

## "AMAZING GRACE - IN ACTION"

TEXT: "And Jesus said to her, 'Give Me a drink'"  
(John 4: 7)

INTRODUCTION It was the writer of the Book of Proverbs who once confessed long ago in writing:

".....four things I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a maiden".

He might have added yet one more to the list: namely, the ways of God with men. I came across a definition of grace some time back that has stayed with me and I pass it on to you. Someone has defined grace as God's extended hand. But how God's grace invades our lives is far more difficult to put into words.

Friday morning I was listening to the radio while shaving and found my attention captured by an ad promoting a number of helpful text books at low cost through Barnes and Noble. The variety of titles intrigued me. "How To Acquire a Foreign Accent in Seven Days". "How To Get A Quick Divorce For Fifty Dollars". "How To Dress A Hog". (I'm not sure about that one, but that's what it sounded like to me.) My point is that we can learn and come to understand how some things do work, but how grace works - God's extended hand in the lives of people - cannot so readily be gathered into words.

For God is free and sovereign. Man is blessed with a will of his own and often thwarted by selfishness and blinded by sin. Grace is personal and not mechanical. Perhaps we're safest, not when we attempt to theorize about grace, but when we pause to witness God's grace in action. And this is what I propose we do this morning - to watch God's amazing grace "in action" here, and not across the street at the RKO with Moms Mabley. We turn to an incident that took place long ago at a well side in Samaria.

THE INCIDENT The incident occurred early on in the ministry of Jesus. The Master was thirsty from much walking. His disciples had gone off to shop for food. Jesus approached the well at Shechem at noon and met a woman who had come there to draw water. In the simplest of language, He said to her, "Give me a drink". Simple though it was, that request of Jesus serves to illustrate this intrusive quality of grace....of God's extended hand touching the life of a human being.

This woman, to her credit, was quick to sense the threatening implication in what Jesus was asking. She replied, "How is it that you - a Jew - ask a drink of me - a woman of Samaria?" Something was up and apparently she knew it!

I suppose she had to lose a lot. Her privacy for one thing - the right to come and go alone. Some of that water she had drawn with her own toil. Then, too, and more importantly, she stood to lose some of her pride as a woman. Back in those pre-women's liberation days women were held to be inferior. It was an accepted precept among the upright of the day that a man should not salute a woman in public - not even his own wife. Privacy and pride were threatened.

Still more, she stood to have her patriotism undermined. Ever since the exile, to be pro-Samaritan was to be anti-Jewish. A cold war had been going on

for many years, supported by convictions on both sides that had hardened into ideologies.

I think we could say that her stereotype of the Jew was being challenged! It's always a disturbing experience to have one's prejudices unsettled. We like to have our characterizations stay in neat array. It helps us to manage life and saves us from having to think. "Politicians are self-serving. You can't trust one of them". "All welfare recipients are lazy". "Black people are inferior". Often we take our refuge in such generalities, but for this woman, as for us when Jesus gets close to us, her little pigeon holes began to run together and her carefully structured categories no longer held up.

Then, too, her religious loyalties were on the line. Jews regarded Samaritans as unclean - in particular, Samaritan women. Certainly that line in verse nine of John 4 that reads: "For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans" would be breached should Jesus take water from her pail or drink from her cup.

But this was only a beginning. As this conversation went on she would be shaken down to the very soles of her sandaled feet. The conversation continues. "If you knew the gift of God" said Jesus, and "and who it is that is saying to you 'Give me a drink' you would have asked of Him and He would have given you living water". "Sir" she replied, "give me this water, th at I may not thirst..." But because grace can never be enjoyed alone, but must always be shared, Jesus turned to her and said, "Go and call your husband and come here". The woman replied, "I have no husband". Jesus said, "You have answered rightly, for you have had five husbands and the one that you now have is not yours".

Now I'm sure that this woman had no idea when she went to draw water that noon that she would get involved in all of this. It would be kind for us to suppose that this woman had been widowed five times, but then again, it wouldn't be entirely realistic. Apparently she was attractive enough to win men to her side, but not substantial enough to hold them. The legalists among the Jews had taught that three marriages were the limit in the commonwealth. She was already two over par. ~~She pre-figures in a pathetic way the "serial polygamy" that has made Hollywood so infamous.~~

We may be sure that she had built up a rationale to justify her easy virtue, for we must learn to live with ourselves. She had marshalled her defenses. She had learned to "live around" her past, but now her protection was being torn away. The subject she wanted least to talk about that hot noon hour had been pried open. It was getting even hotter for her. One thinks of a line from a Broadway musical of several years back, "The Rope Dancer" in which a young girl in that play had the misfortune of being born with six fingers on each hand. All through the play she went around with her hands in her pockets. And when someone threatened to take away her pockets, she screamed from the depths of her being, "Don't take away my pockets. I can't live without my pockets!"

Blessed with a certain amount of feminine guile, this Samaritan woman sought to change the subject immediately. To divert attention from herself, she posed a clearly religious issue: "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship". It's the old trick of trying to postpone the God question with an urbane, intelligent, sophisticated question regarding religion. "Don't you think there are too many churches?" "Don't you think it's better to say debts than trespasses in the Lord's Prayer?" "Don't you think it's better to

stick with the King James' version of the Bible than to read from these newer translations?" ~~"Don't you think it's better to keep politics and current events out of the pulpit?"~~ You know the sort of thing that comes up and meanwhile God is continually saying to us, "Give me your heart". "...your life"

She shifted from the subject of her husband to the subject of religion and Jesus shifted from the place of worship to the manner of worship. Remember how He answered, "God is a spirit and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth".

