

The Church Needs Grace

I want to start out today by reading a story from Brennan Manning's book The Ragamuffin Gospel:

On a sweltering summer night in New Orleans, sixteen recovering alcoholics and drug addicts gather for their weekly AA meeting. Although several members attend other meetings during the week, this is their home group. They have been meeting on Tuesday nights for several years and know each other well. Some talk to each other daily on the telephone, others socialize outside the meetings. The personal investment in one another's sobriety is sizeable. Nobody fools anybody else. Everyone is there because he or she made a slobbering mess of his or her life and is trying to put the pieces back together. Each meeting is marked by levity and seriousness. Some members are wealthy, others middle class or poor. Some smoke, others don't. Most drink coffee. Some have graduate degrees, others have not finished high school. For one small hour the high and the mighty descend and the lowly rise. The result is fellowship.

The meeting opened with the Serenity Prayer followed by a moment of silence. The prologue to Alcoholics Anonymous was read from the Big Book by Harry followed by the Twelve Steps of the program from Michelle. That night Jack was the appointed leader. "The theme I would like to talk about tonight is gratitude," he began, "but if anyone wants to talk about something else, let's hear it." Immediately Phil's hand shot up. "As you all know, last week I went up to Pennsylvania to visit family and missed the meeting. You also know I have been sober for seven years. Last Monday I got drunk and stayed drunk for five days." The only sound in the room was the drip of Mr. Coffee in the corner. "You all know the buzz word: H.A.L.T., in the program," he continued. "Don't let yourself get hungry, angry, lonely or tired or you will be very vulnerable for the first drink. The last three got to me. I unplugged the jug and ..." Phil's voice choked and he lowered his head. I glanced around the table - moist eyes, tears of compassion, soft sobbing the only sound in the room.

"The same thing happened to me, Phil, but I stayed drunk for a year."

"Thank God you're back."

"Boy, that took a lot of guts."

"Relapse spells relief, Phil," said a substance abuse counselor. "Let's get together tomorrow and figure out what you needed relief from and why."

"I'm so proud of you."

"Hell, I never made it close to seven years."

As the meeting ended, Phil stood up. He felt a hand on his shoulder, another on his face ...

"You old ragamuffin," said Denise. Let's go. I'm treating you to a banana split at Tastee-Freeze."

That is grace at work, not in a church, not among people who are making an attempt to follow Jesus, but in a group of people who support each other in their personal battles with addiction.

Brennan Manning moves on from that story to tell another one - this time taking place at Loyola University, a Catholic institution in New Orleans. Dr. Meghan McKenna was lecturing in her class at Loyola in the summer of 1981 and one of her students was named Roslyn. The lecture concerned the different groups at play in Judaism during the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. She talked about how the Pharisees separated themselves from every other group on the grounds that others didn't obey the traditions of the Jewish elders the way the Pharisees did. She outlined how the Sadducees were separated by their wealth and the power of their position, the Zealots by their exclusive hatred of the Romans and willingness to risk their lives to undo Roman rule in Judea and the Essenes who kept to themselves out in the deserts near the Dead Sea and considered everyone else as the sons of darkness.

At the end of class she conducted an experiment to illustrate these 'separations' in Judaism. She asked all those who had never smoked to stand to one side, those who were 'reformed' smokers to stand in the middle and those who still smoked to stand to the other side. There were 30 non-smokers, 12 of the reformed variety and 3 who still smoked.

The teacher asked two questions: 1. How do you feel about the current campus rules regarding smoking?, which everyone seemed to be fine with, and 2. How do you feel about smokers personally? Here, the tone changed and words like 'disgusting' and 'inconsiderate' and 'low self-esteem' and 'lousy role models' came from the non-smoking portion of the room. People from the reformed smokers group were more understanding and compassionate, but the three smokers, including Roslyn, felt isolated and attacked. She said, "I covered against the far wall feeling like the woman caught in adultery. Suddenly, the environment was so hostile. For the past four years of graduate school, I had prayed, worshiped, gone on picnics, taken coffee breaks, studied and conversed with these people. I felt a deep sense of bonding because of our shared life and ministry ... At first, I was angry. When the inner rage finally subsided, I wanted to weep. I have never felt so alone."

