

Easter Grace

[Project image: Primacy of St. Peter] Sometimes things just have to sit for a while. A year ago I preached a sermon series on the Gospel of John. I ended up doing 16 sermons, at which time I decided it might be time to move on to something else for a while. I'm guessing you concurred. But to be clear, I hadn't yet finished the series.

A number of months ago I started a sermon series which I called "50,000 Shades of Grace," and eventually shortened it to simply "Shades of Grace," in which I preached on texts that revealed different manifestations or "shades" of grace. After four weeks we had compiled a list of twenty-three shades of grace, and still hadn't gotten to some of the most important texts. But the season of Lent was beginning, and so it was again time to move on to something else.

The joyous season known as Easter began on April 4. But after seven weeks it was time to move on to Pentecost (which was two weeks ago today, remember?). But to be clear, we hadn't really finished talking about Easter. Far from it.

In the Gospel of John, at the end of Chapter 20 the writer had put the final "amen" on his gospel. Or so he thought at the time. But years later—no one knows how many—five? Ten? Fifty?—the writer realized that some stories were still unfinished, and there was at least one new story to tell. And so he added Chapter 21.

One of the stories the writer hadn't finished yet at the end of Chapter 20 was the story of the disciple known as Simon Peter. Where we had last heard anything about him, Peter had run to the tomb where Jesus' body had been laid, only to find the tomb empty, save for a pile of linen wrappings, and we can imagine Peter had returned home, confused, not knowing what to think.

Throughout the entire gospel, Peter had been one of the most important disciples. The first time he met Jesus (in 1:42), the "Mysterious Master" had said to him, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas (which is translated Peter)," and which, I will add, in English is translated "rock." And sure enough, Peter had very quickly become the rock, giving every last bit of himself to being a disciple or follower of Jesus. That night in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus had been arrested, Peter had even drawn his sword, which we can imagine he barely knew how to hold properly, let alone use (he was a fisherman, for goodness' sake!), and had used it to strike off the ear of the high priest's slave (a man named Malchus, John informs us). Fat lot of good that had done. In the ensuing hours, during which Jesus stood trial, Peter had barely had the courage to follow at a distance, and had even denied knowing Jesus—once, twice, even a totally devastating third time. At least Judas had had the courage and willpower to end his own life after betraying Jesus. Peter couldn't even do that.

When was the last time you failed—or worse betrayed—Jesus? How did that feel? How does it feel even now? You can try to put it out of your mind, even try to move on from it. But you can't, can you? Not really. Not completely.

There was that time when, "after these things," Peter had decided to go fishing. It's what he knew. In truth (Jesus would have said "verily, verily") it was all Peter knew. All he had left. To add yet more "saltwater" to the wound, Peter and his companions had fished all night, and had caught zero fish. Not even one. Serving to simply cement his abject failure.

Some wiseacre had appeared on the shore, and had called to the fishermen, “children, have you no fish?” In the original Greek, what he actually said was more like, “you haven’t caught any fish, have you, children?” Thank you, whoever you are! Thank you for stating the obvious, and then rubbing my nose in it! I don’t even know you!

“Cast your nets to the other side,” the stranger smugly suggested. You idiot! You moron! What do you even know about fishing?! Peter’s moron companions went ahead and did what the stranger suggested anyway. Complete waste of time. We’re not going to catch any fish. I gave up on that hours ago.

Through the thick fog of his total despair, Peter slowly became aware that something was happening. He heard voices. Excited voices. Something about . . . fish. A lot of fish. He heard one of his companions—that “disciple whom Jesus loved”—say to him, “Peter, it is the Lord!” Idiot! Moron! The Lord is dead! But something made Peter look. What if . . . the crackpot on the shore were the Lord? Suddenly some fresh wave of masochistic madness overtook him, and Peter put on his clothes, leapt over the side of the boat, and into the rocking water.

You see, Peter fished naked. He always had. With no clothes in the way, it was easier to manage the nets. But some particularly mad part of his almost completely mad mind asked himself, “what if it were the Lord? You’re not even presentable! You’re naked. Unclean. Vulgar. Idiot! Moron! Put on your clothes!”

What happened next was mostly a blur. He remembered swimming to shore. He remembered the fire. And the fish atop it, already cooked to perfection. And the loaves of steaming fresh bread. He remembered how good it tasted. And he especially remembered the stranger’s voice. “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

He had asked himself that, of course. Many times. If he had really loved the Lord, as much as he had kept saying he did, then how could he abandon him when things went bad? If he had really loved the Lord, how could he deny even knowing him? The stranger’s question served only to painfully remind him of his denial, and to elicit his weak, “hurt” response. “Yes Lord, you know that I love you.” “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” he heard the voice ask a second time. “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you!” “Simon son of John, do you love me?” the voice asked a third time. And he blurted out, beside himself “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you!”

“Feed my sheep,” he said. As if he was giving me a job to do. As if he was saying, “I’m not done with you, Peter. I still need you. Your three denials didn’t diminish your worth to me. Not even a little bit.”

That was my Easter. That was when the Resurrection became real to me. The realization that I hadn’t completely blown it, after all. That it wasn’t over. That the Lord was still alive. And, he had forgiven me. He had forgiven me! He had forgiven me!!

Grace is being forgiven. Pure and simple. And not just that. Grace is being given a second chance, a fresh start. That’s what Jesus did for me. That’s the meaning of Easter.

“Do you know how many fish we ended up catching on the other side of the boat? One hundred fifty-three. Guess who counted them? I’m not saying (it might have been me)! But I will say this: Easter grace is astonishingly abundant grace. Just when you had given up. Because time after time, your nets had come up completely empty. Of course, there were those hints of less pleasant things. About how when I was younger I used to fasten my own belt, go wherever I wished, called my own shots. But how the time was coming, maybe was already here, when I would stretch out my hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around me and take

me where I did not wish to go. The time when I would not, could not call my own shots. A time when I was in control of my own destiny no longer.

And there was that hint of how I would sooner or later die. Because stretching out my hands like this [out in front] could also look like this [up, as on a cross].

But it's okay, it really is. Because I've been forgiven. Not once but three times. Completely, comprehensively, categorically forgiven.

Easter grace. Abundant, restoring grace. I'd call that a pretty good way to end a sermon series, wouldn't you? Even two. Not to mention a gospel. [Refer to the picture.] Sometimes things just have to sit for a while.