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Living Under Grace

Matthew 10:40

Most of us have heard the hit song which came out some years ago, “Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree.” The imagery of the song has inspired families of service members to use yellow ribbons as a way to celebrate the return of their loved ones from long deployments overseas. But the story that originally inspired the song came out of a very different context.

An ex-con was finally heading home. He ignored the noisy college kids on the bus as he stared out the window wondering about his future. After a rest stop a young woman sat down beside him and struck up a conversation. He told her that he had been in prison for four years and that his wife hadn’t written him for three and a half years. When he learned that he was being paroled he wrote again and told his wife he still loved her. He also wrote that he would understand if she never wanted to see him again. To make it easier on both of them, he suggested that his wife use a yellow handkerchief to communicate her feelings. If she wanted him back, she could tie the handkerchief on the old oak tree near their home. If there was no handkerchief on the tree he would know to stay on the bus and keep going.

Word of this arrangement spread through the bus. As it came into town, the college kids flocked to the windows in eager anticipation. When they saw the tree, cheering broke out. On the tree was not one but hundreds of yellow handkerchiefs. This was an extravagant gesture of grace for a man who knew full well that he was not worthy of the love it represented (Evan Drake Howard, *Christian Century*, June 17, 2008, page 21).

It was this truth that the apostle Paul had in mind when he wrote to the Romans that we no longer live under the law but under grace. Paul had grown up believing that the fulfillment of the law was the way to life. The law inspires us to make ourselves better. The law shows us the way to become worthy of God’s love. But Paul later realized that this understanding of the law is flawed. Paul’s vigorous effort to become an overachiever had not worked. The truth is that we are no more capable of fully pleasing God than we are of fully pleasing ourselves. Paul learned that faith is not about overachieving. It is about receiving God’s extravagant gifts with a spirit of humility and gratitude.

To live under grace is to understand that we are not worthy of the gifts that God has showered on us. To live under grace means to be constantly looking for ways to share our blessings with others. It has been a real joy to watch this congregation respond to the plight of the recent flood victims. When word came to us through our presbytery that there was an urgent need for flood clean-up buckets, we sent out an email appeal for help. All kinds of help was needed. We needed money. We needed people to shop for materials. We needed people to transport materials. We needed people to sort these materials and place them in the buckets. Once we succeeded in preparing 154 buckets in a week’s time we needed people and vehicles to deliver them to Peoria. The immediate response of money and volunteer effort has been phenomenal. This can only happen when people respond from a strong sense of gratitude. It is a sign of what it means to live under grace.

In the 10th chapter of Matthew Jesus is preparing the disciples to go out on a mission of preaching, healing, and casting out demons. Jesus is very candid in pointing out all the obstacles they will encounter. He wants the disciples to understand that the success of this mission will not depend on the faith, courage, determination, and talent that they bring to the task. In the end their effectiveness will depend on their understanding that they are living under grace. In the first instance that means being open to receiving the gifts that God provides in ways they do not expect. Jesus tells them that strangers will welcome them into their homes. It is only by receiving this hospitality that they will be enabled to share with others. In the end their effectiveness will flow from their recognition that they are dependent on the help they receive from others. They are not self-sufficient. They live under grace.

During my years at Princeton Seminary, I became acquainted with the chaplain of Princeton University. He was a Scot named Ernest Gordon. In his book, *Through the Valley of the Kwai*, Gordon described how he learned what it means to live under grace. He was a prisoner of the Japanese in Burma during World War II. He was suffering from a case of cholera that was so severe he was taken to the death house. This was a section of the hospital hut that was reserved for the helpless cases. It was a place to die.

A man named Dusty Miller risked his life to help Gordon. He smuggled in food and medicine for Gordon and spent all of his free time nursing him back to health. Dusty Miller was a man of faith who understood that he lived under grace. Gordon had been a skeptic when it came to issues of faith. But as he received from Dusty day after day the attention that saved his life, Gordon learned about grace. What Dusty provided was a gift that Gordon knew he did not deserve.

During the course of their imprisonment the two men were separated and assigned to different camps. As the war ended Gordon set out to find the man who had saved his life and taught him the meaning of grace. Finally he found a man who was in the same work detail as Dusty. This man painfully recounted to Gordon how their friend had died. It happened just a few days before the Japanese packed up and retreated leaving the prisoners to fend for themselves. The Japanese warrant officer became so incensed that he could not break Dusty, he strapped him to a tree and crucified him. Gordon described his reaction to this horrifying news in these words:

I was so stunned I didn't quite know what to do. I walked out from the group of chattering questioners. Dusty...had been rewarded for his goodness by hatred—his radiant goodness which must have maddened the warrant officer to the point where he went berserk. There, like his Master, he died, so far from his homeland, so far from everyone, yet so near to God. I moved to a corner of the camp that I might bear my grief alone. The surroundings misted so that nothing was clear any more; there was only the reality of suffering, disappointment, and sorrow. Then I could see once again the light that had challenged the darkness in the valley of the shadow—the light that had been reflected from gentle faces. I could see Dusty Miller kneeling before me with his rag and his basin, telling me with a smile of his plans for the future as he cleaned my ulcers...It was that light which I had seen in so many faces that helped me to see in my own darkness (*Through the Valley of the Kwai*, pages 236 and 237).

In that light Gordon saw that what matters most is what comes to us as a gift. We are living under grace.