

October 8th, 2006

IF GRACE IS TRUE

“What Are We Supposed to do With Grace?”

Jeff Clinger

Romans 8:26-28

“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”

This morning we move into part two of our conversation about the idea “If Grace is true.” Last week we talked about God’s grace, God’s unconditional love for us, God’s acceptance of us exactly as we are – you know, all the feel good warm and fuzzy stuff. Seriously though, last weeks message is hugely important, that we are all loved by God, unconditionally. I hope and pray that you are all able to understand and experience at least a little bit of what that means in your life.

As I closed last week I left you with a question to ponder for the week. Does anyone remember what that question was? That’s right, If Grace is true, what should the church look like? And I pushed even further in a couple of the services asking, “If Grace is true, what should we look like as Christians, what should our lives look like? Did anyone spend some time pondering those questions this last week? What should the church look like...? What should our own lives look like...? Feel free to continue pondering these questions in the coming days and weeks and really, for the rest of your life. They are the toughest questions that Christians and Christian Churches are going to have to answer as we move further into the 21st century. And these are the questions that we’re going to talk about and wrestle with today especially as we continue to imagine all that Ridge UMC could be as we all grow in our stewardship, financially and otherwise.

Last week as we began talking about the idea of Grace, the greatest gift that God has given us, we looked at a clip from last year's hit movie, "Walk the Line" the story of Johnny and June Carter Cash. In the clip we watched last week Johnny is waking up from a time of personal detox and as the sun shines in on his face and birds sing outside the window June is sitting there offering him something to eat, kind words, and encouragement. She explains that in spite of all of the bad things he has done, he is still a good man and that God is offering him a second chance. As that brief clip ended last week Johnny and June are standing outside a church as singing comes from inside. Does anyone remember what's happening as they stand there?

As Johnny and June stand outside the church Johnny doesn't seem to want to go in. He has responded to the grace offered by June and by God, but he doesn't seem to want to go to church. In fact, if you remember the clip, he seems downright uncomfortable with the idea of going into the church. June has to assure him that everything is going to be ok and then grab his hand to physically lead him into the church. As I shared last week, my hunch is that Johnny had been burned by some good hearted church folks at one point or another and so the church didn't seem to be a place to go and experience or grow in grace. This lack of gracefulness in churches is a big problem.

I'm hesitant to do this, but I'm going to ask a couple of questions and would like to ask you to respond by raising your hands. First of all, please raise your hand if you have ever encountered a crabby, judgmental, negative person, seen someone talk bad behind another person's back, or heard people complain about someone else in a church. It could be any church at any point in your life, but please raise a hand if you've ever

encountered these types of things in a church? And hold those hands up there so everyone can take a look around and see how many hands are up. Now, this is really the question I hesitate to ask. Would you please raise your hands if you have ever encountered or heard about this negative, crabby, judgmental type of person here at Ridge UMC. Again, hold them up there and take a minute to look around.

If Grace is true, what should the church look like? How should we live our lives as individuals and corporately as a church? I believe that if everyone believed Grace to be true, truly believed in God's unconditional love, forgiveness, and acceptance, that there wouldn't be so many hands raised when I asked those questions. But those hands did go up. So, what do we do about that as people of faith?

The problem as I see it is this. God's grace in and of itself isn't enough to dictate how we interact with one another as human beings. We have been given free will and so what truly dictates our treatment of others is how we respond to the gift of God's grace. We can choose to take God's gift of grace for granted or we can choose to let it transform us and share it with the world around us. Let me share two stories that illustrate these two options well.

The first, a story about the sad reality of people taking God's grace for granted, has to do with a community ministry in Lawrence, KS. My home church, Lawrence First United Methodist, was involved for several years with a really great ministry called the Jubilee Café. The café was a ministry for homeless persons, but it was set up differently than your standard soup kitchen. On Friday mornings persons who were homeless could come in, sit down at a table, order what they would like for breakfast, and be served. When it started the ministry was housed in the Episcopal church across the street from

our church. After being there for several years it outgrew the available space in that church and so Lawrence First, which had a larger fellowship hall, was asked if they could host it. It was still going to be staffed by volunteers that would come in, they simply needed a place to host the café.

A meeting was called to discuss the possibility of our church hosting the café. As people from the church sat and talked about the pros and cons of hosting this ministry a woman spoke up and asked a simple question, “what would happen if one of them needed to use the bathroom?” The person running the meeting responded by saying that anyone who was involved with Jubilee Café would be welcome to use the church’s restrooms. This response didn’t go over too well with the woman who had initially asked the question. She didn’t like the idea of “them” or “those people” using the church’s restrooms. While she didn’t say it in so many words, the implication of her response was this – it is fine for us to be involved in serving those homeless persons, but opening up our doors, extending hospitality, and – heaven forbid – having them use our restrooms was not something she wanted to see happen.

Now if you ask this woman’s family or her friends whether or not she was a kind and gracious person they might have told you that she was. But, for as nice and caring as this woman might have been to her friends, to her family, to other people at church, in this particular instance she could not see past a barrier that kept her from extending God’s grace to all people.

The other story I want to share this morning is a beautiful illustration of a person living out God’s grace when it would have been much easier not to. I heard this story earlier this week and I absolutely love it! Before I tell the whole story I want to make

sure that you have a small piece of background though. Petey is a young man from Latvia who has been to the United States to stay with the McNurlans several times through a program called Healing the Children. Petey has no hands and is here currently so that he can receive prosthetic hands. Last week he was here – a lot – helping sort rummage and get things ready for the sale. Ok, back to the story!

