

“God’s Sure Provision”

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First Presbyterian Church, Pulaski, TN

FIRST READING: Exodus 33:12-23

Moses said to the LORD, "See, you have said to me, "Bring up this people'; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, "I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.' 13 Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people." 14 He said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." 15 And he said to him, "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. 16 For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth."

17 The LORD said to Moses, "I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name." 18 Moses said, "Show me your glory, I pray." 19 And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, "The LORD'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. 20 But," he said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." 21 And the LORD continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; 22 and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; 23 then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

SECOND READING: Matthew 18:21-35

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 16 So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. 17 Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" 18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? 19 Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. 20 Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" 21 They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." 22 When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

I have a question I want to ask this morning, but as soon as I ask it, you will know that it is really a question I have been asking myself, based on my sense of renewal that has been going on in me for the last several weeks.

The question is simply this: “What can make us forget the grace of God?”

“What can make us forget the grace of God?”

Grace is my foundational story. It was the revelation of God’s grace that changed my life, irrevocably, for all time. It is why I ever went into ministry at all.

And when it came to working for churches, the central question I always had was whether what they said they wanted to hear was “the grace of God.” I came specifically and intentionally, in fact, to the Presbyterian Church when I was looking for a home, not simply because of past history or sentimentality, but because the Presbyterian Church stakes everything on grace.

That is what we say, anyway.

Read any Presbyterian Confession, and you will hear a clear and full-throated statement about grace—and grace alone. The Reformed Tradition is unequivocally and unashamedly anchored in grace, and nothing but grace.

So, you would think it just wouldn’t be possible for me to forget the grace of God. But I did.

It's a lot like my glasses. As I told the Wednesday evening class last week, my glasses are so essential that I lose them every day.

What?

My glasses are so essential, so of course, I lose them every day.

You can ask why that is, but all I can tell you is that every day I have to go looking for my glasses, because without them, I am nearly helpless. And you would think that because my glasses are so essential, I would be a great pains never to lose them or misplace them. I should know where they are at all times.

But instead, I take them off, sleep or shower, or read something carefully up close with them off my face, and I promptly forget where they are. Emma can be a witness.

So, here I am at age 55, seminary-educated, living out of a profound memory of grace that motivated me to go toward God and toward theology and finally toward ministry—yet what has dawned on me over the last several weeks is just how far I have managed to misplace my awareness of and confidence in the grace of God. I want to thank all of you for helping me find my theological glasses.

Somehow I had managed to misplace it under all the papers on my desk, the obligations I think I have, the schedule I think I must keep, the subtle but deadly sense that it is what I do, and how well I do it, that is the make or break of life and maybe of this church, if I let my ego and fear start running bridle-free.

Which is why this morning, I want to pause and ask us, "What is it that can cause us to forget the grace of God?" And to look at part of the list in this passage from Matthew and another from Exodus.

This passage from Matthew is a good one, and it is a good Middle Tennessee conversation.

"There are only two things certain in life...death and taxes." And this passages brings them both together.

The Pharisees and Herodians—normally two groups that barely tolerated each other, if that—are out to kill Jesus. They are the agents of death here, and it is certain.

So, to kill Jesus, they, let's see here...they bring up...taxes.

Taxes? They bring up taxes? Why in the world would they bring up taxes in a series of conflicts with Jesus that have largely focused on what God is doing to save the world and who gets to say who can come to the banquet.

And even more, how does bringing up taxes fit into a plan to kill someone like Jesus?

The answer is actually not hard to find. Human beings have been arguing about taxes since time began, and we will be arguing about them until Jesus comes back. Of this I am certain.

But the clue here is in the fact that it is the Herodians AND the Pharisees colluding together against Jesus. The Herodians were the people with a vested interested in keeping Rome happy, and, in fact, keeping Rome in charge. Because they were the beneficiaries of the current Roman occupation, and essentially Rome promised their military backing to the Herodians so long as they kept the local people in line. The Pharisees were essentially the day-to-day leaders of the very people that Rome and the Herodians wanted kept in line, but the Pharisees were passionate Jews, with a fierce and passionate commitment to all things Jewish—and only Jewish.

