

Illustrations of Grace – Teresa Holden

Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

In 1985, when I was a student at the University of Notre Dame getting my master's degree in Counseling Psychology, I met weekly with my advisor, Sheridan Patrick McCabe. I was doing a practicum at a local mental health clinic, and part of the requirement was to meet weekly with one's advisor in order to make sense of what we were supposed to be learning. Dr. McCabe looked like a character from a Dickens novel. Everything about him was round—round head, with two tufts of white hair sticking out crazily right above his round ears, on which rested the ends of his round glasses. His round shoulders framed a big round belly on which he would rest his interlaced hands as we talked. Going into his office was like stepping into another world. Everything about Dr. McCabe seemed ancient, down to the classical music that he always had blaring, yet, ironically, he was the only psychology professor at Notre Dame to have a computer (a PC) in his office in 1985. He was a man of few words, very, very few words. This freaked out my friends, because they never knew how to get those few words out of him. But I always liked Dr. McCabe, and I think I remember almost every word he spoke to me—because there were so few of them. Dr. McCabe liked the fact that I had been an English literature major in college, because he believed that literature reveals the complexities of the human mind and behavior, and helps us to understand the fact that things are not always what they seem. He would encourage me to look to my knowledge of literature as I attempted to understand the varied worlds of my counseling clients.

Today's Scriptures present us with some interpretive dilemmas that have created numerous debates in the church. I think we are helped in our understanding of them if we take Dr. McCabe's advice and consider these Scriptures first as great drama with dialogue and action that help the audience understand infinite truths about God. Thinking of these Scriptures as drama reveals this: God's grace is limitless and this grace beckons us to take faithful actions.

Exodus 32 presents the problem of God not seeming as omniscient (or all-knowing) as we know God to be. Garrison Keillor explains this problem well in an opinion piece that the *New York Times* published in 2008. He says: *The Scripture reading in church Sunday gave me a jolt—Exodus 32, which refers to the Chosen People wearing earrings, men as well as women, and I twitched when the lector read it. Yikes! Moses got his ears pierced? What else didn't we know??? And then a bigger jolt. God is so furious at the C.P. for worshiping the golden calf (forged from their earrings) that He talks about consuming them with fire, but Moses talks Him out of it, which sort of dents one's faith in divine omniscience, does it not, the Lord taking a sharp turn like that? ("Oh, I hadn't thought about that—O.K., cancel the thunderbolt!") But I didn't jump up in my pew and point this out—we like to keep things moving along in church, recite the Creed, confess our sins, pass the plate, sing the doxology, not stop for questions along the way.*

I don't know that St. Paul's is famous for "[keeping] things moving along in church," and so we won't pass on trying to understand this Scripture. Keillor has pointed out the

central paradox of this story—that we understand God to be omniscient, yet in this passage it seems as though God is taken unawares by the actions of the Israelites. A bigger problem to me is the fact that by the end of this chapter, God seems quite human, and Moses seems to be the one calming down God.

If we think about this story as an award-winning theater production (and not the Cecile B. DeMille film), a theater production that depicts the relationship between God and man, this can give us a different perspective on what happened here. Actually the events of this chapter would fall into the second half of the play, after the escape from Egypt, the passage through the Red Sea, the provision of food in the wilderness, God giving the Ten Commandments and then becoming visible through various manifestations to different people. In fact, God became visible as fire to the entire group of Israelites. A lot has happened. By this time we would have been past intermission, having talked with our friends about how impactful that fire was that depicted the character of God. From our seats, we could almost feel the heat, and we understood the power of God in a new and transformational way, and it was deeply moving. Now, in the second half of the play, we understand Moses to be on the mountain in conference with God, and we can see that the Israelites are getting restless. Somewhere between seeing God powerfully in the fire and now, people have begun to lose heart. While their request for a golden calf reveals the shallowness of their commitment to the God of their Fathers and Mothers, to them it's an expedient action in a world that is filled with tribes and even vast kingdoms that worship man-made depictions of gods that are finite. Like us, sometimes, when our lives become particularly challenging, it is easy to turn from having faith in something that doesn't always seem real and toward something that we have some control over. That brings us to the interaction between God and Moses that occurs in chapter 32.

If Exodus 32 is a theatrical version of these events, the audience can't see into the mind of God or Moses, and so a dialogue has to take place that informs the audience what is in each character's mind. This raises the question, how does one create dialogue for God? No matter how hard one tries, the result will always be something that a human being would say.

Since we know that God is perfectly just, we have to know that violation of the trust that resulted from the Israelites' actions will draw some reaction, but here it comes out in a very human way. In our theater production, God says to Moses: *I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.* At this point in our production, an incredible role reversal has taken place, as God begins to sound like a human, and Moses begins to seem like the wise and compassionate advocate. This is necessary not only because we can only give God human words. The only words possible to explain the deep disappointment evoked by the Israelites' actions are wrathful. In our human minds we comprehend the fact that God deserves to be angry. What this Scripture reveals is that we can only understand God's grace through understanding the absence of it.

