

God's Fullness, Our Abundance

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Proverbs 31:10, 25-31; James 3:13-18; John 1:1-16

“From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.” -- John 1:16

“From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.” That's the sixteenth verse of the opening chapter of the Gospel of John, and it's the text for this morning's sermon. It's also the theme for this year's stewardship campaign, which you saw in a letter you received from the church this past week, and which you will see on posters throughout the building for the next few weeks.

We have all received from Jesus's fullness – from the fullness of God revealed in Jesus Christ – grace upon grace. That sounds very nice, especially in church, where you expect to hear words like “fullness” and “grace” and “abundance” and “godhead” and other words you don't often hear out there, but what does it all mean? What does it mean to receive grace upon grace from God, through Jesus or anyone else? What does God's grace look like, feel like, sound like, taste like?

For many of us, I suspect, grace is one of those words we're used to hearing and perhaps, from time to time, using, but if you had to define it, you might find yourself a little stuck. We all seem to recognize grace, but talking about it is another matter. The definition of grace is a bit like Justice Potter Stewart's famous definition of pornography: while he might not be able to define it, he certainly knew it when he saw it.

And I think I know grace when I experience it. I recognize it every day when I set out on my three-mile walk. As soon as my feet hit the sidewalk, I look around and find myself saying, “Another beautiful day.” It may be a beautiful sunny day, or it may be a beautiful rainy day, but whether it's sunny or rainy, the fact that I'm walking through it makes it beautiful to me.

And I know I didn't deserve it. I didn't – couldn't, in fact – do anything to bring it about. As much as I hope for it, pray for it, expect it, and even plan for it, the fact that the sun rose and the birds began to sing and the air was crisp and the leaves were beginning to turn – all of that arrived at my doorstep no thanks to me. It all came as a gift, as it does every day, and that's the way I receive it, as a gift.

My daily walk, as much for my spirit as for my body, always leads me into another beautiful day. Inside the house I can be having a lousy day, but once I step outside, into God's natural world, I am reminded that I am part of something “complete and great” as Willa Cather said, and the happiness that Cather said comes from being dissolved into something complete and great is mine for at least the next hour as I walk.

When you're surrounded by God's lovely world – and we are surrounded by some of the loveliest of it here in northeast Ohio – it's easy to think that you've received grace upon grace. When things fall into place just as they should, sometimes against all our worst expectations, we are flooded with a sense of grace. And when good things happen to us unexpectedly, we consider them moments of grace.

The other day, Jill Dugovics and I were sitting on a bench in a church garden not far from here, talking to a woman and her little boy, and completely without warning or prompting from his mother, the child walked over to Jill, a total stranger, and gave her a

hug. All of us except the little boy were totally surprised, and neither the child nor his mother knew that the lady he'd hugged had deposited her last child at college two days before and had just embarked on a new and intimidating chapter in her life. An unexpected child's hug was a moment of pure grace.

Those gentle eruptions of grace in our lives we recognize immediately, but what about those other moments of grace, the moments that don't involve hugs and don't seem so pleasant? What about those events that draw us closer to God in ways we would prefer to avoid? The graces that are often painful and baffling. Do we who claim to be religious people, spiritual people, God's people – do we have the eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts to embrace even those graces as gifts from God?

What do you think might happen, for instance, if gasoline became twenty dollars a gallon? My little Ford Focus, which has a ten-gallon tank, would cost me two hundred dollars every time I filled up, and I generally fill up twice a month. On my salary, I couldn't begin to shell out an extra \$400 a month to drive my car. And yet without it, how would I do my job? How would I do my shopping? How would I get around?

Sounds like a disaster, doesn't it? If you think you're feeling pain at the pump now, try to imagine what would happen if we had to pay two hundred or three hundred or even five hundred dollars every time we filled up. It's a future not many of us want to think about, but Forbes magazine reporter Christopher Steiner has, and if his predictions come true, as the Plain Dealer reported last week (9/14/09, A5), God's grace may be waiting for us just around the corner.

When gasoline reaches \$6 a gallon, public transportation systems, once widespread in this country, will return, and both driving deaths and obesity will plummet as more people walk to rail and bus stops and pedal their way around town.

At \$8 a gallon, "the skies will empty" Steiner says, as airline tickets spiral beyond the reach of all but the wealthiest of us.

At \$10 a gallon, electric cars will become mainstream on Main Street, and gas-guzzling toys like snow mobiles and jet skis will become relics of the past.

And at \$20 a gallon, families will have abandoned the suburbs to renew our inner cities, places like Wal-Mart will have died because the costs of global shipping will have become prohibitive, and one-time suburbs will bloom again into farms for local markets to feed the people nearby with healthy produce rather than supply luxury crops to folks across the country.

Sound like a wishful fantasy? That's entirely up to us. It'll be entirely up to us how we react when we've exhausted the natural resources we're depleting so mindlessly and we have to find other ways to survive.

It's always been up to us to decide how we'll react to any crisis – the Great Depression, 9/11, the foreclosure crisis – and we in this church will have to decide in the coming weeks how we'll respond to this year's stewardship campaign in light of the tough economic times we're facing today.

There's no need for me to use this pulpit to ask you for money; I did that already in the letter I sent last week. All of you know as well as I do that Jesus doesn't pay our light bill; we do. What Jesus does is give us the grace – the "grace upon grace" -- to look beyond our financial fears to the vision of what this church can be and do from a position of financial security.

You and I – all of us here this morning – have been given far more than we need to survive or even to live comfortably. Even the most modest among us live like royalty compared to the way our ancestors lived and the way most of the world lives today. Even those of us who've taken hard hits in our investment portfolios still have access to the best food, the best housing, the best clothing, the best education, the best health care, and the safest neighborhoods in the world. We are rich, you and I, beyond anything our great-great-grandparents could have imagined.

Are we as rich spiritually as we are materially? Or are we, as Harry Emerson

Fosdick famously wrote, "rich in things and poor in soul"?

Let it be our prayer this morning, as we embark on this year's campaign to secure our church's funding, that we will prove ourselves not only the recipients of grace, but its bearers also. And let the grace that we have received be multiplied by the grace with which we give -- "grace upon grace." Let this be our prayer. Amen.