

Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Before I came to St. Thomas', I was at one of the largest Episcopal churches in the state of Arkansas. Now, before you get too impressed, remember, we're talking about Episcopal Churches and we're talking about Arkansas. Christ Church is a great Episcopal church. They have a reputation for being welcoming and open and inclusive. If there's one thing they preach more than anything else, it's grace. Grace is one of those Christian concepts we've heard a million times but for non-churchy folks or maybe for long term pew sitters that've misplaced a thought or two in their memory, "grace is God's favor towards us, unearned and undeserved," says the Book of Common Prayer. Oh yeah, all of us preachers leaned heavily on God's grace in our sermons. We leaned on it so much that one astute parishioner jokingly accused us of using grace as a sort of theological get-out-of-jail-free card.

As far as grace goes, it's one of my favorite and least favorite concepts all at the same time. See, it's awesome to know that God's love for me doesn't depend on how much I mess up, because let's be honest, I'm gonna mess up. And sometimes it's really nice to know that God's love for the people I love doesn't depend on how much they mess up either. But you know what? If I'm not watching myself, I gotta be real careful about how much I want God's love for the people I don't love to depend on them. I know, it's not great. It's not even all that fair. I mean, that's the beautiful thing about grace, right? It's inherently not fair: we get what we don't deserve in spite of all the reasons we don't deserve it. And we all do, every single person. It's not fair, but it's also unimaginably fair. From a theological standpoint, I think most folks love the idea and really struggle with the implications. How many twitter posts got mad about student loan forgiveness or federal marijuana pardons? I mean, sure, we can debate all day long the ins and outs of societal implications and if you look at it this way or look at it that way. But if we're talking in the eyes of God and at the gates of Heaven, God's grace extends every which way, whether we like it or not. Now, that kind of preaching can get a preacher in the Bible Belt into some trouble. Never up here in the enlightened North, though, right? See, the division can even go that way. God's grace is just a little more graceful wherever I happen to find myself, and maybe a little less graceful everywhere else. So we think.

Well, way down at Christ Church, that amazing parish in Little Rock, they had a funny moment in their history. That church was the oldest Episcopal congregation in the whole diocese, and in its history, it burned down twice. The original building had a dark brick edifice and towering steeple, and somehow in the 1870s, it burned to the ground. The church mustered their savings and rallied the people, and together with the leadership of the Women's Guild, they rebuilt, brick by brick, the exact same building. The exact same building which, in time, burned to the ground again. Faced with a clear sign from the architectural gods, the new architect made an offer. We can either rebuild exactly as before *again*, or we can design a building meant for music. Thank God, they chose the latter. To this day, that building is one of the most acoustically impressive spaces I've ever been.

But here's where it gets fun, and maybe where those folks, bless their hearts, forgot about grace. When the architect gave the proposal to *change* the design of the building from the fire-prone to the musically profound, people lost their minds. The sticking point, apparently, was that the exterior would no longer be dark brick. In the new design, it would be locally quarried limestone. For months, the old vestry minutes reported arguments between the "Brickies" and the "Stoners." And no, I'm not making those names up. You know it's bad when the minutes themselves make you uncomfortable. There was no reading between the lines needed. The Brickies and the Stoners dug in hard, the construction wore on, and before the building was finished, the Brickies took half the congregation and their pledges with them to the Episcopal church a few blocks away... a church with, of course, a dark brick facade. It's ridiculous, right? It gets worse: this second construction period

was happening in the early 1940s. While the rest of the world tore itself to pieces, while resources were scarce and rationing was in full effect, while Rosie was Riveting, this church in Little Rock forgot the purpose of their place in the world in exchange for going at their neighbors' throats. Never mind the grace we talk about every week, God surely can't be worshiped in a *stone* building, I mean really.

I wonder why that one leper in Luke turned around to say thank you. And I wonder about Jesus giving up everything he had to give while us people wrangle over words and building materials and whatever other teapot tempests we can come up with. And more than them, I wonder about Jeremiah who, after his whole world burns before him, turns to his people and tells them to get on with life. Love where you live, till the ground, seek the welfare of your new city. That's God's grace interrupting whatever distractions have us all hung up, undeserved and unearned. Of course, God loves both the Brickies and the Stoners, of course God does. But could the Brickies and the Stoners ever love each other? Christ Church these days seems to have learned their lesson. They look back at those construction days as a funny goof in their history, but they've paid attention. That old fight is done, mercifully, and instead of looking to new things to argue about, they've leaned into grace. Of course, none of us will ever reflect the same grace God does, of course not. But they sure do their best to try. They're known throughout that city as a place where people can go that need help, even Samaritans. They are a safe haven for the queer community. Artists and racial justice workers and community organizers line the pews alongside National Guardsmen, police officers, and more than a few farmers. And when they argue these days, and they do, it's not over things like bricks or stones, it's over things like how many people can we really feed with only six pots of chili on the stove. God's grace is an amazing thing to believe, but impossible to emulate fully. Nearly every single one of us has a line where it starts to get hard, a line where God's grace sure sounded like a good idea up until we got to here, wherever here is. Nevermind the poor, the hungry, the orphan, the Brickies or the Stoners.

I guess what I'm ultimately getting at is an issue of perspective. I can't imagine a greater perspective than the perspective God has, maybe that's why grace is so universally given. Zoom in on our lives, and most of our frustrations aren't all that big. Yes, we have real problems, and yes the world has real need. And yes, sometimes folks do awful things. But maybe living out grace asks us to zoom back out a little bit. When the picture gets bigger, how much does the crux of this particular, whatever it is, how much does this issue matter? Will the future church roll their eyes and chuckle at what we're getting tied up on now? Maybe. Or maybe they'll be glad we put our energy here, or out in the community, or among the underserved. God's grace is God's favor towards us, unearned and undeserved. But that doesn't mean we can't try.