

Reading from the Gospel: Mark 6:14-29
Sermon *Grace Abounds*
The Rev. Tom Hagood
Sunday, July 12, 2009

Probably my all-time favorite peek into the wonder of God's grace comes from the late Scott Peck, the author of many great books including *The Road Less Traveled*. I'm sure I've shared his wonderful story with you before about a fella who lived north of the Mason-Dixon Line who came South on a business trip.

He pulled into one of those small town cafes and ordered breakfast. When the waitress brought him his food, he looked down at a bowl of something he didn't recognize or order. "What is this?" he asked. "Why, that's grits," his waitress replied in her charming Southern way. "I didn't order these," he said. "Honey, grits is like God's grace ... you don't order them ... they just come to you."

But something has always nagged at me about that story ... I've always wondered ... did he eat those grits ... those grits that were freely given to him? I suspect he didn't. In my life I've discovered that most people who aren't accustomed to grits usually don't want anything to do with them when they are offered to them.

Unfortunately, the same can be said about God's grace. Far too often most of us probably don't want anything to do with God's grace ... as a matter of fact ... many Christians ... including myself at times ... actually have developed an aversion to grace. As Flannery O'Connor so gracefully puts it, "All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful." (Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*).

And that's true in our Gospel story this morning ... a story of horror ... of devious deception ... a story of sexual lust and political power ... a story of murder ... and there ... in the middle of it all ... connecting all the pieces ... is a story of God's grace.

As we listen to our Gospel lesson from the sixth chapter of Mark, verses 14-29 ... take time to listen for God's grace ... divinely woven throughout the story. I will be reading from Eugene Peterson's translation, *The Message*.

6:14 King Herod heard of all this, for by this time the name of Jesus was on everyone's lips. He said, "This has to be John the Baptizer come back from the dead—that's why he's able to work miracles!"

6:15 Others said, "No, it's Elijah." Others said, "He's a prophet, just like one of the old-time prophets."

6:16 But Herod wouldn't budge: "It's John, sure enough. I cut off his head, and now he's back, alive."

6:17 Herod was the one who had ordered the arrest of John, put him in chains, and sent him to prison at the nagging of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife.

6:18 For John had provoked Herod by naming his relationship with Herodias "adultery."

6:19 Herodias, smoldering with hate, wanted to kill him, but didn't dare

6:20 because Herod was in awe of John. Convinced that he was a holy man, he gave him special treatment. Whenever he listened to him he was miserable with guilt—and yet he couldn't stay away. Something in John kept pulling him back.

6:21 But a portentous day arrived when Herod threw a birthday party, inviting all the brass and bluebloods in Galilee.

6:22 Herodias's daughter entered the banquet hall and danced for the guests. She dazzled Herod and the guests.

6:23 Carried away, he kept on, "I swear, I'll split my kingdom with you if you say so!"

6:24 She went back to her mother and said, "What should I ask for?" "Ask for the head of John the Baptizer."

6:25 Excited, she ran back to the king and said, "I want the head of John the Baptizer served up on a platter. And I want it now!"

6:26 That sobered the king up fast. But unwilling to lose face with his guests, he caved in and let her have her wish.

6:27 The king sent the executioner off to the prison with orders to bring back John's head. He went, cut off John's head,

6:28 brought it back on a platter, and presented it to the girl, who gave it to her mother.

6:29 When John's disciples heard about this, they came and got the body and gave it a decent burial.

This is the word of our Lord. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Hardly seems like a story of grace, does it? You might even be asking yourself ... where's the grace? If anything ... the story of the beheading of John the Baptist is a story that shows what can happen when the truth butts heads with the powers-to-be ... someone's head is going to roll ... and in this case, literally.

Now one thing's for sure ... King Herod is nothing like his infamous father . . .yes, he still has plenty of prestige and power, but he's hardly the ruthless despot daddy was. As a matter of fact, Herod is fascinated with John the Baptist.

Even though the Baptist has been thrown in jail for his straight talk in labeling the King and Herodias' relationship adulterous ... something about this wild guy from the wilderness has captured the king's imagination ... maybe even touched a moral fiber deep within his soul ... so Herod gives his jailhouse guest a little better treatment than all the rest.

Now if you're wondering where the grace is ... there it is ... right there in the prison ... the grace of God offered via John the Baptist to King Herod. Grace is poured right into the heart of the Royal family ... God pours out grace into the life of the ruling King ... and, on some level ... I believe Herod is aware of it ... for he knows that John is a Holy man. And if you think about it ... doesn't God do that all the time ... pouring grace into the places where we probably least expect grace to be found ... places where God's truth often runs head long into the powers of this world.

Herod is offered grace right there in the midst of his own birthday party ... as Herodias' daughter seductively entertains his guests. Unfortunately, sometimes grace has a hard time competing against the ways of the world ... as in the case of Herod ... who turns it down so he doesn't lose face in front of everyone ... and in a moment of stupidity mixed in with a large dose of pride ... Herod chooses wrongly ... God's grace will be ignored ... and John the Baptist will lose his head. You see ... sometimes grace isn't irresistible.

Of course this story hardly applies to us. We don't live in palaces ... we don't have the power to place someone in chains ... we don't hold lavish banquets with the high and mighty rulers of our time. What we might be inclined to do would be to compare this story to our own government and other powerful governments in the world as well as all the political shenanigans and decisions that go on in Washington and their sometimes deadly impact on innocent people around the world ... it would also be easy to point at the terrorists in this world who set off bombs that kill innocent women, men and children. We can also to point our fingers at anyone who has power over other people and misuses that power ... because of greed and corruption.

