

The Coke Can

Lessons: Ephesians 2:1-10, John 3:1-9

I have never repeated sermons for lots of reasons. But because everyone is not here every week, I want to begin today with a review. A couple of weeks ago when we gathered at the Lord's Table, I said something about "grace." I had been listening to a good sermon by a better preacher than I am at the meeting of Presbytery, and he repeated the common definition of grace: "the love we don't deserve." It struck me that this definition may be correct, but it shines the spotlight in the wrong direction, and ultimately misses the point. Love that considers the "deserving" isn't grace at all.

"Grace" is one of those church words that we use all the time and know what we mean even if we can't put it in words. We know grace is a meaningful word - I mean full-of-meaning that goes past our fumbling phrases. It is "unconditional love," because we all know that we have received a lot of real love that still put conditions on the loving: "I'll love you if..." "If you love me, you will..." IF-love is still love, but it is smaller love. IF-love hints at "I love you because of what you do for me." Unconditional love is closer to the real love we all want than all the IF love we have all experienced. We know the difference deep down in our spirit DNA, so we say "love" in general, and we say "grace" when we see "greater love."

But "love we don't deserve"? It shifts the spotlight on the undeserving - the whether or not we are deserving. The phrase puts the IF-love in the definition in a different way. It turns IF-love into "don't deserve" love. We are all in the shadow of that "undeserving" spotlight. We are programmed to see the deserving: dessert if you eat your vegetables; play if you clean your room; good grades if you do your homework; Santa if you are nice, and switches and ashes if you are naughty; merit raises if you work hard. You get the idea, ...or should I say we have all really gotten the idea about deserving. It means in some way or another, we have done the IF that deserves the love. Then grace becomes the "anyway love": "I love you anyway, ...and I'm going to remind you every time that you don't deserve my love." Hmm. There's still an IF in there somewhere. It still feels like IF-love.

But grace is a special case of love precisely because it has nothing to do with deserving at all. Grace is **not** "the love you don't deserve." Grace is just *love* (period). Grace is love that is not even thinking about the deserving. Grace is love that comes so much out of the heart and soul of the giver that there is not a trace of question about deserving or not. Grace, like the old prayer says, is "giving and not counting the cost."

Grace is thoughtless love. It takes no thought for its own gains, and it takes no thought for the deserving. The deserving is more than irrelevant. Deserving never enters the mind of the one who loves with true grace. That is what we mean when we say that grace is "selfless" love.

Hopefully, you know this love because you have experienced it. And you know the difference because you have experienced it. Grace puts the gift in love, and all the other loves become earnings or rewards or incentives or bribes by the contrast. The trace of IF

makes them all a little less than the 24 caret pure love we all long for - the love we were made for.

Grace is pure Mercy. Now, there's a word we don't use in church all that much. Mercy is all about not deserving. I could put you in jail for 20 years, but I will have mercy on you. Mercy is the other side of the coin of "love you don't deserve." Mercy is not getting the punishment you do deserve. Mercy is "better than I deserve" grace.

But if Grace has nothing to do with deserving, then mercy does not anything to do with the not deserving. Mercy says more about the giver. Mercy says the giver has the complete power over us to do anything to us, and with all that power the giver chooses to be grace-full. So, God loves us - not just because it is the only thing God can do in God's nature. God could do anything in God's power, and God chooses to love us without the question of deserving entering the divine calculation. God does not count the cost.

God's question - looking at us - is not "How undeserving are these folks I love anyway?" God's question is "How can I show these folks how much I love them?"

Now, hear the lesson for the day and the good news for every part of your life. Hear the mercy and grace in the lesson, and hear the free gift in the grace.

Ephesians 2:4-10 [from the Order of Worship - Affirmation of Faith]

Jesus is all about living divine mercy - I mean, Jesus shows us that us humans can be grace-full. Jesus had every human limit you have got, and he lived the most selfless life, give the most thoughtless love God could choose to give. God loves us so much that God choose to show us that we can love each other the same pure way God loves. Grace and mercy are not divine *ideas*. They are human **acts**. We have been created for a life of good - and gracious and merciful - deeds. We are who we are - who we really are - when we admit we are more than we can understand, and we just trust and love. We are saved to new life when we love in good deeds.

** So, God's gift of grace in mercy is like ...a can of Coke just sitting on the table. God gives you a drink, puts it out there for you. It's yours. God doesn't take it back, or ask if you want it or need it, or did anything to deserve it. God doesn't say you don't deserve it but you get the gift anyway. God doesn't say it's a limited time offer. It's your can of Coke and it will sit there until it goes room temperature and the paint fades.

Now if you never tasted Coke before, you might be curious and grab the can, pop the top, and have a sip. You might drain the whole thing, or set it back down because you have tasted Orange Crush and like it better. You may be afraid of something new, or afraid that you will like something new. But here's the point: All those possible reactions are possible because God put the can on the table and gave it to you. It's your can, and what you do with it is up to you. Oh, God is hoping you will pop the top, love the drink, and never look back. But the gift is as far as God can go. God's not going to bribe you to love back with big prizes or threaten you if you don't pick it up. It's your can now, and how you live with it is your decision.

Nicodemus was staring at the Coke Can. Jesus was right in front of him. Nicodemus wanted to pick it up, but he had questions. He needed to understand. He was intelligent, had studied enough to know that the life Jesus put in front of him was something he had never tasted before. Jesus told him the only way you can know the new life is to be born new and live it. Don't just pick it up, Nicodemus. Open your life. Take mine in. Live it out.

Look at what is in front of you on this table? We have this model, this picture, this living example. We see clearly demonstrated this absolute definition of love turned to grace and mercy. Jesus is ours for the living, and we can do good deeds for others like we were made to love. None of us learn to love in any other way than by trying to love in our living and learning as we go along. We are like Nicodemus. We see enough of Jesus to see that his gift is different from anything we have ever experienced before. And there is only one way we can know. There is just one thing we must do...