincerely talk about stewardship.

For if the gospel could be summed up in one word – that word would be GRACE... (or “charis” in the Greek) a verb that means simply: “I rejoice, I am glad.”

Kathleen Norris tells of being at an airport departure gate and noticing a young couple with their infant child. The baby was staring intently at other people... and whenever he recognized a human face, no matter whose it was... no matter if it was young or old... pretty or ugly... bored or happy or worried-looking... he would respond with absolute delight. It was beautiful to see,” she wrote. “Our drab departure gate had become the gate of heaven. And as I watched that baby play with any adult who would allow it... I realized that this is how God looks at us, staring into our faces in order to be delighted, to see the creature he made and called good, along with the rest of creation.² Grace could be called the sheer goodness of God who “sends his sunshine and rain upon the just and the unjust” – the goodness of God who is ever more ready to hear than we are to pray. Grace is Christ saying: “How often would I have gathered you...” for “the one who comes to me, I will not cast out.” Grace is the cry of Christ from the cross: “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do.” Grace is saying: “Not seven times, but seventy times seven.” Yet, perhaps the clearest proclamation of this grace is made by the Apostle Paul – Sarah spoke these words earlier – “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God.”³

Babette’s Feast has become for me one of the most compelling stories of God’s unconditional and inclusive love. It is set in a very poor fishing village on the coast of Denmark... a grim town of muddy streets and thatched roof hovels.⁴ In this harsh setting, a white-bearded pastor leads a small and very austere sect of Lutherans. Whatever worldly pleasures could possibly tempt a peasant in such a grim place, this sect has renounced. They wore all black... their diet consisted of a gruel made from boiled cod fish and bread. And on the Sabbath they sang songs about the New Jerusalem they hoped to go to when their miserable life on earth was over.

The pastor, a widower, had two teenage daughters whom he had named for Reformation greats, Martin Luther and Philip Melancthon. Despite all their attempts to suppress it, Martine and Philippa were radiantly beautiful young women ... and both had well-qualified suitors who

² Kathleen Norris in her essay on “Grace” in her collection titled, *Amazing Grace*, p. 150-151.

³ *Are*, p.24.

⁴ This telling of Isak Dinesen’s story draws from Philip Yancey in *What’s So Amazing About Grace* (Zondervan/Harper Collins-1997), p.19-25.

would marry them and take them away from this godforsaken place. Yet, both chose to remain there to care for their aging father and feed the poor each day.

Fifteen years passed and the pastor had died. The two sisters were now middle-age spinsters and without their father's stern leadership, the little Christian sect was badly splintered. One Brother bore a grudge against another regarding some business matter. Rumors spread about a thirty-year old sexual affair between two members. A pair of old ladies had not spoken to each other for a decade. And though the sect still met on Sundays to sing the old songs, only a handful bothered to attend. Yet, despite all these problems, the sisters Martine and Philippa remained faithful - organizing the services and boiling the fish and bread for the toothless elders of the village.

One night... a night too rainy for anyone to venture out... the sisters heard a heavy thump at their door. They opened to find a desperate woman slumped over on the step. She spoke no Danish but carried a letter which told them that her name was Babette... that she had lost her husband and son in the civil war in France... and that her life was now in danger. The letter asked if this village might take her in and show her mercy. And finally, the letter read: "Babette can cook".

Well, the sisters had no money to pay, but Babette was willing to cook for room and board. At first they distrusted her cooking... having heard that the French ate horses and frogs. But in time their hearts softened... even as they and the poor they served began to notice an improvement in the food.

Well, after twelve years Babette received a piece of mail - her very first since arriving - and after reading it she told the sisters that something wonderful had happened to her. Each year a friend in Paris had renewed Babette's number in the French lottery... and this year she had won! Ten thousand francs! The sisters politely congratulated her, but inside their hearts sank... for they knew that soon Babette would be leaving.

As it happened, Babette's good fortune coincided with talk of a celebration to honor the hundredth anniversary of the pastor's birth. And Babette asked the sisters if she might prepare the meal for the celebration service. "I would like to cook you a real French dinner," she said. Although the sisters had grave misgivings about the potential lavishness of this plan, Babette had never asked them for anything before... what choice did they have but to agree?

Soon the villagers were treated to one amazing sight after another as boats unloaded provisions for Babette's kitchen. Wheelbarrows loaded with crates of small birds... cases of champagne and wine... the entire head of a cow... fresh vegetables, truffles, pheasants, ham... strange creatures that lived in the sea... and a huge tortoise still alive. All these headed to into the sister's kitchen which was now under Babette's firm direction. Of course, the sisters were alarmed over this apparent witch's brew and they shared their concern with the eleven remaining members of the sect. Everyone sympathized with them and they all agreed to eat the French meal, but to withhold comment, lest Babette get the wrong idea. After all, tongues were meant for praise and thanksgiving, not for indulging in exotic tastes.

It snowed on December 15, the day of the dinner, brightening the dull village with a gloss of white. And the sisters were delighted to learn that an unexpected guest would join them – a cavalry officer – son of a 90 year member – who was now a general serving in the royal palace. Babette had scrounged enough china and crystal to set the table... she had decorated with candles and evergreens... it all looked lovely. But the villagers remembered their agreement and no one said a thing. Only the general remarked on the food and drink “Amontillado!” he exclaimed as he raised his glass, “and the finest Amontillado I have ever tasted!” When he sipped the first spoonful of soup, he could have sworn it was turtle soup... but how could such a thing be found on this island? “Incredible!” the general said when he tasted the next course... while all the other guests puckered their faces with deep wrinkles as they ate the same rare delicacy. When the general rhapsodized about the champagne – a Veuve Cliquot 1860 – Babette ordered the kitchen boy to keep the general’s glass filled at all times... since he alone seemed to appreciate what was set before him.

Although no one else spoke of the food or drink, gradually the banquet began to work on the churlish villagers. Their blood warmed... their tongues loosened... they spoke of the old days when the pastor was alive and of Christmas the year the bay froze. The Brother who had cheated another in business finally confessed... and the two women who had feuded found themselves conversing. One woman burped and without thinking, the Brother sitting next to her said, “Hallelujah!” The general could speak only of the meal... and when the kitchen boy brought out the coup de grace – baby quail in puff pastry – he exclaimed that he had seen such a dish in only one place in Europe – the famous Café Anglais in Paris... a restaurant once renowned for its woman chef. Now heady with wine... his senses completely sated... the general rose to make a speech. Quoting Psalm 85:10, he said: “Mercy and truth have met together, my friends,” righteousness and bliss shall kiss one another.” And although the Brothers and Sisters of the sect did not fully comprehend what he was saying, at that moment they knew his message was about grace. Because Babette’s feast opened the gate... grace was able to make its way in.

Well, this wonderful story ends with two scenes. After this sumptuous dinner, the old-timers gather outside in the snow around the fountain and joining hands they sing together the old songs of faith. Suddenly they feel as if their sins have been forgiven... and that they are washed as white as the wool of a little lamb.

The final scene takes place inside... in the wreck of a kitchen piled high with unwashed dishes, greasy pots, shells and bones, vegetable trimmings and empty bottles. Babette sits amid the mess... looking almost as wasted as she did the night she arrived twelve years before. Suddenly the sisters realize that, in accordance with the vow, no one has spoken to Babette about the dinner. “It was quite a nice dinner, Babette,” Martine says. “I was once chef at the Café Anglais,” she responds. “We will all remember this evening when you have gone back to Paris, Babette.” Babette tells them she is not going back... that all her relatives and friends have been killed or imprisoned and of course, it would be expensive to return to Paris. “But what about the ten thousand francs?” the sisters ask. Don’t be shocked, she tells them, this is what a proper dinner for twelve costs at the Café Anglais.

Babette’s Feast is not simply the story of a fine meal... it is a parable of grace... a gift that costs everything for the giver and nothing for the recipient. This is what the general tells the grim

faced parishioners gathered with him around Babette's table: "We have all of us been told that grace is to be found in the universe. But in our human foolishness and shortsightedness we imagine divine grace to be finite... but the moment comes when our eyes are opened, and we see and realize that grace is infinite. Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude." Amen.