Last Saturday during the rummage sale there was a woman who was shopping and had parked her car so that it was blocking some traffic in the parking lot. Chuck, our custodian who was helping with the sale, asked her if she could please move it. She did so, begrudgingly, and actually ended up moving it to a worse spot. Chuck approached her again and asked her if she could move it again, explaining that if she wanted to get things loaded up she could pull it right up under the overhang and load there.

The woman acting very unhappy with Chuck, moved her car a second time. As Chuck carried some of this woman's rummage out to her car for her he heard her grumbling to a friend about how ridiculous it was that she had to move her car. She was being negative and cranky and so as Chuck handed her some things to put in her car he said, "excuse me ma'am, did you see the young man when you were inside; the one who doesn't have any hands? He has been here all day Wednesday, all day Thursday, all day Friday and now today helping sort things and get them ready for this sale. And he has been smiling the whole time. Do you know why he's so happy? It's because Jesus loves him. And Jesus loves you too." And Chuck turned to walk away. As he did the woman was shocked, but said in a low and sincere voice, "I'm sorry."

Now, if we were to ask Chuck's wife if he was always gracious and kind and patient she would probably laugh and tell us stories of times that he hasn't been. But,

while there might be some people who live almost entirely in one of these ways or another, the reality is that we all make these choices daily and sometimes we are more gracious than others. Our call as Christians though is to always be mindful of the grace that God gives to us so that we can be gracious in dealing with others.

Bad things happen in the world around us: frustrating things, annoying things, things that make us uncomfortable. We can't control that for a minute, it's the reality of life. What we can control however is how we're going to respond. We can respond with negativity and pessimism, we can gripe and complain and be ungracious or we can respond with Grace. It's a choice that each and every one of us has to make a million times over in our lives. I found myself this week thinking about those Amish families in Lancaster County, PA. They are asking people to forgive the man who held their children hostage and then murdered them. I don't think I could do that, I don't think I would be as able to respond with grace if put in their position. They, however, are responding with grace – they have made a choice.

This idea of our freedom to respond to the world is a big part of what Paul is addressing in his letter to the Romans. In chapter 8:26-28 Paul says, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." All things work together for good for those who love God...

This text is often read to mean that if you love God, God will bring good things into your life. This is an incomplete and superficial understanding of what Paul is saying here. These words were written during a time when 97% of the population was living in poverty. Paul was not implying that if a person loved God, God would bring them out of poverty and miraculously change the world. The core of what he is trying to get across is this. When we love God, when we see God's goodness in the world around us, when we understand the gift of God's grace and love in our lives, then we are able to see God at work for good in the midst of all the junk of life. When we love God and make that our priority in all of our interactions with others we can begin to see that God is at work for good in all things.

When we let our lives be transformed by God's grace and love the way in which we respond to things in the world around us begins to change. We can begin to let go of minor concerns, we can appreciate the beauty of the world and God's presence all around us, we can give joyously and freely of our prayers, our presence, our gifts, and our service knowing that God is at work for good and appreciating the goodness of God. Imagine what our church could look like if we were to let go of the small battles and squabbles that so often consume us. Imagine what Ridge Church could look like if we began to truly embody, live, and share God's grace.

A very real part of responding to God's grace in our lives is by giving back to God through the church a portion of all that God has given to us. Bishop Coyner has asked pastors in Indiana to preach about tithing today. While I didn't want to spend the entire sermon doing so, I think it is important to mention as we close. In my mind the deepest issue of faithfulness and stewardship is the issue of how we respond to God's

grace in our lives. However, the issue of dollars and cents does need to be talked about in relationship to our life together as a church.

Last week you received a letter from John Mybeck that included a flyer that Nancy Caddick designed to share some information that I thought was very important. If you haven't taken the time to read those pieces please do. Giving of our financial resources back to God through the church is a huge part of stewardship. And the expectation in the United Methodist Church is that we will tithe – return ten percent of our income to the church. However, if you're not already tithing, it is not something that you're likely to jump into. Intentional steps need to be taken to move in that direction though and I challenge you to find a way to do that this year, to respond to God's goodness by taking an intentional forward step toward a tithe.

This coming week you will get a letter in the mail from Dick Jones that talks about the importance of giving in all four areas of our lives; prayers, presence, gifts, and service. Enclosed with that letter will be a pledge card and a copy of the 2007 proposed budget for the church. Imagine what 2007 could look like for Ridge UMC if we were able to fully fund our budget through the tithes and gifts of our members and friends. Imagine what our ministries could look like if instead of rummage sales and fish fry's, and pork chop dinners to raise money we were able to hold more all church events to celebrate, to reach out into the community, to imagine and vision what more we could be doing with the gifts that God has given us.

God's grace is true. God loves us unconditionally and with great hope for the people we might be. We are called to share that grace, that love and that hope with the world. Imagine if we all understood all that we have to be gifts from God. Imagine what

we could do if we began to respond to life and to one another positively rather than negatively. Imagine what could happen if culture and attitude began to shift. It could be contagious! Grace is true! Please continue to prayerfully consider what our church should look like and what our lives should look like since we believe this. Imagine the possibilities!