



How Do You Spell Grace?

John 3:14-21, Ephesians 2:4-10

The Fourth Sunday of Lent
March 26, 2006

There's an old TV commercial for an antacid that asks, "How do you spell relief?" The actor, who has eaten one too many meatballs, chews a couple of tablets of antacid, and then immediately feels all better, and declares, "How do I spell relief? R-O-L-A-I-D-S!"

Today I'm asking, "How do you spell grace?" We say the word all the time in church. What is it? Why do we need it? Where can we find it? All of that is what I mean in the question, "How do you spell grace?"

Here's how I spell grace: G-I-F-T. Grace is simply another way to say "gift." We talk all the time about grace of God. That simply is the gift of God. Now there are many kinds of gifts from God: the gift of creation, the gift of family, the gift of life, the gifts of the Spirit. Our passage from John speaks of the greatest gift of God: "For God so loved the world that he GAVE ... his only Son..." The passage we read from Ephesians speaks of the same gift when it says that God "made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved. (Ephesians 2:5) Grace is the gift of God.

It is a gift we cannot give ourselves. Sometimes we joke, "I'm going to buy myself a gift," like a gift from me to me on my birthday. But giving yourself a gift is just not the same. When you unwrap it, it's hard to look surprised. And, besides, there are some things we simply cannot do for ourselves. Saving ourselves from our sins comes to mind. Now that is beyond us, and the only way we'll ever experience that is by a gift from beyond, from the only One who has the power to save us. And when that Divine One grants us that gift, it is ALL gift. It is all grace.

How do you spell grace? I like the way one writer spells grace so much that I had it printed in your bulletin:

A good sleep is grace and so are good dreams. Most tears are grace. The smell of rain is grace. Somebody loving you is grace. Loving somebody is grace. Have you ever *tried* to love somebody? ...people are saved by grace. ... The grace of God means ... Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. ... I love you ... the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it... Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too."

That's how Frederick Buechner spells grace. (*Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*)

The third chapter of John tells how Jesus spelled grace. Look at verses 14 and 15 and you'll hear Jesus spelling grace in a surprising way:

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

How did Jesus spell grace? S-N-A-K-E !!

I don't like snakes. When our first Baptist Men's team went to Gulfport, Bruce Jackson and Garland Ricks and I were cleaning out a room in a flooded house. Suddenly, something about five feet long and black and slithery jumped out into the middle of the room. Bruce jumped straight up – I am not lying – about three feet. I know because I was in mid-air myself. It was a black, slithery, *vacuum cleaner hose* -- that Garland had grabbed and thrown at us.

I don't like snakes. So why would Jesus explain grace by talking about a snake? Because it was an old snake story that Nicodemus knew well. This whole passage is a conversation between Jesus and a teacher named Nicodemus. You remember Nicodemus, the Pharisee who slipped in at nighttime to talk with Jesus secretly. They talked together mind to mind, and heart to heart. And Jesus explained his mission to Nicodemus.

To do that, Jesus reached back for an old, old story from the Torah that Nicodemus knew well. Here's the story (it comes from the 21st chapter of Numbers): Moses and the people of Israel had escaped Egypt and were in the wilderness heading toward the Promised Land. And as usual, the people were grumbling: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." (I think they were talking about the manna. Imagine that: complaining about God's cooking! Num. 21:5) God got so sick and tired of their complaining that God let loose some poisonous snakes in the camp, which started biting people, who started dying. The people got the point, and came to Moses and repented of their complaining and asked Moses to ask the Lord to take the serpents away. The Lord told Moses to make a snake out of bronze, put it up on a pole, and "whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live."

Now, this was not magic or superstition. Rick Brand, Presbyterian pastor in Henderson, NC, explains this very well:

A turning of the head toward the serpent was a turning of one's heart toward the mercy and power of God. It was a physical act of faith to look at the serpent to acknowledge their dependence on the mercy of God. Their healing did not come from the bronze snake, but from the promised word of God. When they were bitten by the poison snake, they knew they were unable to help themselves. ... The looking at the bronze serpent was the act by which they cast themselves upon the presence and power of God to give health, healing and wholeness.

(Lectionary Homiletics, February-March 2006, p. 71)

By the way, those of you in the medical profession have this symbol for your profession: a serpent on a staff, called the caduceus.

Anyway, Jesus reminded Nicodemus of this old story from the Torah. And then Jesus looked Nicodemus right in the eyes and told him this: what that bronze serpent did for the people in the wilderness, I will do for the whole world. He said that in John 3:15:

...just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Jesus was telling Nicodemus that someday Jesus will be lifted up on a cross. But his death will have a purpose. Just as the people of the wilderness could look on that bronze serpent with hope and be healed of their sin and suffering, now the people of the world will be able to look upon Jesus lifted up on the cross and be healed of their own sin and suffering.

Now, if you understand John 3:15, then you can really understand John 3:16:

For God so loved the world that he have his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

“...so that everyone who believes in him – everyone who looks up toward him on the cross – may not perish!” When we look to Jesus on the cross, something happens. It’s not magic; it’s not superstition, but something does happen. When we turn our heads to Jesus on the cross, it is a turning of our hearts toward the mercy and the power of God. It is an act of faith that acknowledges our dependence on the mercy of God.

You and I live in a poisonous age. Our own sins come back to bite us. Some of our sins are very personal. Some of our sins are global. Rick Warren, author of The Purpose Driven Life, spoke to the Baptist World Alliance meeting in England last summer. He described five giants which prevent the world from experiencing the peace on earth promised by our Lord and Savior. Let me re-tell them to you as five giant serpents. The five serpents that keep our world from knowing the peace our Lord wills are: 1. Poverty 2. Disease 3. Illiteracy 4. Spiritual Emptiness 5. Egocentric Leaders. They are the giant serpents that strike our world and inject it with sin and despair and death.

And then there are other serpents that torment us on a more personal level. Personally, most of us are bitten by what Rick Brand calls the “green-eyed monster of envy of all the consumer goods that we do not yet have.” And we are wounded by the “haughty arrogance of pride and self-sufficiency.” And we are poisoned by our past mistakes in how we have handled sex or power or money. And there is nothing we can do to save ourselves. There is no anti-venom in the world that can save us.

But we can turn our heads and look to the Son of Man lifted up on the cross. We can turn our hearts to the God who continues to act to give us new life when the old one

has been poisoned to death. We can throw ourselves upon the presence and the power of God to give us new hope that God will do a new thing in our lives. Whoever looks to him and believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life. That's what the cross is all about. On the cross, the Savior is lifted up for all eyes to see and be saved. And that's how Jesus spells out grace for you and me.

Behind all this is God. It is God who so loved the world, it is God who gave the Son. Who will respond to this love of God? Who will take hold of God's gift of the Son? Who will turn toward the Son and look on him, and know the power of God to save you from all the poison that is in this world?

-- Douglas E. Murray