MESSIAH COLLEGE
CHAPEL ADDRESS
Kim S. Phipps, President
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“GRACIOUS CHRISTIANITY”

Introduction

◦ Play the Pedro the Lion song – “Slow and Steady Wins the Race”

All the way to grandma’s house
I stayed on the narrow path
But my brother wandered off
Deep into the wood
Bitten twice by rattle snakes
Tangled up in poison oak
He fell down and broke his legs
Into a great ravine
When I arrived at grandma’s house
She had made us tea and cake
She asked me where my brother was
I said I don’t know and ate
When I get to heaven
I’ll be greeted warmly
Surrounded by the angels
As Jesus takes my hand
I’ll receive a mansion
On the river Jordan
And a crown of diamonds
For a race well run
I won’t ever lock my doors
I will trust my neighbors
Confident that they deserve
To be there in heaven too

◦ The narrator tells us that he successfully completed the journey to Grandma’s house so that he could indulge in a feast of tea and cake. He was so busy concentrating on the race and the narrow path, he didn’t notice the tragedy that befell his brother – the narrator failed to look beyond his own selfish interests – he failed to be his brother’s keeper.

◦ The final lyrics of the song describe the narrator as sitting there smugly eating cake and drinking tea – certain he will get to heaven where of course, he deserves to be, accompanied by his neighbors – who are the right kind of people! The song raises a few questions: does anyone truly deserve to “get to heaven?” Are we so focused on our own personal salvation that we often fail to live out our faith by caring for our neighbors – our brothers and sisters? Have we forgotten the theology of grace – no one deserves the gift of salvation? – it is God’s gift to us and as a community of faith, we are called to share that abundant grace with others.

◦ Today, I want to talk to you about the idea of grace and the ideal of gracious Christianity.
  • Grace - the experience of receiving God’s love.
  • Graciousness – as defined by Jacobsen and Sawatsky, is “love offered truly lovingly” – often consisting of acts of small graces offered to others on a daily basis!
  • “As Christians, every one of us participates in a story of grace received and grace regifted to others.”
II. The Text: John 4:3-42 “The Samaritan woman encounters Jesus”
We will only read a portion of the story

John 4:1-24

Now when Jesus* learned that the Pharisees had heard, ‘Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John’— although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized— he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink’. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?’ (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, ‘If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, “Give me a drink”, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?’ Jesus said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Go, call your husband, and come back.’ The woman answered him, ‘I have no husband.’ Jesus said to her, ‘You are right in saying, “I have no husband”; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.’

For many of you, this is a familiar story. Jesus often taught through stories, because intellect includes imagination. This particular narrative is the longest recorded conversation of Jesus – imagine the scene with me.

The setting – Samaria – the area between Judea to the south and Galilee to the north – Jewish people would walk around Samaria for miles to avoid contact with its citizens – this was the area where the marginalized lived – people of mixed races – people who were not embraced as neighbors.

The act – it was noon – the sun was oppressively hot – the road was dusty and Jesus was bone tired! He sat down at the well and asked a Samaritan woman for a drink of water.

The context – Jesus addressed this person – this person who was not only a Samaritan but a woman (Jewish tradition was male dominated – women had few rights) – she was totally shocked by his request – by the very act of his engaging her in conversation! Why did Jesus ask her for the water? He certainly could have picked up the bucket and cared for his own thirst. But as always with Jesus – he seized this opportunity as a teachable moment.

The consequences – in an act of small grace, Jesus affirmed the human dignity of one who lived on the margin – the periphery of mainstream society. He confronted racial prejudice and gender oppression by the act of initiating the conversation. In that seemingly insignificant act, he made a significant statement about eliminating the barriers that separated and divided people – barriers based on gender, religion, ethnicity, and race.
Jesus addressed an ordinary woman – a women tending to her ordinary tasks – and the encounter resulted in deep spiritual understanding – she was drawn to this teacher and Jesus skillfully guided the woman at the well, past the limitations of religious dogma and practice to the heart of God – to the depths of grace – to “living water.”

The conversation moved from the request for water to the topic of the living water and spiritual need – Jesus confronted the woman by speaking of her past and present sin. She was frightened and confused by the accuracy of His knowledge. But He did not focus on her sin – instead he concentrated on her future – a future where she will be able to drink of living water and satisfy her spiritual thirst by participating in a loving relationship with God. Jesus’ act of small grace had sent a clear message – I don’t care that you are a Samaritan and I am a Jew. I don’t care that you are a woman and I am a man. I don’t care what your past has been. I know you, and I love you – with all your failings and flaws. She did nothing to deserve Jesus’ affirmation or His love – neither do we – but like the Samaritan woman, we are called to humbly respond to God’s grace by sharing His love with others – all people – including those who do not share our love for God and those who do not embrace our beliefs and values.

