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12/19/10

The Language of Grace

Romans 1:7

Advent is a time to ponder how much we need Christmas. We cannot appreciate the significance of the appearance of God in human form until we understand our vulnerability as human beings. Marilynne Robinson explores this issue in her novel *Home*. There she tells the story of a Presbyterian minister named Robert Boughton who lives in retirement in the small town where he served a church for many years. Boughton is living alone after the death of his wife several years earlier. His health is rapidly deteriorating and his 38 year old daughter Glory has just moved in to take care of him. One evening a letter arrives from Boughton's son Jack. Jack is the prodigal son who has been separated from the family for twenty years after several embarrassing scandals. The letter announces that Jack is coming home for a visit. The father who long ago forgave his son is thrilled that Jack is coming home. Boughton begins preparing an extravagant welcome.

The arrival of the prodigal is delayed. Jack's letter announced he would be arriving in a few days. But the father is kept waiting for four weeks. Robinson describes the time of waiting in these words:

What followed were weeks of trouble and disruption, dealing with the old man's anticipation and anxiety and then his disappointment, every one of which made him restless and sleepless and cross. Glory spent the days coaxing her father to eat. The refrigerator and the pantry were stocked with everything he thought he remembered Jack having a liking for, and he suspected Glory of wanting to give up too soon and eat it all on the pretext of avoiding waste. So he would accept nothing but a bowl of oatmeal or a poached egg, while skin thickened on cream pies and lettuce went limp. She worried about what to do with it all if Jack never came. The thought of sitting down to a stale, humiliated feast with her heartbroken father was intolerable (*Home*, pages 28-29).

This extended time of anxious waiting puts Glory and her father in touch with their human frailty. It is a reminder that we are all vulnerable creatures who depend on the support of family and friends. But most of all we depend on the love, mercy, and grace of God. Christmas is God's answer to our deepest need.

This is the message that is conveyed in the first chapter of Matthew's gospel. Matthew invites us to look carefully at the lives of two vulnerable people who are struggling with burdens for which they were not prepared. Matthew is the only gospel which looks at this story from the perspective of Joseph. Joseph is usually kept in the background of the story of Jesus' birth. He is not the one the artists paint or the Christmas carols celebrate. But Matthew makes clear that Joseph played a pivotal role. Joseph understands that Mary's pregnancy is a threatening scandal. It is all the more serious because in that culture an engagement was a legal relationship. They have already signed the marriage license. This is not a simple matter of returning the wedding ring and canceling the florist. Joseph's only way out is to file for divorce.

Matthew tells us that Joseph knows the scriptures and the rules that apply to situations like this. The rules give him two options. He can cast Mary out in disgrace and get his divorce or he can have her stoned to death. Both options are perfectly legal. Most men would look no further. But Joseph is not satisfied with these options. He looks for another way.

Matthew lays the groundwork for Joseph's approach to this problem by describing Joseph's family tree. Joseph's genealogy is traced back through King David all the way to Abraham. This family history convinces Joseph that God is more interested in the practice of mercy than the enforcement of rules. Joseph dares to read the scriptures not only through the lens of the law, but also through the lens of grace. Joseph understands that we are all vulnerable creatures who depend on the grace of God. Joseph does not wait for an explanation from an angel in a dream. He decides to act contrary to the law which calls for Mary to be stoned or at least held up for ridicule. Joseph moves to protect this vulnerable young woman from humiliation and punishment. He dares to do what is contrary to the law because he knows the language of grace.

According to the Apostle Paul this is what Christmas is all about. In the first chapter of Romans Paul cites an early statement of faith which emphasizes the incarnation of Christ. Paul follows up this confessional description of Christ by pointing out the meaning of his coming into the world. It is all about grace. What God does for us in Christ answers our deepest need and enables us to learn the language of grace. Paul makes use of that language in a greeting he offers to the Romans, "Grace to you." That is the greatest blessing he can offer and he wants the Romans to make generous use of it.

The language of grace which lies at the heart of Christmas has the power to transform lives in ways we can never predict. Two weeks ago I received a letter from a man who participated in this church eighty years ago and now lives in Lake Bluff, Illinois. This is what he wrote:

Enclosed is a donation [of \$1,000] in memory of Dr. Cremeans...The occasion is the memory that Dr. Cremeans allowed and encouraged our gang to play football in the front yard of the Manse in the early 1930s. Thinking back, it was a very generous thing to do. It had a profound effect on our growing up years. Not the least of which was to ensure our attendance at church and Sunday School each week. I intended to drop by and deliver this in person when occasion permitted. It appears that opportunity may not develop, so this is a substitute. I believe I am the only one left from our childhood gang. But in their behalf we say thanks.

The gratitude that this letter conveys is not about football or a man's nostalgia for his childhood. It is about something much more lasting and profound. It is about a life-changing relationship which was grounded in the language of grace. That is God's answer to our deepest need.