The next day the teacher asked the students how they now felt about the exercise they had gone through at yesterday's class. One of the harshest people said that she realized that she needed a lot more compassion for people who were different from her. The teacher asked Roslyn, "And how did you feel yesterday?"

"When I was standing against the wall, I actually thought the group #1 people would have thrown stones at us were they available. I realized how difficult it was for me to look at them and say, 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do.'"

What set Christians apart from the surrounding Jewish and pagan cultures of the Greco-Roman world was the grace that they extended - to widows, to orphans, to abandoned infants, to the destitute, to the despised, to the marginalized. But when the church grew in power and influence, it became more and more like the world it had so powerfully impacted when it was weak and despised and persecuted.

Think for a minute about how Jesus operated during His time on earth and how the early church followed His example. Then think about what is lost when we operate from within the power structures of the world, when we use the tools of political influence and big money in order to get our way.

Seventeen years after he published his book, What's so Amazing About Grace? Philip Yancey wrote another book on a related theme. He called it, Vanishing Grace: What Ever Happened to the Good News? In it, he raises some important questions and issues for us to think about. For example, he says that in all the times he has asked people, "Tell me the first word that comes to your mind when I say *Christian*," not one time has someone suggested the word "love". Yet, if we know Jesus' teaching and the life of the early church, we know that that's the right answer. Why aren't people seeing that?

One person who was able to see it was the woman whose case became famously known as "Roe vs. Wade". In 1995, both sides in the culture wars were shocked to learn that Norma Leah McCorvey, a.k.a. "Jane Roe" had converted to Christ, got baptized and joined the pro-life campaign. How did that happen? It turns out that the primary human instrument in her conversion was the director of the anti-abortion group Operation Rescue. He stopped publicly calling her a baby killer and stopped treating her as an enemy. He spent time with her during her smoking breaks in the parking lot of the building where both of them worked (although in separate offices). Finally, it was a 7-year-old girl who invited her to church.

We may from time to time have enemies, but we're not supposed to keep them as enemies. When that happened in Norma McCorvey's life, she accepted an invitation to become a new person in Christ. Can you guess who has been the most central figure in the call to loving our enemies in the past 70 years? Let me read to you from a sermon written by one candidate, Martin Luther King Jr. while he served time in jail following the Montgomery bus boycott:

To our most bitter opponents we say: "Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws because non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. Throw us in jail and we shall still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process and our victory will be a double victory."

That's the glorious history of the Christian church during the days of persecution under the Emperors of Rome. It's the history of the American Civil Rights movement, led prominently by Christian pastors. It's the history of the expansion of the church in

China and in many other places around the world where the followers of Jesus have been persecuted.

I want to look briefly at three very short passages of Scripture today - in fact, two of the three are only one verse long. I'll start with the longer passage from the Gospel of John:

We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth ... From the fullness of His grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Messiah. (John 1:14,16,17)

Notice what John wants to emphasize about knowing, about seeing, the presence of God in the person of Jesus: glory and grace and truth. But through these three verses, grace shines through. The word is repeated three times and tells us in unmistakable force: Jesus brings the Father's grace to a humanity that is in need of one blessing after another. That's what we get in Jesus.

The second verse is from Colossians 4, verse 6:

Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

Whether we're talking to people inside the church or to people outside the church, wouldn't it be wonderful if our conversations were always full of grace? What a difference it would make to how the world outside perceives the message of the Gospel if we would only show grace to people with whom we differ. When we speak judgment and condemnation to people, they don't know how to take it - partly because in their world there is no condemnation for what they're doing - but they do know what our intention is. We're trying to alienate them, cut them off from the Good News, make them feel unworthy and unlovable. Let's not do that, ever.

The third passage is from 1 Peter, chapter 4, verse 10:

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.

