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The Story of God

A sermon given by
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The scripture we have read for today is a simple story. Jesus, in a way that is typical for him, praying for somebody who is an outcast and puts them in the center while the disciples try to hush and exclude him.

The blind man, Bartimaeus, however, will not be put aside, and for the strength of his faith he is healed. I understand this story as symbolic. I tend to think that if it doesn't happen now, it probably didn't happen then. And so the miracle part of the story holds little weight for me. I understand it as symbolic. To me, the scripture put forth this question: how do we find a faith that is strong enough to heal the holes that are in our hearts and the broken world?

The answer to that question, my friends, is ancient. We can only get to it by way of a language that is problematic, because for years and years a puritan strain has turned religion into moralism and used the word "sin" to deny the pleasures of life and even love. And so nowadays, as a pastor, you can't even say the word "sin" or "salvation" without being associated with that lineage. And it's too bad, because Martin Luther, father of the Reformation, found in the Epistles of Galatians and Romans an understanding of Jesus that I believe is a recipe for enduring and deep happiness. A recipe that requires the use of the terms "sin" and "salvation."

But, today is Reformation Sunday and the one day of the year when we look back and remember our roots and how indebted we are to them. So whether you're inclined to listen to those words or not, I have this microphone and I will take this occasion to teach them Martin Luther.

Luther believed that at any given moment we could open our hearts to the experience of the grace of God, which is that God always has favor and love to pour down on us. And that when we know that God is always gracious and forgiving and we are also aware of our sins, then we exist in a space of gratitude which turns us into beams of light and agents of healing in the world. Faith comes from this opening up—a kind of faith that is strong enough to heal the void in our heart and change the places that we reside. And although this understanding of the world is strange, I know what Luther said to be true because I have felt this same process take place in my own life.

I once followed a question: how do I live in a sacred world without breaking anything far enough that it breaks me? And I came to believe that I could neither know the consequences of all of my actions nor measure the good that I might bring to the world and therefore I had no ability to measure my net worth. From that standpoint, it became clear to me that there was no way that I would learn to love myself by reason alone; that there was no justification that I could discover that would even say that I should be here, except to accept it as a gift. So in my heart, even though Luther uses

words like “sin” and “salvation”, I know that for me he provided a key to unlock enduring happiness.

But to see the world through Luther’s eyes is not exactly a pleasant journey. First, you have to go through all the theological works to come to a vision of God as grace, and second, you have to build the case against yourself. I’ve said it once, for every time I’ve been in this pulpit, that I believe that God is grace. When I say that God is grace I mean to say that the sum total of who God is is grace and that God will never do anything that is not grace. I’ve become so firmly convicted in this view that even the Bible stories that would indicate otherwise are put on my X-list. I believe it over and against Christian doctrine that would deny it.

When I say that God is grace I mean that God loves everyone no matter who and no matter what. God loves you, my friends, and that’s the easy part because, by and large, most of you are lovable.

But here come the words that I have been worrying about for 24 hours. I believe that it is truly amazing that even though God’s heart was the first to break in the great tragedies of the world, God loved Pol Pot. God loved Adolph Hitler. And God loves Osama ben Laden. It’s hard to understand, but until we eliminate the boundary at the edge and include everyone, I don’t think we will be amazed to truly live in gratitude.

The God that I worship is a God of grace, a grace that will never end. A God that loves everyone, and the only way that could be is if grace is something we can never fall out of no matter how incorrect we can be.

Everyone wants God to be a God of justice more than grace, especially when they’re not the one in the wrong. However, if we truly believe that the love that Jesus showed in the world represents the love that God has for the world then the life of Jesus shows that love is persistent vulnerability. Maybe at times we would rather that God would come down and straighten things out. Or maybe at times we’ve wished that Jesus would come down as a conquering warrior to set things straight and secure justice for the people

That’s not how the story goes, because grace cannot carry a gun. The very climax of the Gospel is that from the cross Jesus said, “Forgive them, for they know not what they do.” He did not say, “What goes around, comes around.”

And even if the story of Jesus doesn’t compel you, the idea that he could forgive people who were about to take his life represents the kind of empathy and understanding that would upstage the story of God, if God wasn’t so gracious. God has to be grace in order to be light and nothing but light.

Once, and if, you come to truly believe that God is grace, then you can step to the second task of Luther’s formula, which is to build a case against yourself. We are all dressed in clothes of injustice. We were born into a world and raised in a system that robs the poor, makes war and famine and has now begun the work of undoing the very fabric of creation.

Now maybe you think there are reasons that you are not responsible. But they are yours and they are mine—these dollars in circulation, our taxes, our businesses, even the kind of homes we live in. And if we are not responsible then nobody is responsible. So let's take the responsibility. And, trust me, if you don't work on building the case against yourself, then there's no way you can be truly amazed that God loves you. And until you live in that space of gratitude, you won't have a sense of salvation.

I don't know how to become a person of grace without first finding that place of gratitude. Now there may be 10,000 ways—5,000 from different religious systems and 5,000 from individuals who found it themselves—but I only know this one, which is why I share it with you. Come to know your deep brokenness and from it forgive others and you will find tranquility and peace of mind. It's also the only way I know to truly come to fulfill the first commandment to love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul, which is to see God as grace and know that you're accepted.

I have been on the search for some time now trying to find people I see as examples of the living experience of God's grace, and who have a sense of salvation here and now. It's not a very common thing to find. I personally find it difficult to stay in an attitude of gratitude and find myself oscillating between two camps: one that is riddled with guilt, the "I can never do enough" crowd, and the other crowd that merrily dismisses the role that we're playing in the tragedy.

But there is a third way that is represented by Martin Luther. It is not a superficial way to look at the world, and it answers the question, "am I doing enough?" For you, I wish the diligence and the endurance that it takes to build the case against yourself. I hope that at the same time you will catch glimpses of the spirit of grace that will firm up and convict your faith in a gracious God. So that these questions, perennial to life, do not tear at your seams, but will be a ladder downward to a deeper and deeper faith.