

October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2006  
IF GRACE IS TRUE  
“What’s Up With Grace?”  
Jeff Clinger

Romans 8:38-39

*<sup>38</sup>For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup>nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

I have to be honest, I have lived an extremely fortunate life. I was raised by two parents who loved me unconditionally. I have been blessed with a great wife who does too. Growing up I was surrounded by friends and Sunday school teachers and youth mentors who helped me understand God’s grace and God’s love. I have had incredible opportunities to travel and study and experience God’s work in the world first hand.

I don’t open my sermon this way to boast. I open this way to acknowledge that I know I have been very lucky. And I also know the reality that many people have not been near as lucky as I have. Many people have experienced the love of others as conditional. Many people don’t have family or a spouse to love them and support them for who they are. Many people haven’t had opportunities, through the church or elsewhere, to learn about and truly experience God’s grace and God’s love. Many people understand God to be threatening, judgmental, and accusing. Many people feel as if they are not good enough for God’s love and God’s grace because of the way people within the church and people within their families have treated them.

God loves you. God loves you unconditionally. God loves you exactly the way you are. And as I talked about a few weeks ago in a sermon, the world today works completely counter to the idea of God’s grace. We are constantly surrounded by images that tell us we’re not good enough and that we’re undeserving. These messages that

bombard us daily are exactly why the church as an agent of God's grace is increasingly important in the world today!

Today is a big Sunday here at Ridge UMC. Today we are celebrating World Communion Sunday, we are beginning conversation about our stewardship campaign, and we are beginning a new three week sermon series.

World communion Sunday is an opportunity for us as Christians to celebrate Communion with other Christians around the world. It is an intentional effort to recognize and celebrate the fact that Christianity is a global faith. It is an opportunity for us to take pause and think about Christians who are experiencing and living out God's grace all around the world and to remember that we are connected to them in spirit and in mission.

Our stewardship campaign this fall is simply called Imagine. We are inviting all of the members and friends of Ridge UMC to imagine what our ministry could look like in the community and throughout the world if we would all respond to God's grace by returning a portion of our gifts to God through the church. Next week you'll receive a letter from John Mybeck to kick off the campaign. In coming weeks you'll also receive mail from Dick Jones and Kevin Mybeck talking about the importance of supporting Ridge UMC financially. Please take the time to read these and to consider what they are saying. Also, please plan to be in worship on October 15<sup>th</sup> as we will have a special video presentation that Larry Thomas is putting together of all of the ministries we've been doing here at Ridge UMC. We want to celebrate all that we have been doing as we imagine what more we could do.

This week begins a three part sermon series, or maybe a two part series with a special bonus feature on the end. This week and next I'm going to be challenging us to work on rethinking God's grace using a book called "If Grace is True." On October 15<sup>th</sup> my mom, who is the Associate Pastor of Lawrence First United Methodist Church, is going to be with us and will be preaching a sermon based on the follow up to that book called, "If God is Love." All three of these sermons are written with the intention of helping us all understand that God loves us and that God's grace is a gift offered to us free of charge. Plan to be here for all three weeks!

I first stumbled upon "If Grace is True" while I was in seminary and it captivated me. I devoured it and couldn't stop talking about it for weeks. And while my sermon this morning doesn't quote heavily from the book, it is guided by the main premise of the book, that God's grace is offered to all people.

As we begin to look at some of the concepts put forth in this book and talk about the gift of God's grace I want to share a video clip this morning that is for me a beautiful illustration of God's grace lived out in human terms. Many of you probably saw last year's hit film "Walk the Line," the story of Johnny and June Carter Cash. This scene is later on in the film, after Johnny has had some rough times and made some really bad decisions. He is waking up, not just from a night's sleep, but from a period of detoxing his body and June is sitting at his bedside.