Let's take a moment and remember the definition of grace. I always explain grace in the way I have learned it from Rick, and that definition is "unmerited favor." In our theatrical production of Exodus 32, God's first response of wiping out the Israelites is stunning, as we consider what it would mean if God chose to wipe out all people who weren't faithful. Of course, that would implicate all of us because we've all had moments of unfaithfulness to God. The awful truth becomes real that none of us merits God's favor. In our play, Moses takes on the role that is very similar to what Romans 8 says the Holy Spirit does for us, and that is to intercede on our behalf. That intercession brings God to have mercy and to show grace to the Israelites. In our play, God changes course. The Scripture says, *And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.* Two things seem clear from having thought about this Scripture as a theatrical production: 1) God's grace is a great and glorious gift that is ours because of God's limitless love for us. 2) Intercession or prayer is an effective form of communication with God. Here and in Genesis 32, when Jacob wrestles with the angel of God, we get confirmation of the fact that God gives us space to struggle with Him and disagree, and that when this is done honestly and authentically, we can gain greater knowledge about what God wants for us through that process. Knowing that is also a priceless gift to us.

Moving along to the Parable of the Wedding Banquet, we also see a king (who seems to represent God) becoming incensed and in a rage executing violence against people. While we can view these actions as justified, ultimately Jesus makes this ominous declaration: *Many are called, but few are chosen.* This line has led to doctrinal arguments and denominational splits over the course of centuries, as people have struggled to understand what this statement means. What distinguishes the chosen or the few? Is this a mysterious process that only God participates in, or is the choosing something that humans participate in and influence?

If we follow the idea that God's grace is "unmerited favor" given out freely to all, this influences our interpretation of what "Many are called, but few are chosen" means. This would mean that human beings play a role in whether they are chosen or not. In order to illustrate this, I want to take literary license to change the parable so that it tells a story that we might be able to relate to a little more. I am going to call this the Parable of the Greenville College Guest Lecturer.

As the story goes, a Greenville College professor puts together the funding and scheduling so that her mentor, a leading expert in her field, can come to campus to deliver a colloquium. The date is set, and filled with excitement the professor enthusiastically shares with all of her classes the fact that this wise, beloved and world-renowned mentor is coming. While the students in her classes are mostly all dear people, they are young and tired, and they have very full schedules, and so they obviously do not share the professor's excitement. Dutifully, they get out their hand-held devices to mark the date and time on their electronic schedules, but alas, they begin to share their scheduling conflicts: there are basketball games on that day that will take both the men's and women's teams out of town, choir will be practicing extra because of the impending *Messiah* performance and the wise and faithful seniors will be doing their mock

presentations for the Common Day of Learning. The professor begins to recognize that no one will come to hear her mentor.

But being experienced at the task of coercing student participation in campus events, the professor immediately begins to make fliers about the colloquium to post around campus. The flier not only tells about how awesome the event will be, it also contains four magic words: *Refreshments will be served*. “This will work,” the professor thinks, “a colloquium, late in the afternoon, but too early for dinner, refreshments will surely get some students there.” But as a few days pass, the faculty member comes to realize that most of the Health classes are on a Jeremiah fast, half of her students have given up either sugar or gluten, and she doesn’t really have the budget to provide the buffet that would satisfy the dietary needs of all the students whom she hopes to attract. So, she comes up with Plan C. This time she convinces the chaplain that this guest speaker is definitely worthy, so that chapel credit can be extended to those students who attend. Not only can they get chapel credit, but they are able to get the most valuable kind of chapel credit available, core chapel credit that would allow students to miss one of the regular Monday, Wednesday or Friday chapels. Further, she sends an e-mail to the entire student body to let them know of all the incentives that are being offered to students who will attend.

So everything is ready, and to the professor’s delight, when she and her mentor arrive in Snyder 107, the big lecture hall is filled with students. Some are partaking in the refreshments, others are signing in for chapel credit, and all seem relatively pleased and receptive to the guest speaker’s talk. But there is that one student, the one at the very back. This student has spread in front of him three small red plates filled with refreshments. He has a couple of small cups of punch. His computer is open, his earbuds in his ears, and his head is bobbing. By the time the lecture begins, the student has turned down his music, but the earbuds remain, and as he scrolls through whatever is on his computer screen, he occasionally grins or even quietly chuckles. The professor, who is sitting in the front facing the audience as her mentor speaks, does everything she can to get this young man’s attention. She uses the skill she has honed over 25 years of teaching and parenting—the skill that her children refer to as the “Mom stare.” This stare has been known to reduce particularly sensitive people to tears within 15 seconds. It has no effect on this young man who does not seem to feel its laser power.

Not wanting to interrupt her mentor, the professor waits until the colloquium is over to deliver the news that will strike to the heart of this rude student. Getting up slowly because he was unaware that the colloquium had ended, the student removes his earbuds as the faculty member approaches. “What is your name?” she asks. “You will not be getting chapel credit for this event, and we are going to add \$10 to your student bill to cover the amount of food you ate here today.”

While this is a humorous illustration, it gets at the central message of both of our Scriptures today. God’s grace is always available; it spills over in abundance for any who are willing to devote faithful attention to God’s will. Those who walk away from God’s grace do so out of their own desire to not embrace it. Further, even when things

seem beyond hope, God listens to the intercessions of people who honestly and authentically struggle as they pursue God's grace for themselves and others.