

No End to It

Hosea 1:1-9, 3:1-5, 11:1-9

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When comedian Tig Notaro was in sixth grade, she took this music class covering everything from Beethoven to The Who. She described what happened in that class on *This American Life*:

It was so much fun. I was a huge Beatles and Rolling Stones fan. And at the end of every class, the teacher would let one kid play their favorite song for the whole class to hear. I always brought in Beatles and Rolling Stones albums. The coolest kid in our entire school, JD, came up to me after school one day and said, “If I bring in my dad’s Rolling Stones’ album, will you tell me a cool song to play?” I said, “Absolutely. No doubt.”

Next day, he brought in the Rolling Stones album *Let It Bleed*. I looked it over. I said, “This song—play this one.” And I pointed at “You Can’t Always Get What You Want.” He said, “Are you sure?” I couldn’t be more positive. This is the coolest song that you could possibly play. So the teacher asked if anyone had a song. JD raised his hand. She called him up to the front. He pointed out that song. And at that point, this is what the entire classroom heard:

(Note: At this point in the sermon, our choir began singing the opening lines of the Stones’ song, sounding like the London Bach Choir on the original recording “I saw her today at the reception.”)

Notaro continued:

“JD was furious! He’s looking at me like, what is this? And I’m frantically signing no, no, no! This is an amazing song! It gets better! But, the song continued....”

(Note: Again the choir behind me sings: “You can’t always get what you want. But if you try sometime, you find you get what you need.”)

And then the bell rang. Nobody got to hear any more of that song—the rock n roll part...And the coolest kid in school just marched down there, grabbed his record, and turned to me and said, “Thanks a lot,” and then just bolted out of the classroom. I was like, no! It gets better! But I guess, I guess you can’t always get what you want.¹

That makes me think about grace. We talk about grace so much—grace almost becomes like a theological teddy bear. Soft, cuddly, unquestioning. Grace is not a theological teddy bear. You don’t believe that? Behold the story of Hosea and his wife Gomer, recorded in painful detail in our text today.

Fred Buechner describes the scene something like this: Gomer was always good company—a little loud, but great at a party and always good for a laugh, a little less than choosy about men and booze. Then the prophet Hosea came along wearing a sandwich board that read “The End Is at Hand” on one side and “Watch Out” on the other. The first time he asked her to marry him, she thought he was kidding. The second time Gomer knew he was serious, but thought he was crazy. The third time she said yes. He wasn’t exactly a swinger, but he had a kind face, and he was generous, and he wasn’t all that much crazier than everybody else. Besides, any fool could see he loved her. Give or take a little, she even loved him back for a while, and they had three children whom Hosea named with strang names like Not-pitied-for-God-will-no-Longer-pity-Israel-now-that-it’s-gone-to-the-dogs, so that every time the roll was called at school, Hosea would be scoring a prophetic bull’s-eye in absentia. But everybody could see the marriage wasn’t going to last. While Hosea was off hitting the sawdust trail, Gomer took to hitting as many night spots as she could squeeze into a night. He swore that he was through with her for keeps, but he wasn’t. When he finally found her, she was lying passed out in a highly specialized establishment located above an adult bookstore, and he had to pay the management plenty to let her out of her contract. She’d lost her front teeth and picked up some scars you had to see to believe, but Hosea had her back again and that seemed to be all that mattered. He changed his sandwich board from “The End Is Near” to “God Is love” on one side and “There’s no end to it” on the other, and when he stood on the street corner belting out:

How can I give you up, O Ephraim!
How can I hand you over, O Israel!
For I am God and not mortal,
The Holy One in your midst...

nobody can say how many converts he made. But one thing that’s for sure is that, including Gomer’s, there was seldom a dry eye in the house.²

The penetrating and persistent ways of grace often send us into exile from the life we know, only to finally bring us home to life with God. Grace is decidedly not a theological teddy bear.

Three centuries ago in the village of Olney, England, a new priest came to town. The townsfolk were fascinated both with his style of preaching and his checkered past as a slave trader. In those days clergy frequently wrote original verses for congregational singing. One of these compositions was titled “Faith’s Review and Expectation.” It was a plaintive little poem, and it didn’t stand out and was soon forgotten. But the song survived the priest, whose name was John Henry Newton.³

“Amazing Grace” crossed the Atlantic, and when we sing it in a few minutes, notice especially the beginning of the second verse: “Twas Grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved...” That is grace? Grace teaches our heart to fear? In a culture whose mantra often is “no one is really at fault,” grace punctures the illusion that it’s all comfort and no repentance. As Sam Wells has said, “If it’s not sin—it can’t be forgiven.”

Why is it that grace often first stings before it comforts? How is it that grace evokes fear before the joy? Richard Rohr knows what he’s talking about: “In the

first half of life it is all about me. How can I be safe? How can I make money? How can I look attractive? In the realm of faith: How can I think well of myself and go to heaven? How can I be on moral high ground? These are all ego questions. They are not the questions of the soul.”⁴

Only grace moves us to trust not in our own wiles, but in the power of God to change us. That movement is hard, but it leads us to joy. The fear of God’s grace is that our security and control and status quo—will be reduced to nothing. That can feel like very bad news for us before it emerges as decidedly good news. And it leads to all the risk taking that love and devotion expect.