We see and hear about such things in the news every day of our lives. There's only one problem, however, when we compare this story of truth and grace and horror and greed to those who hold such power ... it easily let's us off the hook. Because this story is also our story ... it is a story that touches every facet of human life ... it's anyone's story who has ever turned their back on God's grace and made a wrong choice ... a sinful choice ... instead of following God's will so freely offered ... it is my story and your story when we, too, have an aversion to grace.

As Flannery O'Connor comments ... "There is a moment in every story in which the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected, even though the reader may not recognize this moment." ("The Dark Side of the Cross: Flannery O'Connor's Short Fiction," by Patrick Galloway, www.literaryhistory.com)

Yes ... that statement is so true in literature ... and also ... so true in real life. Each of us has been at that very point in our own life stories ... when we either accepted God's grace ... or rejected it.

We're either going to eat those grits that just come with breakfast ... or we're going to push them aside.

God's grace abounds anywhere ... anytime ... when we're faced with one of life's choices ... you just have to stop long enough and recognize it ... you have to wrap yourself in it sometimes and hang on for dear life ... because following God's truth will most likely put you at odds with the ways of this world.

God's grace abounds ... take a look at what's happening in our public schools. Talk about pressure from the world. There is an enormous amount of pressure placed on kids to score higher and better or they will be labeled incompetent by the world's standards. "If you want to get into the right college, you better have a better Grade Point average ... you better score in the top 10 percent on that test ... you better do this ... you better do that . . ." The world on one side demands it ... hardly room for grace when your child is faced with cheating on a test because of extreme anxiety and fear.

But grace still abounds ... and you, as parents ... as grandparents ... as mentors ... as Sunday School teachers ... may be the only source of sharing God's grace that rejects the world's view of what success means.

God's grace abounds ... You've been putting in long hours at work ... it seems that you never feel you'll ever catch up. You get home after another long day and the kids are demanding your attention. Maybe your wife or husband would like to spend some time with you to just catch up. But once again that project just has to get finished ... you don't have time to play with them ... to talk to her ... to him ... maybe tomorrow you can make some time ... and the world's ways once again wrestle with God's grace ... pushing aside the very blessings of the loved ones that should be taking priority in your life.

We all juggle many balls in our lives ... most of them we can drop once in a while and they will just bounce right back up again ... but the ball that represents your family ... your children ... is fragile ... it's made of glass.

God's grace abounds ... even in the midst of all the problems that life seems to throw our way ... some of you are struggling with heavy debt ... some of you are having to make do with less during these tough economic times ... some of you have spent months looking for a job ... the stress it places on our lives and families can sometimes be overwhelming ... sleep is disturbed ... lower back pain flares up ... sometimes just getting up and facing life brings on depression. And there, in the kitchen cabinet is a bottle that might help get you through the day ... or those pills up there in the medicine cabinet ... or there is God's grace, seeping into those places of your life when you need it the most.

God's grace is here ... as a church family to support you and care for you ... it is abundant in the care of your friends when you are willing to share your burden ... God's grace abounds.

God's grace abounds ... in the lives of adolescents and teens ... even when you feel alone and forgotten ... when that first love of your life has gone sour and you're so sure that no one will ever love you again ... or when a friend spurs you and you feel isolated and rejected ... in those times when you're sure no one understands what you are going through ... believe me ... God's grace abounds.

You will find it all around you ... when a friend or even an adult is willing to just sit and listen and you are willing to share ... it is found by gathering with your friends here at the church who do understand what you are feeling ... because you are never as alone as you might believe you are ... God's grace abounds to carry you through those tough emotional times when you might feel like striking out ... or even hurting yourself. Don't ... wait ... share what's going on ... accept the grace ... and you will find support and love and caring.

You see ... Herod had a choice ... he could have risked everything in his life and done the exact opposite of what the world demanded he do ... he could have accepted the grace of God and in turn, he would have become a new person.

Oh yes ... it would have been a hard thing for him to do it ... it would have been painful ... he would have had to give up much of what was the foundation of his life and accept a brand new foundation offered by God's grace ... he would have probably had to give up family ties ... and those parasitic friends who only used him ... he could have done it ... had he accepted what had been offered. Unfortunately, he chose otherwise.

But we, too ... all of us ... are faced with choices every day of our lives. And in a few minutes ... here at this table ... you are going to be offered something you might not have expected ... no ... not a bowl of grits ... but God's grace. It just keeps right on being poured into your life whether you order it or not ...

That's the point the writer Lewis Smedes tells us in his book, *How Can It Be All Right When Everything Is Wrong?* This is how he believes grace works: "Grace does not make everything right. Grace's trick is to show us that it is right for us to live; that it is truly good, wonderful even, for us to be breathing and feeling at the same time that everything clustering around is wholly wretched. "Grace is not a ticket to Fantasy Island; Fantasy Island is dreamy fiction.

"Grace is not a potion to charm life to our liking; charms are magic. Grace does not cure all our cancers, transform all our kids into winners, or send us all soaring into the high skies of success.

"Grace is rather an amazing power to look earthy reality full in the face, see its sad and tragic eyes, feel its cruel cuts, join in the primeval chorus against its outrageous unfairness, and yet feel in your deepest being that it is good and right for you to be alive on God's good earth.

"Grace is power; Power to see life very clearly, admit it is sometimes all wrong, and still know that somehow in the center of your life, "It's all right."

This is one reason we call it amazing grace ... Grace is one word for all that God is for us in the form of Jesus Christ."

Let us pray: Bless all whose will or name or love reflects the grace of heaven above. Though unacclaimed by earthly powers, your life through theirs has hallowed ours. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.