And then Peter goes on to explain:

If anyone speaks they should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Messiah. (v. 11)

The central theme in those three passages seems, at least to me, to be that Jesus came to us in a spirit of great grace, great acceptance and love, and now He expects us to extend that grace to others, both within the church and outside of it. We serve others using the gracelets, or spiritual gifts, that He has given to us. And we speak to others in conversations that are marked by grace, by compassion, by understanding and hope. What we receive from Jesus, which is marked by grace and glory and truth, we pass on to others and, in the process, Peter tells us, in all things God will be praised through Jesus. This is the life vision of the person who has fallen in love with

Jesus and who wants to please Him with the way we live. So let's look at how we can be grace-bearers to a world around us that knows very little about grace.

I want to illustrate what we can do, rather than simply explain it. Stories have the power to touch us in a deeper way, in a more personal way, than logic and argument can. So, as you listen to these stories, ask yourself what you would do in a similar situation, or just ask yourself how you feel about the things you are hearing.

In his book Blue Like Jazz, Donald Miller tells of setting up a confession booth at the liberal university he attended in Oregon. He and a group of fellow Christians staffed the booth in the midst of a raucous campus festival notorious for its drunkenness and debauchery. In a surprising twist, though, the Christians used the booth as a way of confessing their own sins to the skeptical students who wandered by. They apologized for the mistakes of the church and for the ways in which they personally had failed to live out what they believed.

As Miller confessed to one startled curiosity-seeker, "Jesus said to feed the poor and heal the sick. I have never done very much about that. Jesus said to love those who persecute me. I tend to lash out, especially if I feel threatened, you know, if my ego gets threatened. Jesus did not mix His spirituality with politics. I grew up doing that. It got in the way of the central message of Christ. I know that was wrong, and I know that a lot of people will not listen to the words of Christ because people like me, who know Him, carry our own agendas into the conversation rather than just relaying the message Christ would want to get across."

Over the next several hours Miller and his friends spoke to scores of fellow students. "Many wanted to hug when we were done," he wrote. "All of the people who visited the booth were grateful and gracious. I was being changed through the process."

Like that story, this next one is also told by Philip Yancey in Vanishing Grace:

For a number of years Craig Detweiler has been bringing his communications students from Biola University and Pepperdine University to the Sundance Film Festival, the premier showcase for independent films. One year Sundance featured a sold-out showing of a movie scathing in its portrayal of American evangelicals . . . The Sundance audience laughed uproariously throughout the film, relishing the depiction of Christians as repressed, intolerant, even homicidal. The director received a standing ovation and fielded questions from the audience. Someone asked if any conservative Christians had seen it. "I'm ready for that fight," he declared, prompting more applause. Without thinking Craig Detweiler stood to his feet with a response, and what follows is in his own words:

"I struggled to compose my words. My voice cracked slightly. I eked out, 'Jay, thank you for this film. As a native of North Carolina, a fellow filmmaker, and an evangelical Christian ...'

I never use the word evangelical. It is so loaded with negative baggage that I usually attempt to distance myself from such associations. But in this instance, it seemed quite right. I was speaking for my community, responding to a particular stance we'd staked out for ourselves. Jay stepped back, ready for that fight. He tensed up, preparing to

launch a counterattack. The crowd sense that things were about to get ugly. My next words caught them off guard:

'Jay, I apologize for anything ever done to you in the name of God.'

The entire tenor in the room shifted. Audience members turned around. 'Did I hear that correctly?' They craned their necks. 'Who said that?' Jay fumbled for words, not knowing how to respond. He was ready to be attacked. He was not prepared for an apology. He offered a modest, 'Thank-you'. The audience was literally disarmed.

Audience members approached me afterward with hugs. A lesbian couple thanked me ... One person said, "If that is true, I might consider giving Christianity another chance." Tears were shed far and wide. All it took were two little words: "I apologize". He went on to describe the opportunities for building relationships with cast, the producer, others about our faith and the life of following Jesus.

We are called as Christians to be light in a dark world. Too often we have thought of that as cursing the darkness, calling it out, blaming it. But light doesn't do any of those things - it simply shines with truth. We are called to grace, to show the Father's love to a world in need; let's pick up that call and run with it.