

Deep Grace

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Damascus United Methodist Church

Genesis 45:1-15, Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32, Matthew 15:21-28

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One of my grandmothers, Ma-maw Watkins, lived to be 100 years old. She was a spirited cantankerous woman who was a pastor's wife. She believed a person was never too old to learn. At age 92 years, in Tennessee she participated in the 9 month Disciple Bible study. As God would have it, I was also taking the 9 month Disciple Bible study in Maryland.

During that time, I remember our discussion about "grace." We decided "grace" can be a hard concept to completely understand. Ma-maw asked, "What's your definition of grace, Linda?" I shared, "Being given a break that you do not deserve." Ma-maw replied, "Yes.., and that's just how I feel- undeserving of God's grace. It's hard to believe that as a sinner, having faith in God's gracious gift of Jesus is our only needed response to God's grace." I replied, "I know just what you mean, Ma-maw."

Inside myself, I was surprised that my Ma-maw, who was nearly 60 years older than me, shared in the same spiritual struggles that I did. From that discussion, Ma-maw gave me a great gift – a desire to more fully know God's deep grace that transforms lives and makes the impossible possible. It is because of receiving God's grace that we can share grace with others. Since then, I've realized grace can best be understood through experience and example.

One such example is a story told by Jeffrey Zaslow about what his father, the baseball coach, did. "Years ago, my Dad coached a team of eight-year-olds. He had a few excellent players, and some who just couldn't get the hang of the game. Dad's team didn't win once all season. But in the last inning of the last game, his team was only down by a run. There was one boy who had never been able to hit the ball--or catch it. With two outs, it was his turn to bat. He surprised the world and got a single!

The next batter was the team slugger. Finally, Dad's players might win a game. The slugger connected, and as the boy who hit the single ran to second, he saw the ball coming toward him. Not so certain of baseball's rules, he caught it. Final out! Dad's team lost!

Quickly, my father told his team to cheer. The boy beamed. It never ever occurred to him that he had lost the game. All he knew was - he had hit the ball and caught it-- both for the first time! His parents later thanked my Dad. Before that season, their child had never played in a game.

My Dad never told the boy exactly what happened. He didn't want to ruin it for

him. And to this day, I'm proud of what my father did that afternoon.” (Zaslow)

Stories like this -- about grace -- offer hope. Stories of grace help us rise above our human nature. Because left to our own human condition, it is too easy to go astray from God in what we do and say.

The biblical story of Joseph reflects human nature. For both Jews and Christians, over the centuries, Joseph's story has been a favorite. Why is this? It is easy to find pieces of our own lives that relate to what happens to Joseph. Just pick up a newspaper, read a popular book or go to the movies. There you will find similar themes: jealousy, greed, sibling rivalry, politics, sex and 'what goes on behind the palace walls'. Thankfully, God's Word offers us instruction about how to treat others in the middle of life's dilemmas. Through God's faithfulness in human lives, the Bible gives examples of how we -- in a healthy way-- can handle the difficult situations in our lives.

Joseph's story is a perfect example. From today's Genesis 45 passage, Joseph is now in a position to forgive his brothers. But let's be honest. This has not been an easy journey.

Let's remember what has happened. Jealousy and bitterness grew among the brothers. Why? Joseph was his Dad's favorite, and Dad only gave Joseph a special coat. Then, sibling rivalry appeared. Why? Joseph had a dream. His interpretation of his dream claimed his brothers would bow down to him. Next, Joseph's death was staged. Why? The brothers grew tired of Joseph and sold him as a slave to a travelling merchant. To their Dad, they made it look like Joseph was dead. Then, political connections occurred. How? Joseph, the slave, was sold to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guards. Potiphar was so impressed with Joseph's abilities that he made Joseph overseer of his household. Stories of seduction erupted. How? Potiphar's wife tried to seduce Joseph. When he resisted, she lied about it and had Joseph thrown into prison. He's there many years until-- all of a sudden, Joseph gets out of prison. How? -- Pharaoh had a dream which needed interpretation. Joseph's God-given gift of interpreting dreams made the difference with Pharaoh's dream, and he was released from prison! Finally, the miraculous happens. How? Joseph is made overseer of Egypt and because of Pharaoh's dream, Joseph stores away enough grain for seven years. This prepares Egypt for the coming famine. In Canaan, the famine also occurs, and Jacob sends Joseph's brothers to buy grain in Egypt. These events bring us to today's Genesis passage.

