

“The Grace . . . of our Lord Jesus Christ”

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“I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art . . .” John Calvin, c. 1551

All of my life I have struggled with the questions of natural theology and revealed theology. Especially since Karl Barth clashed with the National Socialists and with Emil Brunner and in the realm where faith intersects with political realities, it has been important to remember the scandal and the specificity of the Incarnation, the Cross, the Resurrection. Love of nature cannot stand against tyranny for very long. Hitler’s mass choreographed rallies often wedded the natural beauty of the Fatherland with the goose step and the idolatrous salute.

Yet, there is in the common usage of *grace*, a loveliness and a beauty and symmetry in Creation for which we give thanks and before which we stand in awe. Pope Francis’s 2015 encyclical “*Laudate Si*”: *On Care for Our Common Home* reminds us of the connections between the desecration of the environment and issues of poverty and justice. The Psalmists cry, “Let everything that breathes praise the Lord.” John Calvin observed that there is no place in creation where our eyes may not discern at least some sparks of God’s glory. At Christmas we celebrate the Lord’s birth by belting out “And Heav’n and Nature sing.” I give thanks for the music of Creation, the grace of it all—the staccato phrasing of dolphins, the antiphonal spirituals of whales, the slapstick percussion of the beaver’s tails, the bass notes of bullfrogs and alligators, the trumpet chorus of elephants, the counterpoint of cicadas, the raucous laughter of ducks at dawn, the plaintive solos of owls and whippoorwills down in the bottomland—and for the human capacity for seeing, keeping, praying for and with all of these. Jesus invited his anxious disciples to consider the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, cared for by an attentive and loving Creator.

In the New Testament benedictions (II Corinthians 13:12; I Thessalonians 5:28 et.al) though, there is specific reference to the “grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.” How do we bear witness to that Grace? What do we mean by this? Fleming Rutledge and others have suggested that God’s grace in Christ is not simply favorable treatment, but unmerited favor, a gift bestowed on the undeserving, a reconciliation made possible only by the offended party. In pastoral care I have often noticed that if there is ever reconciling in a relationship, someone bears the pain in unequal portions, and most often it is the offended party rather than the offender. One of the Statler Brothers’ old songs says, “You Take the Bow, I’ll Take the Blame.” All of the traditional “theories of atonement” refer in some deep sense to this unmerited favor. When Paul wrote to the Philippians, he was very likely in prison and at the end of his life, and at the center of his letter is the kenotic hymn of 2:1-11, wherein the “self-emptying” of Christ is the mainstay of the revealed Gospel. We are not at all on equal terms or on God’s level, but always recipients of unmerited favor. The Scriptures are not simply transactional, but benevolent and often counterintuitive, poured out, and always for human hope and salvation.

A couple of generations ago, Reinhold Niebuhr wrote a still relevant book *The*

Nature and Destiny of Man (Scribner, 1943). In volume II, on “Human Destiny,” there is a profound essay in which Niebuhr suggests that Grace is both God’s mercy toward us and God’s power in us. That is a strenuous dynamic, grounded in Galatians 2:20. Cheap grace stops with the mercy toward us and neglects the power (in the Greek, “*dunamis*” or dynamite) of God which is also extended and realized in the communion of saints/Pentecost. My soul is not only saved by Christ, but it is given life to embody him now, in these very days, in the flesh. There is a power not our own to go along with the mercy not usually found in human relationships.

Grace is God’s mercy toward us, unmerited favor which produces the power to continue. In Charles Frazier’s excellent novel *Cold Mountain*, published in 1997, there is the disturbing and provocative story of an “Everyman” on a journey. Inman is a wounded soldier in the United States’ Civil War. He is walking a long distance from the hospital in Virginia to the mountains of North Carolina. On the way he encounters all kinds of difficulty and pain and engages in deep introspection. At one point he is completely lost; but he is met by a slave, a mulatto, a kind of Samaritan (p. 183):

“Cut north. Go toward Wilkes. Taking that heading there’s Moravians and Quakers all the way that will help. Hit the bottom of the Blue Ridge and then cut south again following the foothills. Or go on into the mountains and follow the ridges back down to your course. But, they say it’s cold and rough back in there.”

“That’s where I’m from,” Inman said.

The yellow man gave him cornmeal twisted up in paper and tied with twine, a strip of salt pork, and some pieces of roast pork. Then he worked for some time scratching out a map in ink on a piece of paper, and when it was done it was a work of art. All detailed with little houses and odd-shaped barns and crooked trees with faces in their trunks and limbs like arms and hair. A fancy compass rose in one corner. And there were notes in a precise script to say who could be trusted and who could not. Gradually things got vague and far apart until in the west all was white but for interlinked arcs the man had drawn to suggest the shapes of mountains.

“That’s as far as I’ve been,” he said. “Just right there to the edge.”

“You can read and write?” Inman said.

“Got a crazy man for a master. That law don’t mean a thing to him.”

Inman reached in his pockets for money to give the man. He thought to draw out a generous amount, but he found his pockets empty and remembered what money he had left was in the haversack hidden in Junior’s woodpile.

“I wish I had something to pay you with,” Inman said.

“I might not have took it anyway,” the man said.

My friend Jack died about five years ago. His death was unexpected, though he was more than the Biblical “three score and ten” and had survived some major health problems. His soul was always one in whose presence I found gladness and welcome and strength. In the Church he was leader, servant, Elder. He was the benevolent treasurer and also the person who called all the visitors. Also in his “retirement” years he was the moderator of the Board of the Child Development Center (Few want that

responsibility and the associated stresses!) and also the one who was more than happy to assist with baptisms of squirming infants. We ate lunch together several times a year at a Chinese restaurant where Jack knew all the chefs and the waiters, naturally. At one of these holy meals, we were talking about funerals, and I went on a tangent about the hymn “Amazing Grace.” I said that I was weary of it, that it was overused, common, never mentions Jesus by name, and has become sentimentalized despite its origins with slave trader John Newton’s conversion in the 1770s, and that it would be fine with me if I never heard it or sang it again. Jack just listened and smiled, and we went on to another subject.

About a week later, I found in my mailbox a home-made CD. It was from Jack. It contained more than twenty versions of “Amazing Grace,” from Elvis to Judy Collins to the Blind Boys of Alabama, from the Mormon Tabernacle Choir to Willie Nelson to Mahalia Jackson, from a Hawaiian ukulele choir to a Jamaican steel drum band to the bagpipers at the Edinburgh Military Tattoo, and a version our congregation’s choir had sung recently at a memorial service.

Grace. Mercy. Power. Amen.