

## "GOD'S 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 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 recently that has stayed with me. I pass it on to you. Someone has defined grace as God's extended hand. But how God's grace invades our lives is difficult to say. I'm reminded of a book that we gave our son for Christmas last year entitled, The Way Things Work. The contents fulfill the promise on the cover which read in this fashion:

"An illustrated encyclopedia of technology - from the ball point pen to the computer, from the polaroid camera to the atomic clock, with ten thousand seventy-one two color drawings and diagrams."

The point is that it is comparatively easy to learn and to understand how some things work, but how grace works - God's extended hand in the lives of men - cannot so readily be gathered into words. For God is free and sovereign. And man is blessed with a will of his own and often blinded by his sin and selfishness. Grace is personal - not mechanical. And perhaps we're safest, not when we attempt to theorize about grace, but when we witness God's grace in action. And this is what I propose we do today - watch God's grace "in action" - "on location" at a well side in Samaria long ago.

### THE INCIDENT

The incident I'm referring to took place 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 high noon and met a woman who had come there to draw some water. In the simplest language, Jesus 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. Let's continue with the scene.

This woman, to her credit, was quick to sense the threatening implications 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 stood 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. In those pre-women's liberation days women were held to be inferior. It was an accepted precept among the upright of that day that a man should not salute a woman in a public place - not even his own wife.

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 ideologi

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 unshaken. We like to have our characterizations to stay in neat array. It helps us, we think, to manage life and it also saves us from much thought. "Welfare recipients are lazy". "Communists are all bad - you can't trust one of them". "Black people are inferior". "Policemen are brutal". "Liberals hate America". "Politicians are self-serving". In such generalities we take our refuge. But for this woman, as for us when Jesus comes our way, her little pigeon holes began to run together and her carefully structured categories no longer held.

Then too, her religious loyalty was 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 still 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 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, that I may not thirst..." But because grace can never be enjoyed alone, but must always be shared, Jesus turned to her and said, "Go 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".

I'm sure that she had no idea when she went to draw water that noon that she would get into all of this. Now I think it would be kind for us to assume 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, but not substantial enough to hold to them. Legalists among the Jews had taught that three marriages were the limit in the commonwealth. She was already two over par. She prefigures 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 torn away. The subject she wanted least to talk about that hot noon had been pried open. One thinks of a line from a Broadway musical of several years back, "The Rope Dancer" in which a young girl in that production 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".

This is the old trick of trying to postpone the God question with an urbane, sophisticated question on religion. "Don't you think there are too many churches?" "Don't you think it's better to say trespasses than debts in the Lord's Prayer?" "Don't you think the King James Version is better than all those modern versions?" You know the sort of thing that comes up and meanwhile, God keeps saying, "Give me your heart"

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. 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!

It's true - men 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 grace, if you will. This grace of God - so amazing (in the words of our second hymn) that we sing about so easily and talk about so glibly - this grace of God is initially for everyone who knows it a disturbing and 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, selfish and futile ways.

And frankly, 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 in to must first be broken before we can know the peace that passes all human understanding. There is no way that an experience of grace can be anything but painful.

Back in June, a young man by the name of David Levy, said something at the Dartmouth Commencement that had overtones to me of intrusive grace. David Levy 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, the mothers and fathers, the faculty, the dignitaries and some of his own classmates when David Levy of this 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 the Class of 1971, take pity on 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 David Levy's speech at the Dartmouth Commencement must have rankled the majority of those who were present to hear it. But from within the stand-point of Scripture, it might very well be that grace was moving from that platform, overturning the hearts of many in that place.

HOW CAN THE GRACE OF GOD GET THROUGH

How can God get through to us while we hang on to our obsession with money, to name one myth. I know few people, if any, who are really happy because of the money they have. But the myth persists. If only they had more, their happiness would be complete. When it comes to giving, some men stop at nothing.

I'm reminded of the story of the minister 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 little while, he had to wake himself to check whether his satchel was still there on the rack. Finally, when he opened his eyes about four am, he discovered that the satchel was gone. "From then on" he says, "I slept absolutely peacefully".

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

One of New York's up and coming professional athletes who, before he retires, if he stays healthy, will bank six or seven hundred thousand dollars, was recently interviewed on television. When asked what he liked to do with his money, he said, "I like to spend it". The questioner continued, "What do you like to spend it on". With a straight face and without embarrassment he said, "On me".

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".

How can the grace of God get through to us while we continue to cling to our obsession with race - trying to turn the accident of color into the heart-beat of life as some attempt to? Or how can the grace of God get through to us so long as we continue our obsession with security? Bonhoeffer was on the mark in noting:

"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".

CLOSING

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

And so, dear friends, the next time something gets under your skin - at a Dartmouth commencement, in a book, in an article, a sermon, a documentary on TV, in an argument with a hippie, or in a conversation with a friend who differs with your point of view -- be careful how you answer. Just remember that it might just

be God's intrusive grace at work - touching your life - exposing it to the life and the light of Christ. In the words then of that old Gospel hymn set to one of our early American melodies, the hymn we sung before the sermon, a hymn we often hear being sung today:

"Amazing grace. How sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch 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. Forgive us if we have sought to have Thee bless our blind and selfish ways. Strive with us, Lord, for that striving is our hope. And we have no rest, no peace, until we rest in Thee. Amen