First, Joseph sends all of the Egyptians out of the room. Hear these words, *Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.*

Imagine Joseph, a very powerful influential Egyptian in Pharaoh's court, revealing to his brothers, "I am Joseph." At this, his brothers must have looked like deer caught in the headlights. But rather than seek revenge and have them sent to prison to be killed or suffer for what they had done to him, Joseph shares in a God-moment of deep grace. He says, "*Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.*" Joseph sees his life through the lens of God's purpose for his life – even his journey into slavery! Through this transforming revelation, the brothers are able to see the hand of God even in Joseph's life.

The grace of God allows Joseph, who was cast aside to die, to become reunited with his family. God's grace spills over into Pharaoh's court. Pharaoh offers Joseph's family the best Egypt has to offer- land in "Goshen" -- the fertile area east of the Nile delta. This clue places this story in historical time, because the royal court was in Lower Egypt during the Hyksos period of 1720-1550 BCE. Ultimately, Joseph's management of Egypt's grain stores will keep Jacob's family alive through the famine. Israel, "a remnant on earth" will survive.

In Joseph's story, who benefits from God's grace? At first, it is the eleven brothers and their father, Jacob. Next, it is their extended family members. Ultimately, the object of God's loving intervention in Joseph's life is to all of humankind – that means you and me. This is because God has gifted the whole world with the gift of grace in Jesus Christ. If we accept and believe in this free gift of grace, we are forever changed, God's deep grace transforms our life, making the *impossible* possible.

It was a hot summer day in Central Park in 1986. A 29 year old detective with the NYC Police Department, Steven McDonald, was questioning three youths who were attempting a robbery. One of them, a 15 year old, had a gun. He shot the officer at point blank range three times. One bullet went thru Steve's spinal cord and paralyzed him from the neck down. He spent the next 18 months in the hospital – with a tracheotomy--fighting for his life. After being shot in the line of duty, Steve had to learn how to breathe thru a ventilator.

The tragic shooting couldn't have come at a worse time. Steven had been married only one year. Just a few weeks earlier, he learned he was going to become a father. He had had a bright career ahead. Now, he was going to have to live his life in a wheelchair - - attached to a portable ventilator and speaking only in a whisper. Feeling useless to his colleagues, his wife and future child, one can only imagine the level of anger, frustration and depression he had to deal with.

Within a year, a spiritual transformation came over Steve. He felt God was telling him the only path to peace was forgiveness. So, on the occasion of his son Conor's baptism, Steve paid a visit to the boy who had shot him,... and he publicly forgave him. Prior to the shooting, Steve didn't consider himself a particularly religious man. But the more he discussed his future with his wife and his surgeon, he began to see how much

faith was playing a greater role in his life. The cards that had flooded his hospital room and the assurance that countless people of all faiths were praying for him led Steve to claim, "it was God's gracious love that put me back together again."

Today, Steven McDonald is a peacemaker. As part of a youth organization called Breaking the Cycle, He takes his message of forgiveness to different kinds of settings. He talks to school principals about the problem of bullying. He has travelled to Northern Ireland to people seeking reconciliation between Protestants and Catholics. Steve has been to Jerusalem working with peace advocates who are trying to mend the enduring Middle Eastern conflict.

Even though Steve's body is still in pain, at least his body and soul aren't overwhelmed by anger and revenge. He says, "I often tell people the only thing worse than the bullet in my spine would be to nurture revenge in my heart. That would have extended my tragic injury into my soul. It's bad enough that the physical effects are permanent, but at least I can *choose to prevent spiritual injury.*"

Although his life is very different now than when he first wore the badge of a police officer, Steven says he's "convinced his suffering has been ultimately part of a good cause. God has turned something terrible into something beautiful. I think God wants us to use both our abilities and our disabilities. God needs our arms and legs and minds and hearts and all that we have -- and some things we no longer have -- to let others know that all is well, God is alive. And, that God wants us to graciously love one another. (Steven McDonald)

No one says this better than author Max Lucado who offers, "Where the grace of God is absent, bitterness abounds. Where the grace of God is embraced, forgiveness flourishes." Max says, "The longer we walk in the garden, the more likely we are to smell like flowers. The more we immerse ourselves in grace, the more likely we are to give grace." (Lucado, In the Grip of Grace)

With God, all things are possible: the lost are found, the blind see, the sick are healed, Joseph graciously forgives his manipulating brothers, an 8 year old celebrates his first baseball hit and catch, and Detective Steve McDonald uses grace to forgive his shooter. Yes, all of these dilemmas go beyond logical human understanding. Yet, it is only a glimpse of the transforming power of the loving grace of God in Jesus Christ. God's grace always surpasses our greatest hope. Thanks be to God!