

Grace, Grace, Grace, and then Finally Law

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On Psalm 1

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Scripture Introduction

Psalm 1 has an interesting history. It was likely the very last addition to what we call the Old Testament. We believe this because in the New Testament book—the Acts of the Apostles—what we know as Psalm 2 is referred to as Psalm 1. That suggests that the current Psalm 1 was added to the collection of psalms in the first century, after much of the New Testament had already been written and certainly after the fall of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70. That helps us understand the purpose of this psalm. The Psalter was originally a hymnbook—the songs to be sung in the sanctuary, but when the sanctuary (the Temple) was destroyed, what do you do with the hymnal? This psalm, the “new” Psalm 1, was appended to the beginning of the hymnbook as an introduction to the whole book, and it makes the Psalter not just a hymnal but a book appropriate for study and reflection—it refers to the Psalter as “instruction” or “law”—the word often used of the rest of Scripture. This Psalm 1 updates the Psalter, so it is still seen as useful, since you don’t need a temple to study and reflect. This translation that Tom is about to read includes some of the NRSV, but it is primarily mine with some use of an earlier, inclusive translation from 1997.

Blessed are those who the advice of the wicked neither follow,
nor in the path of sinners tread,
nor in the seat of scoffers sit;
² but in the law of the Lord is their delight,
and on God’s law they meditate day and night.

³ They are like trees planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in proper season,
and their leaves do not wither.
All that they do is good for something.

⁴ Not so, the wicked, but they are like chaff that the wind drives away.

⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
⁶ for the Lord marks the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked comes to naught.¹

Blessed are those who ... in the law of the Lord delight, and on it meditate day and night.

When we think of law, we don’t first think of delighting in it, do we?

¹ This translation is based on the NRSV. It has influences from The Inclusive Psalms, Priests for Equality, 1997, but it is my own ultimately.

Because sermons are prepared with an emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts may occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.

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When I see the law flashing red lights in my rear view mirror, I get sweaty palms... and my heart speeds up. Guilty conscience? Old habits?—I don't know, but I know that my first thought is not... delight! I don't think, "Oh, goody, here comes the law!"

Clarence Kyle was a retired police sergeant in the Oakland church. In a Bible Study once on this psalm, he volunteered that when he used to show up as the law, "Nobody was ever delighted to see me!"

Our first thoughts of the law are more likely that it is a stern voice to ... tell us what NOT to do, to correct us, to admonish us. Saturday Night Live's church lady comes to mind. She says, "Holy out your hand" and "Stop it" and slaps your hand. Thou shalt not! (slap hand) Thou shalt not! (slap hand) That's a more common view of the law.

Delight? It's just not the first thing we think, when we think of the law.

But... *blessed are those who in the law of the Lord delight, and on it meditate day and night.*

Why would one, how would one delight in the law?

The title of this sermon is "Grace, Grace, Grace, and then finally Law." That's actually an edited version of the title—the original was "Grace, Grace, Grace, Grace, Grace, Grace, Grace, Grace... Grace, and then Finally Law." We need to talk about grace before we talk about the law, if we are to understand its delight. Do you have a sense of this word grace? It is an important word—we say we are saved by grace. "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound—that saved a wretch like me."

First of all the word, grace, in its Greek root is the word *charis*—where we get the word "charisma." The Greek word means "gift." Gift. It's given. Like charismata, charisms—the gifts of the Spirit. They are freely given. Grace is something that we receive without earning or deserving. It does not come through a deal; it's not leveraged—it's a free and unfettered gift. That may be the simplest definition of grace: a free gift.

Think of Ainsley Ann this morning. She didn't do anything to get baptized. She was born, but even that was a gift. She didn't share in the deliberations with Cory and Emilie, her parents. She didn't join in and say, "Yes, that's a splendid idea. I think I'd like to be baptized." Nobody asked her. We had to carry her up to the font. We had to put the water on her. This baptism, this expression of God's love was simply given to her, as a gift: that is grace.

This is what the fine preacher Richard Lischer says about it: "...grace is not grace if its recipients must deserve it or if by their attitude or behavior they somehow set it in motion. Every attempt to impose an order of prerequisites on grace by insisting on contrition, confession, shame, and repentance or by limiting forgivable offenses to a specified number—say, seven—fails before Jesus' own example.

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“He healed some people before they asked for help. He forgave others before they repented. [And] sometimes, his kindness evoked repentance and faith, sometimes it did not. He himself died forgiving his unrepentant torturers. ... If [grace] is not free, it is not of God.”²

Free. Unbidden. It just comes. If we require someone to have some attitude or posture or (even to express their) faith in order to receive grace, we are making something we offer, our attitude, posture or faith a requirement for God to act—and we don’t have that power. God’s grace is free. The baptism of an infant is a perfect expression of that gift. As Lischer says, anything else would betray the picture of Jesus.

