

Grace, All Sufficient

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2 Corinthians 12:2-10

A week ago Friday, President Obama offered the eulogy at the funeral service of the Reverend Clementa Pinckney. Perhaps you saw it, or a portion of it. If you haven't, I would commend it to you on this Independence Day weekend – the entire eulogy, as both a civics lesson and a profound testimony to faithfulness.

The President concluded by singing a portion of that most well-known hymn, "Amazing Grace." I will not do that this morning, nor will we sing the hymn, though we could.

While the presidential singing received much attention, I have become compelled by the 37 minutes or so that preceded it, a recitation on grace, theological, political, cultural. Grace was the topic of the sermon this morning long before this past Friday, or the tragic shootings at Mother Emmanuel A.M.E. Church, or the church burnings that continue in the south. Grace was the topic long before all of that. Someone in our house asked me if grace wasn't the topic on most Sundays, whether I say it or not. There's a point.

But it took on added resonance, as it takes on added resonance when we face moments of despair, as individuals, as families, as a church, as a nation. "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see."

Several weeks ago in our Thursday discussion group we talked about grace, and even sought to define it. We will get to that in a moment. Here is what the president said. First, he said, the alleged killer, blinded by hatred, failed to see the power of grace, grace that surrounded those nine gathered in that church for Bible study. Then he spoke of grace. "Not earned. Not merited. Not something we deserve. The free and benevolent favor of God, manifested by the salvation of sinners and the bestowal of blessings." That's pretty good, I thought, for a politician.

As far as being a central element of our faith, we have trouble defining grace. The president, I must say, did a pretty good job. Unearned. Unmerited. Undeserved. Free. Theologian Christoph Schwobel (*The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, pages 276-278) writes that "grace sums up the relationship of the triune God with creation. It depicts this relationship as grounded in the freedom of God's love and is directed towards the perfecting of God's communion with creation...Christian doctrine, worship and life are shaped in all their dimensions by the way in

which grace is understood. Since the concept of grace determines our understanding of divine action and its relationship to human action it is a highly contentious concept. The history of Christian doctrine and pastoral practice could well be written as a history of debates on the interpretation of grace.”

Here are some big questions. Is grace really unmerited, that is, do I have to do absolutely nothing to receive it? Can I lose it? What is the role of judgment? If it is freely given, do I have to do anything? Is it for me, but not for others? Is it for others, but not for me? What about sin? What about hell?

Here is how Paul understood it, our first Christian theologian. Paul was writing to a church unsure of itself, unsure of its identity or beliefs. Paul’s own leadership has come under attack; he is decidedly un-apostle like – no extraordinary spiritual experiences, no miracles. He becomes autobiographical, speaking of weakness, of the insults and hardships and persecutions he had experienced, he would experience.

He turns it all on its head, and weakness becomes strength and vulnerability becomes faithfulness. “...a thorn was given to me in the flesh,” he reports, “a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated.” He offers no description, but cannot we envision such a situation, such a thorn, a person, a circumstance?

And he asked God, three times, that the thorn would leave him. And God said no. God said I will give you what you need to persevere. I will give you grace. My grace. In fact, God said to Paul “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”

Grace, therefore, has something to do with human weakness and God’s power to overcome. Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock (*The People’s New Testament Commentary*, page 573) write that “(Paul’s) only “answer” was the grace of God – which was enough.” Enough.

Therefore it *must* be free, unearned, unmerited. Left to our own devices, we would be just that, left to our own devices. Lost, blind, wretches, however we define that admittedly old-school term. Grace finds us, gives us sight, allows us to deal with the thorns of our lives in ways we simply couldn’t otherwise.

Grace, B.A. Gerrish writes (*Grace and Gratitude*, page 94) that “grace is not so much offered to us as given to us.”

That is so difficult for us to accept. Living as we do in this nation, in this time, we believe that good things are earned. From the inception for this nation all those July Fourth’s ago and ever since, we have believed in rugged individualism, manifest destiny, pull yourselves up by the bootstraps. And on some levels, rightly so. But we have turned that into a kind of theology,

whereby God rewards those who work hard, and, consequently, punishes those who do not, or at least withholds. But we know the fault of that argument on both sides.

I am all for hard work using the gifts of your hands and your minds, your God-given gifts, to succeed, to contribute, to make a difference. But we know how communal even that is, people supporting us, teaching us, giving us breaks.

And we know people who work hard who don't succeed, whatever success looks like. That's the flaw in the discussion about poverty right now, that is, people saying if people just worked harder, they could break free from poverty's grip. Little talk of leveling the playing field, of providing equality of opportunity. Work harder, and if that fails, too bad, for you and your children.

Now at the end of the day, a conversation about grace is not about matters of the economy, but matters of the soul. Nonetheless, they are related, in terms of perceptions of self-worth, and how to respond when the thorns of life close in on you.

In our weakness, we find strength in grace, God's acceptance of us, God's welcoming of us, which we cannot earn by what we say or do, by how much we give, by how hard we pray. We receive it as a gift, and it is sufficient.

Later this summer we will review David Brooks' new book called *The Road to Character*. Brooks has become for us a kind of public philosopher and theologian. The book is on my summer reading list, but a few weeks ago, in anticipation of a Thursday gathering, someone shared with me a snippet. See what you think. "We are all ultimately saved by grace. The struggle against weakness often has a U shape. You are living your life and you are knocked off course – either by an overwhelming love, or by failure, illness, loss of employment, or twist of fate. The shape is advance-retreat-advance. In retreat, you admit your need and surrender your crown. You open up space that others might fill. And grace floods in. It may come in the form of love from friends and family, in the assistance of an unexpected stranger, or from God. But the message is the same. You are accepted. You don't flail about in desperation, because hands are holding you up. You don't have to struggle for a place, because you are embraced and accepted. You just have to accept the fact that you are accepted. Gratitude fills the soul. And with it the desire to serve and give back." (Page 265)

The desire to serve, and give back, responding to God's grace with a deep sense of gratitude.

President Obama concluded his eulogy with these words: "As a nation, out of this terrible tragedy, God has visited grace upon us, for he has allowed us to see where we've been blind. He has given us the chance, where we've been lost, to find our best selves. We may not have earned it, this grace, with our rancor and complacency, and short-sightedness and fear of each

other -- but we got it all the same. He gave it to us anyway. He's once more given us grace. But it is up to us now to make the most of it, to receive it with gratitude, and to prove ourselves worthy of this gift."

Were I to have a chat with the president I would explore with him that notion of worthiness. The point of grace is that we are not worthy, never worthy. But I appreciate his point, which is gratitude, a grateful response to God's gracious activity.

The president concluded: "We don't earn grace. We're all sinners. We don't deserve it. But God gives it to us anyway. And we choose how to receive it. It's our decision how to honor it."

This day, perhaps we can embrace grace as all sufficient. Perhaps we can accept the news that we are accepted. Perhaps we can allow our weakness to become our strength. Perhaps we can, embraced by God, so embrace God's world, the hurting parts. Perhaps our souls, now filled with gratitude, can serve. Perhaps we can affirm this day, that grace, having led us safe thus far, will lead us home. Amen.