Thinking of Hosea and Gomer, and grace, I recall a story Nadia Bolz-Weber tells about how God’s grace is found in the small and the surprising and even the profane:

I think back to two days after PJ was found dead. See, PJ grew up in a nice Catholic family in Iowa. Not really sure how they got a darkly sardonic, filthy minded comic genius for a son but that’s another story for another time. Two days after PJ’s death, a group of friends, comics, and recovering alcoholics undertook a mission of graceful compassion. They entered the home of our dead friend and they cleared out all the pornography. Every Playboy and VHS tape. All of it. They wanted to spare these good folks any more pain than they were already dealing with. That to me is the in-breaking of the Grace of God on earth, that we might clear out the pornography from our dead friends’ homes before their grieving parents come to settle their son’s affairs.⁵

It’s small, it’s surprising, and it’s a little profane, but it’s the real thing. Hosea, along with Gomer, would wholeheartedly recognize that as grace.

What Hosea learned, first in his exile of pain and then in his exile when grace spun his world around, is that we can take exactly none of our “conventional wisdom” into our encounter with grace. None of our rules apply! You just have to hold onto radical love for dear life and a wild ride as grace changes us heart and soul. Finally, it will dawn on us that if truly our sin costs us a lot, God coming to us and healing us costs God everything.⁶

At the turning point of C.S. Lewis’ beloved *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, several significant characters encourage each other with reports that Aslan, the great lion and true ruler of oppressed Narnia, has reappeared to fight the evil witch. Their words of encouragement to each other are as potent as they are succinct: “Aslan is on the move.”⁷ Into every stuck, cautious, timid, fearful life, the words that can sting are also the words of life: God’s grace is on the move—in your life and in the life of the world!

Anne Lamott once took her then two-year-old son to Lake Tahoe where they rented a condominium by the lake. That area around Reno is such a hotbed of gambling that all the rooms are equipped with those curtains that block out all light so you can stay up all night in the casinos and then sleep all morning. One afternoon she put the baby in his playpen in one of those rooms, in the pitch dark, and went to do some work. A few minutes later she heard her baby knocking on the door from inside the room, and she got up, knowing he’d crawled out of his playpen. But when she got to the

door, she found he'd locked it.

He had somehow managed to push the little button on the doorknob. He was calling to her, "Mommy, Mommy," and Anne was saying to him, "Jiggle the door knob, darling," and of course he couldn't even see the knob to know what she was talking about.

After a moment, it became clear to him that his mother could not open the door, and panic set in. He began sobbing. So his mother ran around like crazy trying everything possible, making calls, jiggling the lock, leaving messages for help. And there, in this dark, locked room was this terrified little child. Finally she did the only thing she could, which was to slide her fingers underneath the door, where there were a few centimeters of space.

She kept telling him over and over to bend down and find her fingers. And somehow he did. So they stayed like that for a really long time—connected, on the floor, him holding her fingers in the dark, slowly feeling connected, feeling her love, feeling her presence and her care.

I think grace ultimately may well feel to you or me like being a two-year-old...in the dark, and God is our mother and I am not old enough to speak cogent phrases yet, even in the midst of such panic. She could break down the door if that struck her as being the best way, but instead, by grace, I can just hold onto her fingers underneath the door.⁸

How can that be enough? With grace it is always enough. How can we know it is enough? The punch line JD never heard in the Stones' song is the very gift of God that teaches our heart to fear and is the grace that also relieves all our fears. From God, always: we get what we need.

We need grace to live and to love, to form relationships, to move us off some paths and on to others, to help us look to tomorrow in hope, and to help us forgive all our yesterdays. Grace is the sweet song God sings to us across generations and through all our locked doors, lifting us up and moving us onward.

(Note: A small ensemble gathered to sing "Tomorrow Will Be Kinder" by The Secret Sisters – a song known at least to a younger segment of the congregation as a song from "The Hunger Games." It begins:

Black clouds are behind me, I now can see ahead,
Often I wonder why I try hoping for an end.
Sorrow weighs my shoulders down, and trouble haunts my mind.
But I know the present will not last, and tomorrow will be kinder.⁹)
(See it at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3rsD4orsMFw>)

Grace is the sweet song God sings to us. It meets us in our tears as it envelopes us in love. It meets us in our control and our pride, and it strips us down. It meets us in our distraction and holds up a mirror and forces us into self-recognition. Grace comes into all broken places, and it begins to love us back to wholeness. And grace always forms and reforms us, and the sweet song of grace brings us home. The grace of God always, always, always gives us what we need.

Notes

- 1 As recounted, “Act Three/Start Me Up” from episode 518 of *This American Life*.
- 2 Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures* (New York: HarperCollins, 1984).
- 3 Matthew Myer Boulton, “Reflections on the Lectionary,” *Christian Century*, March 22, 2011.
- 4 Richard Rohr, “The First Half of Life,” *Daily Meditation*, March 7, 2014.
- 5 <http://sojo.net/blogs/2011/07/25/spotting-kingdom-god-after-tragedy-death>, accessed July 18, 2014.
- 6 From the sermon “What Is Sin?” preached at Duke Chapel by Sam Wells on February 10, 2008.
- 7 David Lose, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 3.
- 8 Anne Lamott, *Operating Instructions* (Random House: Toronto, 1993), 88-89.
- 9 “Tomorrow Will Be Kinder” from *The Hunger Games*, Laura Rogers/The Secret Sisters.