And it’s not just Jesus. There is a long, long tradition of grace before Jesus. Grace is the story of each Old Testament covenant. Grace. There are the three major covenants with God’s people in the Old Testament: through Noah, Abraham, and Moses. And God is the one who initiates the covenant in each case. God comes to Noah. God initiates the relationship. Noah doesn’t go around calling out, looking for God. All the text says is that “Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.”³ Noah catches God’s eye. It’s like Noah is at a party. He’s even a wallflower, trying not to be noticed, and God sees him and crosses the room to him. Noah is just there in the world, and along comes God. Same thing with Abraham and Sarah and Moses and Israel. God finds them, comes to them—with no initiative on their part: pure grace, the gift of God in their lives.

Now... clearly, God’s initiating contact isn’t the end of any of these stories at all. That’s also essential to grace. That is, the unbidden, unearned grace of God—has a corollary, a follow up. God doesn’t just come up to each of us and say, “Oh, I love you.” There’s more.

Grace is not just amnesty or forgiveness. Grace isn’t just about relieving the burden of our past. Now amnesty means that you are free of the past—*the past is finished and gone*—but grace is more than that: grace is also a beginning, a new beginning—*behold, everything is fresh and new*—not just an ending. It’s an invitation, not mere amnesty. Grace initiates covenant. Grace says, “Let that go,” and “Let me show you something, a new way.” (Ainsley Anne, obviously, has a whole future ahead of her with God, begun through grace with much more to come.)

I want to talk about how our order of worship communicates this. (Refer to Bulletin) In the Call to Confession, we try to make it very clear that we are not in control of our relationship with God. It is NOT: we confess so God will forgive—a tit for tat, a deal we make with God. No. The Call to Confession reminds us that already God loves us before we say a word. God made the deal—and that’s it: God loves us, and God already knows our hearts and our words. We are called to confession not for God’s sake, but for ours.

The speaking of our confession is really helpful to us. Confession is the sound of one hand clapping. (Hit my forehead.) Doh! “Oh, that’s what I’ve been doing!” Doh! We, Homer Simpson-like, need the clarity, the light on the things we forget or omit or commit.

² Richard Lischer, The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 2008, p. 148. The original word at the end of the quote was “reconciliation”—I don’t think this does violence to the quote.

³ Genesis 6:8

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God, on the other hand...doesn't. God already knows. Already knows our limitation, our sin. Our confessing is healing and instructive to us. It is part of the experience of light shining on our lives, speaking the truth that will set us free.

It's the sound of one hand clapping. And confession is good for the soul. It's helpful and liberating. Then we sing our sorrow or regret or failure in the Kyrie.

But then in our service after our confession ... again, the gift of forgiveness and grace is named right away—the Assurance of God's Grace is spoken. We say, "Remember God's grace—it's true; it's true; it's true; grace, grace, grace."

Then we stand to sing our gratitude: "Woohoo!" Woohoo is the Gloria. "Glory be to God! We can't believe it! Here is God freely gracing us again, forgiving, loving us still..." Grace, grace, grace, grace, grace, grace. And then, you see? There in the bulletin: finally, law. The Statement of the Law. We have been mostly using the law of love—the first, the essential commandment of the law, but the Ten Commandments, other passages of Scripture are often used here in the traditional liturgy as well.

Then, the peace is the acting out of that law of love. But the point here is grace, grace, grace, grace, grace... then finally law.

It's like this. God spies you across the room (like Noah, Sarah, Mary or James) and crosses over to us and says, "You're absolutely fascinating! You're the one I want! Tell me all about yourself! Oh, right! I already know that! Would you like to dance?"

"I know your name. I've heard about you. You have some amazing gifts. Bring them out here on the dance floor. Come on. Let me show you a few steps and see if we can bring out your best."

Grace is not just amnesty. It's a beginning. God wants to explore the relationship further. It's an invitation... to dance, to be in intimate covenant.

God has this passion for each of us that wants us out on the dance floor and wants to teach us, wants to show us how to dance, how God moves in this life in grace.

Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, tells the story of a "Chilean dance teacher who specializes in teaching the developmentally disabled how to dance. (Those of you who were here for Elaine Lester's memorial know that Don and Elaine's daughter, Delight, teaches this as well.) The teacher masterfully guides even the most awkward of her pupils around the floor, leading but not dominating, always allowing her partners just enough freedom to try their wings on the dance floor."⁴

Williams says, "...put grace and you will *find* grace. Invite the unlovely partner to sit opposite you, breathing slowly and deeply, and to mirror your gestures: the slow circling of an arm, the opening of a hand. That's how our Chilean teacher began. That's how dancing begins... I'll give

⁴ Lischer, pp. 120-121.

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you grace and you can give it back. You can answer me because you are like me. You are alive, too. Here are the signs of my life, the patterns I make, the beauty I create, so can you.”

“Listen to this invitation,” he says, “Sit down, all of you handicapped, lumpish, empty, afraid, and start to feel that you too are rooted in a firm, rich earth. Opposite you is someone who, it seems, doesn’t need to learn. His roots are very deep, very deep indeed; he knows he is lovely and loved. Dancing is natural to him; he has no paralyzing, self-conscious dread, no self-protection to overcome...”

