

*Greatness of Grace*

Acts 4:32-37

Rev. Cameron Barr

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One might doubt the sincerity of an apology that is too effusive. Or if your spouse is acting uncharacteristically kind and considerate you might understandably wonder what they're hiding. Or if you unexpectedly receive a really nice gift from a friend or family member, you might suspect they're compensating for something. There is something unsettling about kindness that is adorned with unnecessary pageantry. A kind gesture involving too much explanation or justification can't really stand on its own. I'm not suggesting that one should be unnecessarily skeptical of mundane gestures of friendliness and love - but it's generally true that we can sense when others feign affection. Some things just set off your inner BS detector. Most everyone with an intimate partner, or a family, or children learns to see through the little falsehoods that are presented to us day by day. They're not all bad for us. A little bit of fakery is useful to protect our wounds. A sincere apology or a genuine act of kindness isn't always hurt by a good performance. But I imagine you know what I mean: There's a subtle difference between showing your love and making show of your love.

We might well reflect on that distinction with the first apostles. Many of them actually witnessed the resurrected Jesus, according to Luke, and experienced the gift of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. These early converts to the tradition that will become Christianity are true believers, emboldened not just by what they saw with their own eyes but by the hostility of their neighbors who reject their testimony. Authenticity is the central question in this narrative - what can we believe happened and whose testimony about these extraordinary things can we accept? The first apostles slowly learn to trust their experience - seeing Jesus with their own eyes, wrestling with their doubts, discerning the truth in the company of others. Things really get out of hand, though, when reported miracles continue after the ascension of Jesus. Religious authorities are alarmed when Peter reportedly healed a sick man in the middle of the day at a popular gathering place known as the Beautiful Gate. It's one thing to believe in Jesus; quite another to believe in his followers. So they lock Peter and John up in the local jail for the night to give them time to reconsider their testimony. But the apostles are firm in their recollection and consistent in their testimony. They trust their experience. "You must judge whether it is right for us to listen to you rather than to God," Peter and John replied to them, but we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard."

The believers are said to be so transformed by their experience that they create their own utopian community. To me, this is the most unbelievable part of the whole narrative. I believe in the resurrection of Jesus. I accept the movement of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. I don't even dispute that Peter healed a man at the Beautiful Gate. But I have a hard time with Luke's description of the harmonious spirit that prevailed in the early church. Luke says that everyone shared their possessions unselfishly. They jointly owned property and lived in peaceful housing collectives. No one had need of anything. Everyone brought what they earned and "laid it at the Apostle's feet" for equitable distribution. Conditioned as I am by the gross inequalities in the world I walk in and am accustomed to expect so little of those who hold power, the early church doesn't sound to me like a religious miracle but a fantasy. It makes me question not God's power but Luke's memory. I can accept the miracles of Jesus, but call me cynical, I don't believe

this much in the goodness of ordinary people. To me, it's Luke's over the top description that makes me suspicious. "With great power the apostles gave their testimony...and great grace was upon them all." Great grace? What does greatness of grace even mean? Can grace be intensified with greatness? Grace cannot be compared. Grace is not something we strive for. So to say that the apostles were "great" in their grace is to invite the kind of skepticism you might feel when an ex-boyfriend says, "But I really really love you." Am I supposed to be reassured by this?

In any event - whether the culture of the early church was really as cooperative and serene as Luke describes or not - the honeymoon didn't last long. Within a few chapters, the egos return, and certainly by the time Paul crusades across the Mediterranean there are multiple conflicts among and between the various churches. Thank goodness that "greatness of grace" doesn't become an expectation of all of us.

In truth I quarrel with the notion that these Apostles lived in idyllic community with each other because I reject the notion that our faith is somehow supposed to bring us to some kind of moral perfection. Perhaps we are saved by our faith - but not as a consequence of our own good intentions. I believe that Christ lives for real people. Christ is only real to us if we can be real in ourselves. The resurrection is only true to the extent that we can be true to ourselves. Even under arrest and persecution, the apostles stick to their testimony because they have authentically wrestled with it. There's a man in Mark's gospel who cries out through his tears before Jesus - "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief." I think about his honesty as a testimony of deep and sincere faith. He holds together his belief and his unbelief. Jesus sees his doubt and his conviction, his worry and his hope.

So I want to relate to this story in the way that I want to relate to people in my life that I care about. Not with false sincerity. Not with "greatness of grace." Not with a performance of devotion or affection or sentiment. But in the authenticity of my own faith - present to the reality of my existence, responsible for myself, honest with my doubts and struggles. If we expect that sort of truth and honesty among our friends and family, wouldn't God desire the same authenticity in their relationship with us? God does not need our effusive apologies. What use does God have for the empty gifts that we bring in place of ourselves. God can see plainly through the masks that we wear.

So this is the Good News of Easter. It comes to us without adornment. It is the Gospel that stands for itself. No justification. No explanation. No performance. Just the plain testimony of a few who have seen and heard. Christ is Risen! Alleluia!