

# A Sermon for DaySpring

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“When Grace Dances”

Jonah; Matthew 20: 1-16

September 18, 2005

W.H. Auden wrote, “**I know nothing, except what everyone knows – if there when Grace dances, I should dance.**”

How’s your dancing these days? When Grace dances... do you join in? Well? The Divine is waltzing gracefully, or better yet, cutting a merciful rug right in the middle of your life and I’m wondering if you’re able to let go and dance with grace.

*Grace*, says Anne Lamott,

*is the force that infuses our lives and keeps letting us off the hook. It is unearned love – the love that goes before, that greets us on the way. It’s the help you receive when you have no bright ideas left, when you’re empty and desperate and have discovered that your best thinking and most charming charm have failed you. Grace is the light or electricity or juice or breeze that takes you from that isolated place and puts you with others who are as startled and embarrassed and eventually grateful as you are to be there.*

(Traveling Mercies, page 139)

That’s Anne’s idea...

I know you have some ideas... and hopefully you have some doctrines about grace but if it’s not more than that, you may not have grace. Grace isn’t simply some divine deal. It’s not a cosmic judicial decision. It is the life, which is emanating from the heart of God. Flowing towards you... to you... and looking for some opening in order, some crevice, to touch the deepest part of who you are.

It’s a reality that enlivens you.

A truth that changes you.

A blessing that awakens you

... to what is true about God... and most true about you.

Do you know grace? Any stories of grace in your life? I’ve got a few. Like the one that happened on my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Like most kids, I was living to drive. The day came and I went straight after school, got my drivers license and then started looking for an excuse to get out. **Keys... I needed my own keys.** So, off I went to the hardware store... came home by way of Jack in the Box and the high school and then drove down the alley to our house doing the parade wave to all the neighborhood kids who clearly thought it was cool that I was driving.

I was in our truck... ’65 Chevy with three-in-the-tree... and our other car, a Fury Three... basically a living room with wheels had been moved over by my brother so he could get the lawn mower out.

I didn’t notice that... and when I pulled in to the garage I hit the Fury with the Chevy... Hadn’t had my license for two hours and I’d made a mess of both cars. I’m dying.

My dad gets home...

finds me on the patio in angst and agony...

shame and despair, and says,

**“I wouldn’t worry about it... could have happened to anyone.”**

That’s grace... it banishes 16 year-old shame.

Grace really is more of an encounter than an idea. It’s a reality that creates stories... Do you have any?

Ever heard the one William Barclay told about the group of soldiers who lost a friend in some European theatre? They saw a church nearby... cemetery to the side, of course... and went to inquire of the priest if they could give their buddy a proper burial before moving on.

**“Was your friend Catholic,”** the priest asked?

**“No, he wasn’t.”**

**“Well, I’m so sorry, but I can’t let you bury him in the cemetery... but if you’d like to bury him just outside the cemetery fence you can.”**

They thanked him and buried their friend outside the fence. The next day before their unit moved on, they went by to pay their last respects but couldn’t find the grave... no loose dirt... no marker... nothing.

It was upsetting and they went back up to the parsonage and knocked again... The priest came to the door.

**“We’re so sorry to bother you, but we buried our friend and something’s wrong... we can’t find his grave. Can you help us?”**

The priest said, **“Well... I got to feeling badly last night about what I’d done... and that you had to bury your friend outside... out there... So... I got up and moved the fence.”**

That’s grace... it erases the boundary.

That’s a story of grace... do you like it? Do you dance when grace dances? Anyone have just a little part inside them saying, **“You can’t just go moving fences... can’t ignore boundaries?”** Any parents here thinking... there’s got to be some consequences for wrecking two cars? **“You can’t just say... could have happened to anyone.”**

What goes on inside of you when Grace dances?

I’m reminded of that great Old Testament story when King David finally got the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. That beautiful... holy... sacred box that was glowing with God’s glory. In many ways... it contained God... with it came God’s blessing, and to bring it to Jerusalem was like ushering in God’s presence.

David is beside himself... And, (this is a great story)... Regal King David... takes off his clothes down to his linen ephod. He’s in his underwear... BVDs... Ancient, Middle Eastern, whity-tighties. And he’s dancing out in front of the Ark, celebrating God for all to see.