“He dances so that you will dance. He shows you what beauty is, his body awakens yours. He’s there to be your partner and everyone’s; sometimes you’ll see him opposite you, sometimes not (beside you, behind you, holding someone else’s hands). But he’s there, in and out of your dance, always affirming your beauty, fusing together your mind and your imagination and your flesh, so that none of it will be lost.”⁵

Remember the title of the sermon—“Grace, Grace, Grace, and then Finally Law.” Grace sees you from afar, crosses the room, catches your eye, speaks to you, and says, “Would you like to dance?” And law says, “Here are the steps.” Grace is the invitation to dance, and law is the choreography.

This is the long, long history of covenant grace: God creates the whole thing, sets it all in motion, adds us into the mix, comes to Noah unbidden, comes to Abraham and Sarah by grace, to Isaac and Jacob and Moses, calls them to Herself, liberates the people from their shackles, leads them across the Red Sea, feeds them with the grace of daily manna. “And then..., finally...at Sinai, law. After all that grace, finally, law. It’s not that God gives us law as a way to become deserving of God’s grace. It’s that God gives us a guide, [the steps] to how to respond to the grace that God has been dishing up in generous measure since the first day of creation.”⁶

And still, even now, especially now, in the season of the Spirit, God goes in and out of our dance, teaching us the steps of the law by grace.

This is not a new interpretation. This is the heart of our tradition. The amazing John Calvin wrote about the law given on Sinai in his comments on the Ten Commandments. He said, “In these words [God] commends the Law; because it must be accounted a peculiar blessing, and a very high honor to be taken into covenant by God. ... [God] says that what was above all things to be desired had been freely offered to them, [that is] that they should be united in covenant with God.”⁷

⁵ Rowan Williams, *A Ray of Darkness*, Cowley Publications, Canterbury, U.K., 1995, pp. 62-63.

⁶ KC Ptomey, former Pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church, Nashville, TN, in an unpublished paper for the Moveable Feast 2006. KC now teaches at Austin Seminary.

⁷ Calvin, J., & Bingham, C. W., *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony (1:340)*, Logos Research Systems, Inc., Bellingham, WA, 2010.

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That's the law; that's the covenant; it says, "Welcome to the dance. Here are the steps to the rest of your life."

In the worship centers, where our younger children worship when they are not with us, we call the Ten Commandments, "The Ten Best Ways to Live." The gift of this law, the grace of this law is not to chase us down with red lights flashing, hand-cuff, or crush the love God has been trying to lure from us. The law has never been that. *In the law is their delight*: the invitation has never been to become chained but freely to delight in the dance of the law. Delight is the word.

Sometimes it's the delight in seeing, "Oh, that's how you do that!" Like a child's delight in learning to truly give a gift for the first time. Sometimes it's the delight in learning how to forgive, as difficult a step as it is to learn; experiencing how it liberates us, unburdens us and those we forgive. Sometimes it's the delight of learning a regimen that heals—having the right daily exercise of compassion and prayer and the doses of hope, trust and justice. They really are the (ten) best ways to live; they offer life abundant, so we do not wither and die but yield good fruit...

But most of all, we delight in the steps of law, because the Giver of the Law is the Lord of the Dance, our Beloved Teacher, our Dance Partner. We, the graced, meditate on the dance steps, delight in the Lord's law, simply "wanting to be with the beloved, it's the desire ...[the desire] in pleasing the beloved; 'finding in the joy of the one loved one's own true joy.'

"The depth of joy [the delight that] one finds in the beloved prompts one to ask continually, 'What else can I do in order to delight the beloved?'"⁸ "What are you asking of me? What does my Beloved want of me here? How can I delight my love, my God in this law? Show me the new and more gracious steps. Teach me your holy dance."

These covenants are each a waltz, a flamenco, a ballet. We dance them into the wee hours of the night at the deathbed of our parents, as we dance *Honor thy father and mother*. We dance them on the phone with our joyous friend, over a common meal, all rejoicing together when one rejoices, dancing *Thou shalt not covet*. We dance them in helping a child in Sunday School or offering our hands at the Food Pantry, dancing *When you receive one of the least of these*. We dance in sorrow, in joy, in companionship, with God alone or with others, even in huge long conga lines in Sunday worship, dancing *Thou shalt have no other gods*. The steps God teaches are for any time and any place in our lives. In this eternal covenant of two-step, tango or salsa, there the Partner always is: there—in and out of our dance: a hand here, a touch there, the leading of the Lord of the Dance—even for the most awkward of her pupils, leading but not dominating, allowing her partners just enough freedom, and always affirming your beauty, fusing together your mind, imagination and flesh, so that none of it will be lost.

Not lost but found—Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saves a wretch like me: handicapped, lumpish, empty and afraid—and invites me to dance and moves in and out of my dance, showing me the steps—that I might delight in the law, both day and night.

Let all of God's holy dancers say, "Amen."

⁸ Ptomey, quoting Brueggemann, *The Covenanted Self*, p. 39—on the definition of the *eros* in God's love.