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In the Presence of Grace

John 1:26

The Gospel of John tells us that the message of John the Baptist is directed to people who are confused about many things. But most of all they are confused about what God is doing in the world.

John wants his listeners to understand that the cure for their confusion is closer than they think. He says “Among you stands one whom you do not know.” There is a man in their midst who embodies the grace of God. But they fail to recognize him because the work of God’s grace defies their familiar categories. Jesus is not the kind of messiah they are expecting.

This is the story of all those who encounter Jesus in the gospel of John. Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman understand his words but not their meaning. The high priest understands Jesus only as a threat to the status quo. Pilate gives Jesus the right title for the wrong reasons. Even the disciples who know Jesus best, demonstrate again and again that where Jesus is concerned they just don’t get it. They are living in the presence of grace without recognizing it. They do not realize that this grace is working to change them from the inside out and to create a new world which is based on God’s justice.

This understanding of the grace of God in our midst was emphasized in the validictory address to the class of 1760 in a Presbyterian institution called the College of New Jersey, which we know today as Princeton University. The Reverend Samuel Davies had been a leader in the First Great Awakening in Virginia before getting the call to become president of Princeton. The students that Davies addressed were well versed in the Great Awakening emphasis on personal spiritual transformation. But Davies wanted them to understand that the agenda of God’s gracious activity is much larger than that. One historian described Davies’ address in these words:

Davies challenged each student to serve his generation as a “proper member of human society.” God’s purposes in this world... are carried out through the... love of one’s fellow human beings. Davies wanted his graduates to serve the church, but he also urged them to use their education to... “embrace your Friends, your Neighbors, your Country, your Nation, the whole race of Mankind, even your Enemies.” The goal was to “leave the World wiser and better than you found it at your Entrance.” The Princeton class of 1760 had a mandate from their president to work for the public good(John Frea, *The Journal of Presbyterian History*, Fall/Winter 2008, page 57).

Davies wanted to make sure that his students were not confused about the grace that was present in their midst. That grace was moving them beyond the narrow categories of the First Great Awakening to see that God is also creating a new world grounded in justice.

Isaiah 61 offers a similar understanding of how God’s grace is at work in our world. The prophet is addressing a people who have lived for many years in exile. An important part of their brokenness as exiles is their long separation from Jerusalem. That city was for them a powerful symbol of the grace of God. It was remembered as the center of their worship and the sign of God’s activity in the world. But for these exiles Jerusalem is a city in ruins. It was destroyed by the Babylonians years

ago and no one can afford to rebuild it. It is no longer the symbol of God's presence and grace. It is now a sign of the brokenness of their lives.

But the prophet wants these exiles to understand that the cure for their brokenness is closer than they think. The gracious God who is already present in their lives will not allow Jerusalem to languish in ruins. God is at work to restore Jerusalem. The promised transformation of the ruins is not limited to the narrow category of reconstructing buildings. It is also about redeemed relationships. The new Jerusalem will be the place where God's justice rules supreme. In the same way the ruins of our own existence can be transformed by the grace which is already in our midst.