So... Grace is dancing in the streets... and David’s wife Michael is mad at him... Hate’s him for it. And later on, she lets him have it with a heavy dose of sarcasm... **“Man, you really did it today... really distinguished yourself... out there disrobed in front of all the slave girls... like any vulgar person would.”**

**“I was dancing before God...”** David said... **“I don’t have to be dignified before God.”**

Michael is not one to dance when Grace dances. She’s not even tapping her toe.

Any Michaels in here... where grace seems to rub you the wrong way? You wouldn’t say so... we all believe in grace, right? But what’s your reaction to grace and the stories it creates?

Our two stories today are for those of us who are uncomfortable with grace. They’re there... they were told... to awaken us to the possibility that we may not be real, honest-to-goodness, die-hard fans of grace.

First of all, there’s Jonah... written probably at a time when folks in Israel were pretty sure they were in and the rest of the world was out when it came to God’s favor. And here’s a story where every character in the story... is more loving, more compassionate, more awake... than Jonah... the supposed insider.

And you’ve heard it and heard it again here today... the bottom line for Jonah is that he hates the Ninevites and doesn’t want to be any part of their redemption. They were a violent, brutal nation that had terrorized Israel and the last thing he wants is for them to get mercy from God.

But they do.

Grace dances.

Jonah doesn’t.

It’s not hard to see why the Lectionary pairs this story with the parable from Matthew where these workers get hired at various times during the day, and then at closing time they line up...

Those who worked an hour get a denarius... and the folks at the back of the line who worked all day started doing the math. **“They worked an hour for a denarius... we’ll be getting eight denarii.”** Basically a week’s pay.

And they get up there and the boss flips them one coin and they’re screaming **“UNFAIR.”**

**There are rules... principles...** Grace is dancing and they’ve got the scales of justice out peddling with them and they’re sure this isn’t right. They don’t dance with this gracious landowner.

Jesus had begun the teaching with those familiar words... **“The Kingdom of God is like...”** It’s like this... The kingdom, the realm of God, operates by different rules. And it’s really more a rule of thumb than a law.

And the truth is, some of us, lots of us, maybe all of us... aren’t sure we like this. Anymore than the folks listening to Jesus that day liked it... or the parable he told.

Most of us are elder brothers, aren’t we,... when it comes to stories of grace. If we’re honest... When a certain man has two sons and one of them shames his father and wastes his inheritance, he shouldn’t be welcomed when he comes home. And at some level we’re standing out in a field... there’s a party going on... Grace is dancing, but we’re not.

You don’t believe me, do you? You love grace... you’re a Christian after all. You believe in it. Well... I know... but I think it’s hard to know and see and admit all the places where we decline to dance in this Kingdom.

Anybody here, real quick on the draw to use Bonhoeffer’s line about “cheap grace” when folks start talking about accepting people? Blessing themselves. Be honest... you’re worried if we dispense too much of it, it won’t mean anything. Grace inflation’s a problem for you, isn’t it?

Anyone here fearful of grace... like if you give it too easily to the world, then something will all come crashing in?

Lots of folks in Jesus’ day were fearful. They looked at Jesus and all his graceful teaching and they had the sense that he was pulling on some thread in the fabric of their society and that everything would unravel. You’re fearful, aren’t you? If it’s of fear... it’s not of God.

Some of you are wearing badges... you think someone has deputized you to be the sheriff of orthodoxy (A Craddock Line). You’re the Barney Fife of the Kingdom. Busy... alert... stalkin’... handin’ out citations lest chaos reign in Mayberry because grace has run amok.

We don’t dance... some of us.

And it’s not about others, maybe, but it’s about us. You believe in grace for everyone else, but it never gets soul deep for you. **“Gotta get it right... save the whales and the world... be all things to all people.”**

Grace is dancing and we’re thinking... **“I’m weak... I’m selfish... I’m this... I’m not that. Not enough... not worthy...”** And never dancing to celebrate God. You’re saved... but not really. Because you have not believed that you are beloved. That God likes you prior to your decision to come to church today.

Grace is the way of God... it is the life of God flowing out into the world. And when you say yes to it, it changes things. Whenever, wherever it touches you, you are different and this has happened to you.