Almost cornered, she now resorts to one last refuge and says, "I know that the Messiah is coming; when He comes He will show us all things". She was exercising the instinct for postponement. You are a prophet, but I am not at all sure of your credentials, and prophets differ on these subjects anyway. Why can't we just leave well enough alone until He is come and He will show us all things! Postponement. Procrastination. We do our share of it, too.

How true it is - people can live more easily with a Messiah who is coming than with the One who is here. But Jesus seals off this last escape route open to her by responding quietly, "I who speak to you am He".

#### INTRUSIVE GRACE

There it is - grace....intrusive and amazing grace, if you will, at work in a human life. We sing about it so easily and talk about it so glibly. This grace of God is initially for everyone...for everyone who knows it is a disturbing and times a provocative experience. God does not come into our lives to be a mere additive. He comes to present us with a grand alternative to our weak, often selfish and futile ways.

persistent

And to be honest, I don't see how God can break through to any of us with salvation or deliverance until first our myths fall and our idols topple and our illusions are stripped away. That false peace that we have entered into must first be broken before we can know that measure of peace that passes all of our human understanding. An experience of grace - true grace - can be a very painful experience...as our illusions are stripped away.

A young man by the name of David Levy said something at a recent Dartmouth Commencement that had overtones to me of this intrusive grace. David had the highest academic record of any of the 940 graduating seniors. On those credentials, he was accorded speaking time on the commencement program. Imagine the shock on the faces of the old alums gathered there - mothers and fathers - faculty - dignitaries - and classmates when David Levy of New York City stood up and said;

"I have rejected graduate school offers because I could not worship black ink on white paper. I have made no plans because I have found no plans worth making.

Take pity on me, those of you who can justify the air you breathe. Send me letters and tell me why life is worth living. Rich parents, write and tell me how money makes your life worthwhile. Dartmouth alumni, tell me how the Dartmouth experience has given value to your existence.

And fellow graduates, fellow members of this class, take pity on me a student who did not think, but only studied. Tell me how you have justified your existence to yourself, or perhaps

why you have not felt the need to do so. And if some one of you out there is also made like me, write me a letter and tell me how you came to appreciate the absurdity of your life".

I'm sure that this young man's speech at the Dartmouth Commencement must have rankled and irritated the majority of those who were present, but from within the standpoint of Scripture, it might very well be that intrusive grace was in action on that platform, overturning the hearts of some in that hall.

#### HOW CAN GOD'S GRACE GET THROUGH

How can God get through to us while we hang on to our obsession with money - to name one myth. I've known very few people, if any, who are happy because of the money they have. But....the myth persists. If only they had a little more, their happiness would be complete.

I'm reminded of the story of the man who was riding a train in Ceylon. As custom had it, he put his small, rather beat-up satchel of possessions on the luggage rack above his head. Then, also according to custom, he settled down to snooze. But it wasn't a sound sleep. Every so often he had to wake himself to check whether his satchel was still there on the rack. Finally, he opened his eyes about four o'clock and discovered that his satchel was gone! "From then on" he said, "I slept peacefully".

Or, how can the grace of God get through to us if we maintain our obsession with pleasure - in which, however, we come at it, the self is still king and people and objects are there to serve us, to bring us pleasure. "What most people

One of this city's professional athletes who, before he retires, if he stays healthy, will bank six or seven thousand dollars, was recently interviewed on TV. When asked what he liked to do with all his money, he said, "I like to spend it". The questioner continued, "What do you like to spend it on". And with a straight face and without embarrassment, he said, "Oh...on myself". Which reminds us that "When it comes to giving, some men stop at nothing."

Said James Smart, "No man is truly himself - the man whom God created him to be, until his whole experience has its center beyond himself in God".

Or, how can the grace of God get through to us so long as we continue with our obsession with security. Bonhoeffer was on target when he noted:

"When we seek for security in possession, we are trying to drive out care with care, and the net result is the precise opposite of our anticipations. The fetters which bind us to our possessions prove to be cares themselves."

#### CONCLUSION

"Give me a drink" said Jesus to the woman at the well in Samaria. With that request this amazing grace proceeded to "move in" on that woman. You may wonder in your mind, is this amazing and intrusive grace worth putting up with. Does it make life different? - worth having? - worth living? The answer comes with the closing scene as we see this woman rushing to her village with a joy that she has never before known, shouting ecstatically to one and all, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did!" "Can this be the Christ?" And John adds: "Many Samaritans from that city believed in Him because of that woman's testimony".

"....need to learn in life is how to love people and use things, instead of loving things and using people"

The next time something rankles, bothers, irritates you - in an article, a book, an editorial, a conversation, a documentary - be careful how you answer. Listen and think and remember that it just might be a bit of God's persistent, intrusive but amazing grace at work....touching the vital nerve centers of your life....stripping it of some of the illusions and misconceptions that have been built up....exposing it to the will of Christ. "God's extended hand in the lives of people" - I like that definition of grace and I'm sure that those who sang that old Gospel hymn a hundred years ago as they trudged across the praries of America on their way to the West would have accepted it, too.

"Amazing grace. How sweet the sound  
That saved a wreth like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see."

"Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,  
And grace my fears relieved;  
How precious did that grace appear,  
The hour I first believed."

PRAYER

Forgive us, Lord, if we have made of Thee an easy mark and assumed that grace was cheap to find.

Forgive us if we have sought to have Thee bless our blind, selfish and self-centered way. Strive with us, Lord - with each of us - for that striving is our only lasting hope.

And we know that we have no rest - no peace - until we find our rest in Thee. In the name of Him who came that we might have life and have it in abundance, even Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen