

“Celebrate Grace”

by Mary Anne Biggs

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Ephesians 1:3-14 ~ Mark 6:14-29

Ministers are a serious bunch of people by nature. What we do is serious business ... life and death ... eternal life and death. We handle the holy as a matter of course. We engage in sacred duties. We deal with ultimate issues. We are responsible for souls. Consequently, one of the risks of such a serious profession is that we can become too serious. Or take ourselves too seriously. I know I'm guilty of that sometimes.

When preachers get together we sometimes tell war stories, like every other profession I suppose. Those stories run along the lines of “Am I crazy? Or are they?” We don't break confidences, of course, but we need a sanity check from time to time. And every once in a while our trusted colleagues lovingly let us know that *we* are indeed the crazy ones ... that we've been dancing on the edge of the precipice or staring into the sun too long, and that we need to get over ourselves or take a break.

And as a way of lightening up about it, we also share our own “News of the Weird” stories. As serious as our work is, or maybe because it's so serious, we witness some truly hilarious things along the way. No matter how carefully we plan, no matter how formal we try to be, no matter how serious we are in our services and sermons, something always happens to remind us we are merely human working with humans. “I am a man of unclean lips,” Isaiah cried when the Lord appeared to him, “and I dwell among a people of unclean lips” (Isaiah 6:5).

We all make verbal blunders. It goes with public speaking. The last place you want it to happen is at a funeral. Funerals aren't funny of course, but funny things happen. A friend of mine was invited to preach at the funeral of a stranger. Funeral directors will call you sometimes, “The family is from out of town, they don't have a church here locally, they want a Methodist,” and so on. It was a simple graveside service. He began reading from the Sermon on the Mount: “Consider the lilies of the field...” Only, his tongue got twisted and he said, “Consider the lilies of the filly.” Not that funny, but he got tickled. I tell you, it's the waking nightmare of every preacher! Because then he giggled. And then he guffawed. He totally lost it! Just like the Chuckles the Clown episode on the Mary Tyler Moore Show, soon he was laughing so hard that he couldn't breathe. He was crying. He had to sit down. He couldn't regain his composure. The family, of course, was completely mortified. Who was this nut? But he couldn't help himself. Between gasps and giggles, he apologized and pressed on. Finally he was finally able to finish the service, totally humiliated. The funeral director never called on him again.

I've heard a hundred funny funeral stories like that. There was the preacher who stepped too close to the casket and slid into the grave beneath. Another who witnessed the wife and the mistress of the deceased get into a screaming fight and start throwing flower arrangements at each other. Yet another had to preach right after a family member sang the deceased's favorite song: “Send in The Clowns!”

Or I could tell you wedding stories that would make you want to stay single. I heard about a groomsman who fainted and landed on the organ with a “Phantom of the Opera” chord ... a bride who set her veil on fire with the unity candle. One groom perspired so profusely that the bride looked at him in utter disgust throughout the entire service. A friend had a ring bearer ... a little boy about six ... who decided that the flower girl’s job was more fun. So he untied the rings from the pillow and he threw them down the aisle in front of the bride. Every minister I know has had the divorced parents of the bride or groom get into an argument at the rehearsal. People are tense on these occasions, and human nature being what it is...

Weddings and funerals aren’t the only occasions when crazy things happen. My Baptist friends have baptism stories you wouldn’t believe ... unreliable baptismal heaters that made steam rise from the surface like a spa, or water just barely above freezing, so that the neither the minister or the baptismal candidate could hardly speak.

Nearly every minister I know has enough stories of this kind that they could write a book. And nearly every minister I know takes their calling seriously and tries to be reverent, respectful and dignified on all occasions. But it’s not easy to keep a straight face when these “only human” things happen. One time I was the guest preacher at a church where the soloist was so bad I feared the communion chalice might shatter. And of course, there I was up on chancel, every eye on the guest preacher. And this woman was screeching “His Eye is on The Sparrow” like a bird with a broken wing. It was all I could do to keep an appropriately pleasant look on my face. That’s when the host pastor leaned over and muttered, “She could make a living calling hogs.” Try keeping a straight face after that.

The “only human” becomes rather ridiculous when engaging the Divine, which makes it hard sometimes for us to take our church work somberly. But there’s another thing that makes it hard to take this preacher business so seriously all the time. And that’s the thing we are celebrating today ... Grace! Grace is the foundation of our faith. Grace is the air we breathe and the food we eat. Grace is the beginning and grace is the end of everything we do. Grace is the unearned, undeserved, and unconditional gift of God’s abiding love for humankind. And that grace means we don’t have to take everything so seriously ... so ultimately ... all the time. We can laugh. We can be playful. We can have fun in church. We can afford not to take ourselves so seriously... because we are ... all of us ... covered by the deep abiding grace of a loving God.

Grace means finally “all will be well.” God has promised it. All will be included. All will be healed. All will be accomplished. So we can relax. I am not saying grace means anything goes and nothing matters ... that we shouldn’t take evil and injustice and violence and war and poverty and death and all other forms of suffering seriously ... that we shouldn’t continuously work towards their abolishment. No, it is grace that fuels our work because grace means that none of those things are ultimate ... none of those things will be the last word ... none of those things will win out in the end. In the end, grace will bring us into the presence of an eternal love ... an embracing God who will not let the creation God called good turn out to be bad.

Like every pastor, I try to balance my preaching across the span of a year. The old saw says that the preacher should “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable,” and I try to do a little of both. My first responsibility is to hear the scripture so that I can help you hear what God is still

saying to us through it. God knows, on every page the Bible challenges us to live up to the high calling that God has given us. But with this prophetic voice, the scripture also has a priestly voice ... a message of consolation and encouragement and support ... a message of grace. I feel called to encourage us to be the church that God created us to be. If we want to see our church thrive, I think we should make cultivating joy a priority—joy in life, joy in service, and joy in worship. Christian worship is intended to be a celebration of the resurrection, a celebration of new life. I love our church so much that the dreams and hopes and griefs I feel are almost too much to bear. But today, with Ephesians, I just want to stop everything and celebrate the amazing grace of God in which we stand.

Ephesians shows a close familiarity with most of Paul's other correspondence and the earliest New Testament manuscripts place it first in the section that contains Paul's letters. In fact, the word "Ephesus" does not even appear in the earliest manuscripts. Consequently, many scholars believe that Ephesians may have been written by a later follower of Paul as an introduction to a collection of his letters to be circulated among the churches. Indeed, rather than addressing a specific situation in a local church as Paul's other letters do, Ephesians celebrates the grace of God for all Christians and the unity of all peoples in the church. The long passage we read today is actually one sentence in the original Greek, and it is an eloquent compilation of effusive adjectives in praise of God's grace. It is actually a benediction, a blessing. The early Christians who received it must have been dazzled by these words. Their lives were hard, as all lives were in those days. But they faced additional hardships and persecutions because they were Christians. Many of them were poor ... many were hungry. They worked constantly to eke out a living for themselves and their families in a hostile, dangerous world. These words reminded them of a better world coming ... an eternal world held securely for them by God ... and of God's continuing presence in their journey towards it. They are still words of comfort and reassurance and encouragement and promise for us today.

I invite you this morning to hear them again, to absorb them, to feel them, to know that you ... yourself ... are personally included in the grace these words celebrate. And in order for that to resonate ... I am going to substitute personal pronouns for the communal ones. I want you to hear it ... and to believe it ... as if you wrote it.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed me in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose me in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined me for adoption as his child through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on me in the Beloved. In him I have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of my trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on me. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to me the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ I have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that I, might live for the praise of his glory..."

If we had an unlimited budget, I would have hired a marching band today. Or maybe a hundred trumpets ... some jugglers ... dancers and flame swallowers, too ... a thousand balloons in all

colors with streams of confetti to drop from the ceiling. We'd have bottles of champagne for everyone ... not to drink ... but to pop the corks and pour over each other like the team that wins the championship. The Blue Angels would do a flyover. Skydivers trailing streamers would land in the parking lot across the street. The Goodyear blimp would hover overhead and planes would drag banners across the sky ... because grace is the grandest celebration of all!

We must celebrate what God's grace has done among a people called the First Congregational UCC in Eagle River! Celebrate the wonderful experiences we have shared and the amazing transformations we have seen! Celebrate the ways God has provided again and again what we needed when we needed it! Celebrate the grace each one of us has received from the Lord! Rejoice in what the Lord has done for you. By the grace of God you are a child of God, forever. Nothing can ever take that away from you. Do you realize that today? "You are a child of God!" You, each and every one of you, are a child of God! Amazing, amazing grace!!

Yes, you are a child of God. It is your deepest identity. It is your ultimate destiny. It is your birthright and your inheritance. You are a child of God. Remember it. Live into it. Celebrate it every day of your life ... no matter what else might be going on ... because you are always carried by the grace of God. That's what Ephesians is celebrating. Grace will always save you unless and except you reject it ... because God doesn't force grace on any of us.

Grace means we have comfort whenever we sorrow. Grace means we have healing whenever we are wounded. Grace means we can laugh and play and have fun together without having to be so serious all the time. Y'all know I'm not going to stop preaching the Word of God week by week, just as I hear it. Which means, sometimes I'm might step on some toes. I will always want to challenge you to be better and do better and live up to your calling and remember your covenant in Christ. That's my job. That's what you have called me to do, and I take my calling seriously. But I hope you realize always ... that every week ... every sermon I preach ... every challenge I offer ... will be based upon this one reality in which we all stand. Grace! Grace! Grace! "The word of God for the people of God" is grace! Thanks be to God! May we pray?

Tune our hearts to sing your grace, God of our being, and let our lives become the doorway by which your love enters the world. Amen.