So, by posing the seemingly innocuous question of "is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" these two groups are putting Jesus in a pincer move.

If Jesus answers "no," then Jesus becomes the darling of the Pharisees and every group even more radical than the Pharisees. He would essentially be throwing down the Maccabean gauntlet. "Millions for defense, but not one cent for tribute!" comes to mind. To refuse to pay taxes is to stir a people's passion for independence, freedom and manhood—but very likely also for rebellion and violence. So, Jesus' polling numbers would have gone up yet even more...a Jesus Maccabeus with miraculous power no less to crush the Romans.

But none of that would have a chance to take place, with Herodians as witnesses. Because they would have made one quick "ancient world phone call" and Jesus and his followers would have been on a cross by 3 o'clock that same day.

On the other hand, if Jesus says, "yes," then the opposite takes place. The Herodians leave happy, but the Pharisees now have Jesus in their jaws. With a "yes" Jesus becomes a Roman stooge, a subversive Gentile agent, undermining Jewish righteousness with loose talk about forgiveness and salvation, when the real plan is to destroy Jewish zeal and commitment. They are ready already with their "Crucify him, crucify him! Crucify the traitor to the law, the temple and all that makes us Jews!" And the same

nationalistic zeal that would have catapulted Jesus to fame and glory in the minds of the popular thinking with a “no” would have turned and tried to tear him to shreds as a traitor.

Only two things are certain...death and anger over taxes.

For down deep, what the Herodians and the Pharisees are trying to exploit is people’s fear of scarcity and powerlessness. Taxes seem to make us feel small and weak, as if someone is draining the life out of us. And whatever I pay in taxes may as well have been loaded in a rocket and shipped off to Mars, never to return. Taxes take our lives and put them in a deep hole never to return, or so we feel. And whatever went into taxes pushed me that much closer to the brink of survival or starvation, which, of course, means that there is precious little, if anything, left for God.

“Give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor, and to God what is God’s.”

Jesus is on the brink of giving away his whole life to God in a seemingly useless endeavor. Dying on a cross seems about as big a waste of human life as one can envision. Yet Jesus believes that not only will his life not be wasted, it will not even be lost. Because the power and the sure provision of God in both life and death makes it silly to worry about pieces of paper and metal and what is printed on them.

Maybe we should go ahead and accept the full sentence of “Only two things in life are certain: death and taxes..., the grace of God...not so much.”

Money, power, narrow nationalism, control, fear of death, fear of scarcity, fear of being alone and defenseless...these things can indeed make us forget the grace of God, God’s sure provision.

It is an echo of Exodus, in fact, where Moses comes to God worn down by another version of death and taxes, only this time it has an even longer list of things that can make even Moses forget the grace of God.

What can make someone like Moses forget the grace of God? Well, people can, that’s what, or who. People. God’s people, no less.

And even today, when we look at the church, it doesn’t take long to forget the grace of God. Our divisions, our arguments, our loss of social prestige—at least in our own minds—our seeming loss of great leaders, our fears over the state of the world—only one thing is certain, the church is in trouble.

“the grace of God, well, not so much.”

Moses has just come out of the Golden Calf scene. Up on the mountain with God, Moses seems barely out of sight and earshot before the people go nuts. They feel weak, defenseless, leaderless, abandoned, bereft. They are nobodies camped around a mountain seemingly without a future or a direction, and they know that they are vulnerable to hunger, scarcity, attack. They are surrounded by nations more powerful than they, with all the trappings and machinery that make a nation a nation—a king, a mighty army, powerful weapons, a structured society and consistent basis for food, water and housing.

Forget, of course, that they have just been delivered by the grace of God from the most powerful nation on earth—all that matters is that they don’t have those things.

So, the people are so desperate that they tax themselves and then sell themselves over to an image of power that is only a hunk of metal. But they cast onto that image the hope of nationhood and protection and power, a focal point for their anxiety and a focal point for their hungry desires for life that feels normal for them, which is a form of slavery, at this point.

And now Moses has come out of the wreckage of that moment to stand before God and to say, “I feel all alone, and I am at the end of what I can do.”