III. Question worth considering is this – has the contemporary Christian Church lost sight of God’s embracing grace? Do Christians spend more time debating issues such as the use of praise songs versus hymns in morning worship rather than actively seeking to meet the needs of others? Has the Church focused more on political agendas as she has succumbed to the seduction of political power rather than concentrating on being a witness to God’s grace and love?

◦ Students, your generation has been described by some sociologists as one that is unique and different from the self-centered, power-driven Baby Boomers and Generation X. Your generation has already demonstrated a commitment to voluntary service. On surveys and in interviews, you claim to be seeking authentic, honest, religious faith. You’ve witnessed death and destruction in the Middle East, poverty and starvation throughout the African continent, the world-wide epidemic of AIDS, the senseless violence of terrorism and the destruction of our urban and natural resources. You’ve witnessed and experienced the world’s pain and brokenness, and you have witnessed a Church that has often lost the ability to be a vibrant witness to the gospel because we have allowed our rhetoric and our actions to be characterized by divisive hatred and arrogant piety. Are you willing to set the example by living as people of conviction – committed to building community – living alongside neighbors of different faiths, perspectives, and cultural backgrounds – seeking understanding and demonstrating respect, not in spite of your Christian faith but precisely because of your Christian faith? Because you know – and I know – that our understanding is limited and we certainly do not deserve God’s grace, but we humbly wrap ourselves in God’s embrace and our response of obedience must be to embrace others – to extend hospitality and compassion to all those people with whom we have contact – to act as Jesus acted toward the Samaritan woman!

◦ In the midst of daily tasks and ordinary responsibilities – we must diligently look for opportunities to extend grace to others. St. Francis de Sales – a 16th century priest in the city of Geneva – wrote about “little virtues” – he reminded us “that we are all made in the image and likeness of God – thus we are all made in the image of one another.” We may not always find opportunities for “high profile” or greater virtues – but all of us have opportunities to nurture the little virtues in our lives: virtues such as humility, service, and gentleness. St. Francis de Sales suggested that the consistent practice of these virtues will ultimately draw us closer to our God – our Creator and Redeemer. Practicing these little virtues will enable us to live as gracious Christians in our communities – in a world that desperately longs for compassion and love. We must follow the way of Jesus – His example of extending extraordinary grace to the Samaritan woman in the midst of her ordinary daily tasks. Elizabeth Canham reminds us that “ . . . people do not enter our lives to be coerced or manipulated, but to enrich us by their differences, and to be graciously received in the name of Christ.”

Conclusion

- Jacobsen and Sawatsky note that “Christians currently account for almost one-third of the world’s people, two billion out of a global population of just over six billion. If the faith professed by those two billion Christians became even a little more gracious, the dynamics of the world community could be changed dramatically for the better.”

- Rodney James Sawatsky – was the 7th president of Messiah College. He was a man of keen intellect, inspired vision, and profound personal faith. Through his life and his death, he incarnated more about the theology of grace than any other person I have encountered. I’ve shared this story with some of you in other venues, but I feel compelled to share it again – particularly with those of you who did not have the privilege of knowing him. After President Sawatsky retired prematurely, due to cancer, I attempted to travel to Waterloo, Canada every six weeks or so to spend time with him and his wonderful family. One evening, we sat in his home office surrounded by his beloved books, presidential robe, numerous diplomas and awards, and many other precious mementos of a life well lived – a life of a committed churchman, passionate scholar, and a transformational leader. Seated in his wheelchair, evidence of the increasing physical limitations he was experiencing, Rod told me that he did not want to die, primarily because he did not want to leave his beloved wife Lorna and his daughters – but he also said that he was ready – he was fully confident of God’s eternal promises – fully confident of God’s saving grace. Then he said something I will never forget, “God has richly blessed me because I have known love – I have been able to give love and to receive love – in the end, that’s all that truly matters.”

- President Sawatsky was correct. In the end – embracing God’s love, grace, and extending that love – graciousness – to others is what truly matters – it is not the entire gospel, but it is the heart of the gospel. Our challenge is to be faithful to the gospel as we seek to prayerfully live as gracious Christians!

- Frederick Buechner described “Grace” in this way, “‘Grace’ is like God saying this to each one of us: ‘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.’ ‘There’s only one catch,’ Buechner continues. ‘Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you’ll reach out and take it. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift, too.’” As Christians, we reach out and humbly accept God’s grace knowing that we are called to respond by graciously loving others.

- Please stand as we pray together, in unison.

  O God, you have taught us to keep all your commandments by loving you and our neighbors: Grant us the grace of your Holy Spirit, that we may be devoted to you with our whole heart, and united to others with pure affection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

- You are dismissed

Kim S. Phipps  
President  
Messiah College