

THE GIFT OF GRACE

ROMANS 1:16-17; 3:22B-28

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Fred Craddock is one of America's most accomplished preachers and teacher of preachers. He grew up in eastern Tennessee in a very conservative theological environment, and after attending a fundamentalist Bible college went to Yale Divinity School. Unlike the average Yalie who had attended a mainline Protestant church and a secular university, Fred could find any biblical verse, any text, any cross reference on a moment's notice. Consequently, his carrel in the library was a popular place for students working in Old Testament or New Testament studies.

Fred Craddock is a Southerner, so he's a storyteller. He is retired now from Candler School of Theology at Emory University and lives in north Georgia. He tells about preaching on the Parable of the Prodigal Son one Sunday.

"I preached in Blue Ridge, the little town near where I live and get my mail. I actually live at Cherry Log, but our mule died, and it's just hand-delivered now, so it takes longer. So I preached in Blue Ridge while the minister was away, and I preached on the lectionary text for that Sunday, which was the Prodigal Son. I preached on the Prodigal Son. A man after the service said, 'I really didn't care much for that, frankly.'

"I said, 'Why?'

"He said, 'Well, I guess it's not your sermon. I just don't like that story.'

"I said, 'What is it you don't like about it?'

"He said, 'It's not morally responsible.'

"I said, 'What do you mean by that?'

"'Forgiving that boy.'

"'Well, what would you have done?'

"He said, 'I think when he came home he should have been arrested.'

"The fellow was serious. *He's an attorney*, I thought. I thought he was going to tell me a joke. But he was really serious. He belonged to this unofficial organization nationwide, never has any meetings and doesn't have a name, but it's a very strong network that I call 'quality control people.' They're the moral police. Mandatory sentences and no parole, mind you, and execution.

"I said, 'What would you have given the prodigal?'

"He said, "Six years.'"

When Martin Luther launched the Protestant Reformation on that significant day—October 31, 1517—by nailing his Ninety-Five Theses on the door of the church in Wittenberg, he based his theology and his new movement on the Gospels and the letters of St. Paul, especially the Letter to the Romans. WE ARE SAVED BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH was—and still is—the cry of Protestantism.

And yet. So much of our contemporary preaching, teaching and theology reverts back to the kind of thinking of that man who confronted Fred Craddock at the door of that little Disciples of Christ church in Blue Ridge, Georgia. It's called "works righteousness." And its philosophy—I dare not call it a theology—goes something like this: If you and I will just live decent, law-abiding, moral lives, we will get to heaven. Just do your best. Don't rob any banks, swindle any old women, mislead any little children. Be trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, thrifty, brave clean and reverent—and someday you will stand before God on Judgment Day and you will be ushered through the pearly gates because you have been a good scout.

A good deal of the problem rests with North American preaching over the past several decades. We preachers have succumbed to outlining a sweet, simple Gospel—something that will not offend or cause some big giver or member of the governing board—they are rarely the same—to storm out in protest because they can accuse us of being a quasi-Jeremiah Wright or a semi-Michael Pflieger. So we preachers too easily dilute the Gospel.

Several years ago I escorted the editor of the *British Weekly*, the UK counterpart to the *Christian Century*, Shawn Herron as he toured a portion of the United States. At the end of his ten-week tour in which he visited dozens of North American churches and—poor man!—listened to at least three sermons every Sunday, I asked him what he thought about North American preaching. He reflected for a moment, then replied, I think it can be summed up in one sentence, "Let's all try to do a little better."

What an indictment! What a denial of God's grace being proclaimed.

That emphasis on works righteousness rather than grace prompted Fred Craddock's friend to want to sentence the prodigal to six years in prison. Obviously, if we live our lives by comparing our good works to those of someone else, we can always find somebody who is not as good, as righteous, as generous as we are.

When a friend of mine tried to preach on all ten of the Ten Commandments in one sermon—imagine that!—a man came out the sanctuary door, shook the preacher's hand and muttered, "Well, at least I haven't made any graven images."

Paul makes clear in today's Epistle reading, which is his thesis statement for the entire letter, that *God's righteousness is manifest apart from the law*. That is, God's way of righting wrong now occurs by God's grace given as a gift. Note the apostle's use of the word "now." That word is emphatic because it refers to a new era in God's dealings with us. An old way of understanding God's relationship with us has gone by the board. A new way has been opened up. "God's justice has been brought to light" (3:21)

Moreover, *faith in Christ is the new way of experiencing God's righteousness, God's justice, God's presence*. Your problem and mine is that we think of human sinfulness as an accumulation of mistakes, errors, and mishaps. Paul paints a larger, more passionate picture: we are subject to a power that sweeps all human beings before it like an irresistible flood. Every one of us lives in bondage to the power of sin. This is the act of Christian faith: to believe that now God rights wrong, both **our** wrong and **all** wrong, in a new way—no longer through law but through grace.