<show the clip – the first part of chapter 31>

There are several things that I'd like to point out about this clip. First of all, as Johnny wakes up from his sleep the warm sun is shining in through the window – a powerful symbol of God's grace, it warms, it brightens, it brings new hope with the

coming of each new day. As Johnny wakes up and sees June there he is shocked to see her. He has treated her poorly, he has neglected their relationship and it seems impossible to believe that she would still be present after all he had done. God is like this too. No matter what bad we might do, no matter how much we might neglect our relationship with God, no matter how far from God we feel like we might have strayed, God is there waiting for us to wake up. In addition to the grace that is offered in this clip, there is a powerful illustration in how Johnny responds to that grace. After Johnny wakes up he responds to the grace that June offers and June takes him to church. God's grace is a gift, always present, always offered to us, and one to which we are called to respond.

One thing worth noting is Johnny's resistance to entering the church. This really strikes me. A reason for his resistance is never given, but I imagine it has something to do with how he has been treated by church folks in the past. It's another sermon for another time, but all too often we as the church exhibit anything but God's grace to the world. We bicker with one another, we judge others who come into our midst, and we get bogged down in the minutia of life not allowing God's grace to transform us and work through us.

What's up with Grace? God's grace is like a sunbeam that warms us and brings us new hope, God's grace is like a friend who stays with us through tough times in our lives, God's grace is a gift offered freely and without price. Marcus Borg, one of my favorite theologians says it well, "God accepts us....no if statement follows, despite our tendency to add one or more; we are accepted *if* we truly repent, *if* we truly believe....adding an *if* statement makes our acceptance conditional and turns forgiveness into a reward for meeting a requirement. Rather, the message of forgiveness is

unconditional grace...You are accepted...period, full stop.” The amazing thing about God’s grace is that it is a gift of love. God loves us, period.

The problem then, is that we all too often put conditional statements after the ideas of grace and salvation. Hear again these words from Paul’s letter to the Romans. *“<sup>38</sup>For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup>nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* Nothing can separate us from God’s love. Not our own insecurities, not the judgments that others make of us, not our downfalls or shortcomings or sins. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus!

God’s grace is all around us. Not because of who we are or because we deserve it, but because of who God is. God doesn’t just love us as a part of God’s action – God is love. God created us out of love, God liberated the Israelites out of love, God brought about the resurrection out of love, and God continually creates, liberates, and brings new birth out of love.

Last summer my mom preached a four part sermon series on the book, “If Grace is True.” And in one of the sermons she shared a beautiful illustration from a book by Parker Palmer. I want to share that illustration with you this morning. A three year old girl’s parents had just had a second child, a baby boy for this young girl. When her parents brought her new brother home from the hospital she told them that she wanted to spend some time in her baby brothers’ room with him, alone, with the door shut. At first her parents were hesitant about this, not knowing what their daughter might be up to. They thought about it though and decided it would be important to honor their daughter’s

request – after all they’d be able to listen to everything through the baby monitor in the room. So the young girl went into her brother’s room and shut the door behind her. The parents, listening through the monitor, heard their daughter walk toward the crib, climb up on a stool, and whisper to her baby brother, “Tell me about God...I’ve almost forgotten.”

“Tell me about God...I’ve almost forgotten.” As soon as we are born into this world we are sent messages about the things we need to do and have to be accepted and loved. All too often these messages can taint our understanding of God and allow us to forget who God is and how God loves us. The world today is full of people like this young girl, yearning to be reminded what God is like, fearful that they’ve nearly forgotten. It is our task as the church in the world today to help people remember what God is like.

Grace is true. God loves us unconditionally. God accepts us, forgives us, and loves us. Not because of who we are or what we do, but because of who God is. So, if Grace is true... what would and should the church look like? This is the question that we’ll spend some more time talking about next Sunday.

This coming week I want to challenge you to keep that question at the front of your mind though. If Grace is true, what should the church look like? And in these coming weeks I challenge you to use God’s gift of imagination to imagine all that Ridge UMC could be doing in the world. As you do this I challenge you to remember that God loves you unconditionally. Imagine what a difference we could make in the world if we began to truly experience and live that love and to share it with the world around us!