

Games and Grace

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Texts: Ephesians 2:1-10, John 3: 14-21

Oh my goodness. Every word that makes my teeth itch, as my mom used to say – every word that makes me squirm is in these two passages that were our lessons for this morning.

The reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians starts right out with all those negative words; trespasses, sins, disobedience, passions of the flesh, desires of the flesh and senses, children of wrath and then trespasses again. We have difficulty thinking about ourselves in these terms. We want to say, "Yes, I disobey. I know I'm not perfect but I don't think I'm only about sins and trespasses. I lose my temper now and again but surely I am not simply a child of wrath." And the passage from John ends on a rather somber if not completely frightening note. "People loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil." Are we only about evil deeds? Do we always prefer the darkness?

Why even the words that we might put on the positive side of the ledger can present some difficulty; "By grace you have been saved through faith, by grace you have been saved." Just what does it mean to be saved by grace? In fact, what does it mean to be saved?

And then our second lesson includes that verse that appears on signs at nearly every athletic event. John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whosoever believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." I think the signs have been banned at most golf matches, but you used to see them behind the person who was lining up a putt. John 3:16 proclaim the signs. "For God so loved the world..."

Signs appear behind the goal posts at football games so that every attempted field goal, every point after touchdown shows the viewers John 3:16. At baseball games, it is not as frequent but still occasionally it appears. John 3:16. "God so loved the world..." Somebody, or more likely, several somebodies seem to believe that of all the verses in all the books of this collection, this library called the Bible, the one that is essential is John 3:16.

Now, before we look at what that verse says, let me tell you that I am quite uncomfortable with that way of taking a single text and thinking that it contains all the good news of God's love for this world. I want to hear the history and the poetry, the songs and the prayers, the letters and the prophecies, the dreams and the stories. I want to read again and again all the writings that communities of faith saved over the years to express their thoughts and feelings about their relationship with the one who gave them life.

Maybe we should get seats in the end zone and hold up a sign that says, "Read the Bible" or "Genesis through Revelation." But the fact of the matter is that even the entire Bible,

apocrypha and all, even all the writings ever written cannot capture all there is to tell about humanity's relationship with our creator. All of what we say, all of what we write, all the expressions in all the languages of the world only give a hint of the amazing story that we are loved by the creator of this world. So since all these expressions only hint at God's great love, I suppose it is always possible to pick one and see it as holding some bit of imagery, some seed ... not the whole bouquet or even a complete single flower. And John 3:16 is as good as any other and probably more powerful than many.

Even the editors of the lectionary seem to see in this verse a foundational concept, an idea that is at the very center of our faith. The lectionary is that listing of bible passages that is laid out for each year and repeats every three years. The idea is that by following the readings of the lectionary in the service of worship a broad representation of biblical theology will be heard. But this verse John 3:16 appears every year at least once and it usually is right in the center of Lent. It is as if we cannot understand the happenings of Holy Week, unless we hear clearly what this verse is saying. We cannot take in the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus if we do not know that "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son..."

That being said, let's take a few minutes to look at this verse that is so ubiquitous at all kinds of games and sporting events. "For God so loved the world..." From the outset this verse emphasizes the love of God for the world- not just a portion of the world, not just the ones who look and behave in ways that others find pleasing, not even just the ones who act in ways consistent with what God desires. "God so loved the world" This throws us back to those terms that made my teeth itch. God so loved the sinners, the trespassers, the disobedient ones, even the children of wrath... God so loved us all. This is what makes this verse a basic building block of our faith. It begins with the love of God and says... *that* love is not dependent on what we do or say or even think. It does not depend on us at all. The focus is not on us. The focus is on the nature of God, the amazing, sustaining, surprising, consistent love of God. And there we have perhaps in overly simplified terms, the definition of grace. We are saved, that is we are brought into relationship with God, we are made whole not by what we do but by who God is.

Frederick Buechner in a wonderful little book called *Wishful Thinking*, with the appropriate sub-title *A Theological ABC* describes grace more poetically and probably more accurately than I can. He writes:

"After centuries of handling and mishandling, most religious words have become so shopworn nobody's much interested any more. Not so with grace, for some reason. Mysteriously, even derivatives like gracious and graceful have some of the bloom left. Grace is something you can never get but only be given. There is no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream (you know these are Beuchner's words rather than mine because I would have said chocolate chip cookies and milk). There is no way to earn grace or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth. A good sleep is grace and so are good dreams. Most tears are grace. Somebody loving you is grace. Loving somebody is grace. Have you ever tried to love somebody? A crucial eccentricity of the Christian faith is the assertion that

people are saved by grace. (Now listen to Beuchner's amazing and interesting emphasis on three different words in the same sentence) There is nothing you have to do. There is nothing you have to do. There is nothing you have to do.

“The grace of God means something like this: God says, Here is your life. You might never have been but you are because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you.”

In just a few minutes we will be welcoming into this community of faith five babies. We will promise Lucas and Lyla and Matthew and two Olivias that we will show them God's love. It will be a long, long time before any of these little ones will be able to read the Bible, or understand and discuss what any verse or word means. They won't even be able to read those big signs held up at football games. John 3:16. “For God so loved the world...”

But we will promise to show them and all the little ones who have come before them and will come after them what it means that God so loved the world.

As Fredrick Beuchner so powerfully stated, there is nothing we have to do to receive the gift of God's gracious love. But I would argue that there is something we have to do in response to that gift. And together as a community of faith, we must find the myriad of loving responses. We have to respond by showing God's love, to these little ones, to those we come across who are lonely or grieving, to those who are hungry or homeless, to those who are oppressed or marginalized, even to those who are called enemy.

For God so loved the world. There is something we have to do. For God so loved the world. There is something we have to do. For God so loved the world. There is something we have to do.