To be justified by faith is to see God's righteousness no longer as a *quid pro quo*, something God does to reward our efforts, something we earn. It is rather God's generous response to our sinfulness, an act of grace that sets right our wrongs by canceling their effects. How do we appropriate this righteousness, this new life? The short, the compelling answer is, "by faith."

My constant companion, my hero, my spiritual guide, the nineteenth century poet/philosopher/raconteur/bon vivant/provocateur, Soren Kierkegaard (you will be hearing a lot from him over the next several months as I serve you), deplored the same conditions in Denmark two hundred years ago that infect mainline churches in the twenty-first century in North America. We think of our faith as something we sort of inherit, come by naturally, understand inchoately as we grow up in the church and as those of us who are parents and teachers and role-models nurture children in the church. Kierkegaard was fond of saying: “A little water on your head when you are born, a little rice on your head when you get married and a little dirt on your head when you die do not make you a Christian.”

It is by faith, by receiving the free gift of God’s grace that we are justified.

Now. Now, the contrast is not between two religious theories, law and grace, but between the human situation apart from Christ and the human situation regarded in the light of God’s saving act in the cross of Christ.

As Karl Barth so powerfully stated the case, “The Gospel is not an inevitable therefore, but a miraculous nevertheless.”

We do not just quietly work our way into a saving relationship with Christ by doing nice things and going to church every Sunday (well, almost every Sunday—if there’s not a Bears game or a picnic or a trip) and putting a few dollars in the offering plate and attending some dull church meetings. God’s grace is a gift. Salvation is not earned by human merit, but granted freely by God’s grace. Salvation is not based on who we are and what we have done, but on who God is as revealed in Jesus Christ. And by what God has done in the event of Christ’s life, death and resurrection.

I am reading a new book, *Sin In The City: Chicago and Revivalism, 1880-1920*, by Thekla Ellen Joiner. Ms. Joiner studies the Third Great Awakening during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She writes about Dwight L. Moody’s 1893 World’s Fair Revival, which was centered just a few blocks from the present site of University Church; the 1910 Chapman-Alexander campaign; and the 1918 Billy Sunday Revival. In all three instances, those preachers were enraged by rapid social change in Chicago, and they developed a theology that prompted evangelicals to formulate a middle-class morality that was based on racism and the disparagement of women.

In her provocative book, Dr. Joiner shows that these same legacies live on today in the religious right’s sociopolitical activism; their crusade for what they call “family values”; their disparagement of feminism; and their promotion of spirituality in middle-class, racial and cultural terms.

As Paul Achtemeier writes in his volume on Romans in the *Interpretation series*: “Paul deals with problems as contemporary as tomorrow’s newspaper. They are problems as global as the headlines and as intimate as those discussed in ‘Dear Abby.’ The fate and future of the Jewish people, the role of the individual in the total sweep of history, the responsibilities of the citizen to the government of the country with which he or she may not always agree, the morality of actions in which adults engage, sexual and otherwise—all these and more occupy Paul in his letter to the Christians in Rome.”

May I remind you that Paul wrote to those Christians in Rome, people he would never meet but fellow pilgrims in the faith who lived in a first-century city not unlike twenty-first century Chicago. As Barth began his commentary on the Letter to the Romans, we sometimes have to be reminded that God shouts a resounding “Nein! No!” to our human pretension and pride. God’s saving mercy speaks more often than we want to recognize through healing judgment coupled with amazing grace.

One of my favorite people in all the world, a hero in the faith, is the Reverend Will Campbell. Do you remember in Gary Trudeau's cartoon series, *Kudzu*, the "Reverend Will B. Dunn"? That's a caricature of Will Campbell. Will grew up in Mississippi in the Southern Baptist Church and after graduating from Ole Miss, went into exile by attending and graduating from Yale Divinity School. After trying to return to his home state to serve churches, he was named by the National Council of Churches to become a sort of roving ambassador throughout the tumultuous racial and moral and political troubles of the sixties. He now lives as an eighty-five year old farmer near Nashville, Tennessee.

In his book, *Brother To A Dragonfly*, Will tells of riding his pickup truck, a Ford F-150, near Hattiesburg one day with his younger brother, a benighted man who long ago gave up on the church and all things "religious," a man who wrestles every day with the demons of alcoholism. As they were driving through the farmlands and pine woods of southern Mississippi, Will's brother challenged him, "O.K., Will. Sum up the Christian faith in ten words or less."

Will promptly replied, "We are all bastards. God loves us anyway."

His brother said, "Good. You have two words left."

You and I come to the Communion table this morning as benighted bastards, as those who struggle to live more than decently, better than average, with a modicum of faith. And because of God's free gift of grace, we are made new.