Moses comes to God out of his fatigue and his frustration and he essentially says to God, “You have said that I have found favor in your sight, that I am doing your work and that these people matter to you, but right this minute, I feel overworked, overcome and all alone. So, I need you not to say nice words to me. I need help.”

And God says, “Okay.”

But Moses can only see the ½ mile around him at the moment as if it were the whole universe, and so he says essentially to God, “No, God, you don’t understand. I really need you to be with me.”

And God says, “I will do precisely what you have asked.”

But still Moses hasn’t remembered the grace of God, so he says again, “Look God, I need to see you to be sure of you, and I need you to end my anxiety one way or the other. I want to please you but I need help, and I need to know whether you are really there or not. I need to see you.”

So, God says, “Okay, but not as your anxiety demands, because you have forgotten who I am. No one can see my face and live.” It is just too much to see the true glory of God, unfiltered.

And if you have ever looked at the computer program Google Earth, you can get a little sense of what is about to happen to Moses. On his screen, he has zoomed in to the street level, down to looking at the cars in the driveway, when suddenly he scrolls the computer mouse, and Moses' vision goes out the infinite view, and the planet earth becomes just a tiny, then invisible dot, among the vast cosmos of the universe.

God goes from being Jiminy Cricket on Moses' shoulder, or a tiny little angelic voice beside his ear, to the Sovereign Ruler of all that exists. And it would have put him in the total awareness vortex and his mind would have melted from trying to take it all in.

So, instead, God shows grace to Moses' frail creaturely mind and existence, and first of all takes no offense at Moses and his weakness and his frustration, and he places him in the cleft of the rock to both protect him and reassure him, and then God says this:

"I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The LORD'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.

It is an intimidating pronouncement, overwhelming Moses' vision of God that he had been operating with not 30 seconds before.

But what is most clear is that God is the God of all goodness, and God is the God of all grace and all mercy. That is plainly and simply who God is, no matter how often we forget that.

I find this such an illuminating reality for me, because I slip into forgetting God and the grace of God as soon as I start to feel pressure, or need, or anxiety, or threat, or fear, or scarcity or anger.

There is a long, long list of the things that can make me forget the grace of God. My own fatigue or impatience, my frustration with myself or with others, my self-important notions about leadership in God's name, the latest news report about turmoil or catastrophe in the world. The latest wrinkle in my skin, or bump on my face. The latest checking account statement from my bank, or the phone call from my car repair shop.

Maybe the truth is that anything and everything can become a reason for us to forget the grace of God. A conversation about death or taxes, much less both. A conversation about the future of our church, or my child or your child.

Someone's fear of the end of the world, or someone's fear of the people across the street or across the globe.

But here is the word for the Pharisees, the Herodians, for Moses, for the children of Israel and for us:

"I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The LORD'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.

God is the God of all grace. At the very core of who God is, how God names God's own identity is this word, "grace."

No one has to tell or convince God to be gracious. No one has to coerce or bribe God to be good or merciful. God is those things, in God's very being. We know God because we know grace. And vice-versa.

So, perhaps we humans are always in the process or the moment of forgetting God's grace, no matter how many Red Seas we cross or how many fish we have caught or how many fears we have survived and no matter deaths we have escaped.

But no matter. God cannot and will not forget God's grace, for God's grace is who God is.

And even with sinners like you and me, especially sinners like us and the rest of the world, God's grace is never at an end. God is at work in this world, drawing people toward life and health and fullness and joy, toward hope and toward faith and especially toward love.

And God's grace is relentless, because God's name is faithfulness and graciousness and mercy.

The things that are wrong in this world are real. A golden calf, idolatry, nations in turmoil and nations in danger and nations that are dangerous. Hunger and scarcity can be real. I will pay taxes this year.

But what is most certain in all of life, more certain than all those things and anything else you or I can name in all of heaven and earth, what is most certain of all is God's grace, God's sure provision, God's very nature as the God of all grace and glory and mercy and justice and ultimately of peace and justification.

And despite all our fears and all our long lists of things that worry us, God's sure provision, God's grace is always here, ready to be discovered, and always, always more than sufficient for all our needs.

Thanks be to God, the God of all grace. Amen.