Someone blessed you, forgave you for making a wreck of things.

You laughed at yourself and accepted your humanity.

You found your mood lifted, a wound healed.

You let someone off the hook. God came to you in your darkness. You woke up and heard the birds again... you came to this table and knew, soul deep, God’s love for you. Not some legal deal God had to make... **GOD LOVES YOU.** And you felt it, the gleam in His eye when He sees you.

Grace, grace, grace... it is everywhere... changing everything.

I have to tell you one more story of grace. I told it a few years back, but can’t resist it. I first heard it from Grady Nutt a long time ago.

It's about a Methodist Minister and his family who pastored the Methodist church in a small town. It was he and his wife and four kids. They had a sixteen-year-old son, a twelve-year-old son, an eight-year-old daughter named Joanne, and another boy, four years old.

It was revival time in the church and it was the first Sunday of the revival and the guest preacher was coming for Sunday lunch. Some of you know this scene because you grew up in families where the guest preacher always came over. And if that was the case, your mother was probably like the mother of this household... Martha Stewart on steroids. She makes Martha look sloppy. I mean, she took these events seriously.

Planned the menu and went shopping early in the week.

She made everything.

Fresh breads and several kinds of homemade pies.

Three different kinds of meat.

Two types of fresh vegetables.

Chow-chow, four different chow-chows.

And iced tea... sweetened, unsweetened. Iced tea every-which-way.

And of course, Mother Immaculate has the house spotless. She's gotten out the good china and the silver and the linen tablecloth with fresh flowers in the center of the dining room table. Most of you have been there.

And as you know, this is not an easy moment for kids. For one thing, there are two preachers in the house and that's enough to put most people on edge. Then you have to wait for a long time for the meal to actually make it to the table. And the kids (back in those days) were still in their Sunday best... waiting for dinner.

And then when they finally do get to the table, the guest minister always prays and goes on way too long so that by the time he finishes the kids and everyone else, just sort of lunge for whatever is right in front of them.

Little Joanne, eight-year-old Joanne, lunged for something and as she did, she hit her tea glass and (splash), it's all over everything. The four-year-old, sitting next to her, tries to jump out of the way as the tea flows in his direction, and hits his glass and knocks it over. So the "Amen" is barely said and now brown ice tea is soaking its way through the linen tablecloth.

Mother Immaculate is, obviously, not pleased and she hasn't said anything yet but bad weather is imminent. Just before she speaks what were obviously going to be some serious words of displeasure, she looks over at her husband, who catches her eye, smiles, leans out his hand and (splash) knocks over his glass. And the whole table just stares because nobody has ever seen a grown man knock over his Sunday tea glass on purpose before.

The two teenage boys are sitting at the opposite end of the table and think this looks like fun and (splash, splash) they knock theirs over.

The guest minister is sort of a serious fellow, who doesn't get out a lot and it's really stretching it for him but he can't help himself and he knocks his over as well.

Now there are 58 brown ice cubes floating around all over the table and Mother Immaculate is just about to die. You can see her... eyes and veins popping out, bees stinging the front of her brain and she's staring at her husband in complete disgust and disbelief. Then she just says, "**O what the heck,**" and knocks hers over, too.

Then the laughter starts... and you know how this is. They can't stop. They can't sit up. They're leaning on each other, just beside themselves. It hurts, they're laughing so hard.

When all of the sudden everyone stops laughing because they realize that little Joanne is not laughing with them. She's not laughing at all. Instead there are big tears streaming down her face as she looks up at her father with absolute adoration because he'd done something so foolish for her...

I like the way Paul Duke described this moment. "**He was saying, in the first place, a child matters more than a table cloth.**" But he was also saying, "**If you're going to get to her, you're going to have to get to me, too. This mess she has made, I make my mess with it.**"

And so she cried. And my hunch is, that there came a day, when this child, who knew the embarrassment once of ruining Sunday's meal, will knock her glass over as a way of gracing someone else. She'll make a mess with someone. She'll imitate her daddy, don't you think? She'll forgive a wreck... move a fence.

Grace will dance and she will too.

I hope you'll join her... join us all.