

Sermon: **Grasping Grace**  
Text: Luke 7:36-50

Reverend James R. Henry  
The Elijah Kellogg Congregational Church  
Harpswell, Maine  
Delivered: June 27, 2010

At first glance we see three main characters; a sinful woman, a religious man and Jesus. But deeper perception reveals a woman of contrite heart, a self-righteous man and Jesus.

First, the woman. She is introduced as “a woman in the city who was a sinner” She is not named but is apparently known and readily recognized. Whatever her sin, we are not told, she seems to be known throughout the city for her sin. We may assume she has been subject to public shame. That can be devastating. As such she would be deemed unworthy and dismissed from public society. She is not one you would invite to your table. I can only wonder about her personal sense of shame and self-condemnation.

But she has come to realize in Jesus the grace of God’s forgiveness. She has grasped the meaning of grace. She is experiencing the reality of God’s forgiveness and the freedom of God’s acceptance. (Let me slip in a “Hallelujah” here!)

And so her response to Jesus is extreme gratitude. Her expression of gratitude is an over-the-top outpouring of affection that is way beyond the customary acts of greeting or the normal rituals of hospitality. Her over-the-top expression is in response to Jesus’ over-the-top grace.

She grasps the meaning of grace. She “gets it” intellectually, but more than that, she is taking hold of it and appropriating it experientially.

This is not the cheap grace that Dietrich Bonhoeffer warns us of. Her response is not “Oh cool, I’m off the hook. That’s easy. It’s nice to know about this lever of grace. I need not worry too much about how I live. I can go on living for myself. I’ll just need, every now and then, to invoke this grace thing, pull the lever, and I’ll be off the hook again.” No, her actions and response indicate otherwise.

Nor is this simply an act of self-forgiveness. It is her response to the initial forgiveness of God.

Quite a few times I have met with people who struggle to forgive themselves for something. “I just can’t forgive myself”, they say. Their difficulty is a very reasonable and honest kind of reckoning with fairness. It’s just doesn’t seem right or fair to forgive themselves. It seems too easy and cheap, especially when the consequences of their wrongdoing still exist.

There are times, I believe, when we will be able to forgive ourselves only as we are able to grasp hold of God’s forgiveness. It is the forgiveness and acceptance of God that allows us to forgive ourselves and frees us to live a true life of love and gratitude. How wonderful are those words of assurance: “In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. Thanks be to God.”

Grasping grace means throwing ourselves on the mercy of God’s redeeming love. Luke presents this in such a way that we see this woman throwing herself on the mercy of Christ. Had the words of songwriter Robert Robinson been written by then, she might have been singing,

*Oh to grace how great a debtor daily I’m constrained to be!  
Let thy goodness, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to thee.*

We love because God first loved us, John tells us. True devotion to God and selfless service in the name of Christ is not our self-determined effort. It is born and flows out of our grasp of grace and the resulting experience of God's forgiveness and freedom of our acceptance in Jesus Christ. That is the key to living the Christian life.

This woman is grasping grace.

Then there is Simon. Rather than grasping grace, he is grudging of grace. Rather than being receptive to God's forgiveness, he is resistant to it.

I mean, it just doesn't seem fair. He has invited Jesus to his table. He is a very devout religious man. He lives a very measured and careful life according to the law. He observes all the prescribed rituals of his religion and adheres closely to the codes of purity, lest he be morally defiled.

He was a good man, but one that Mark Twain would refer to as "a good man in the very worst sense of the word." Simon knows the rules, and buddy, he keeps the rules. He has become quite self-satisfied and self-affirming in his high standard of rightness. His concept of righteousness has become objectified and systematized and mechanized. He has developed a standard of measure by which he categorizes and judges others. And as a result, he cuts a line, separating him from "them"... the sinners... lest he become contaminated by them.

It's a kind of spiritual profiling; a kind of righteousness by separation. He sees this woman through the lens of his own religious frame. She is thus profiled, categorized, separated, and stamped with a low valuation of worth.

After Luke describes this woman's over-the-top outpouring of gratitude he writes, "When Simon saw it he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him – that she is a sinner.'"

"When he saw *it*." What was it Simon saw? He saw "what kind of woman she was – that she was a sinner". And he saw an extravagant and ridiculous display by this woman – this outsider who has no place or claim at his table. And he was appalled by her behavior. But even more so, he was appalled by Jesus' reception of her. "Doesn't he know who she is -- what kind of woman she is? He's letting a sinner touch him. He's allowing himself to be defiled, and also my table. He shouldn't allow it. By his acceptance of her he is disqualifies himself with her.

What he sees doesn't square with his code of righteousness. It doesn't square with our human doctrine of fairness. And he and we can be quick to begrudge the grace of God so freely extended to someone we don't think qualifies.

Simon finds grace offensive, and he is truly baffled by it. It doesn't work! It messes with his concept of holiness and it invalidates his whole system of righteous weights and measures. He would rather see her judged... to see her get what's coming to her. And what she gets instead is grace!

Luke continues his account. "Then turning toward the woman, Jesus said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman?'" Simon, do you *see this woman?*

Simon sees a sinner; someone to turn away from. But Jesus sees a contrite and repentant heart, and he turns toward her, and says, "Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

Jesus tries to help Simon understand this woman's over-the-top expression of love, something like this: "Simon, you're the host here. Yet you haven't offered me even the customary acts of hospitality. This woman has gone overboard and way beyond the cultural norm in an outpouring of gratitude for how much she has been forgiven. Simon, do you see this woman? Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven. That's why she has shown such

great love. But” (I think he’s looking Simon right in the eye) “the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little. Simon, you’re not seeing the magnitude of your own sinfulness. You are not so other than this woman. Simon, can’t you see yourself in her?”

“Both of you are known publically for what you do; you for your righteous acts; she for her unrighteous acts. But both of you are sinners. Remember, Simon, ‘Let the one who is without sin throw the first stone.’ Her sin is outward and obvious to all. Your sin is inward; a hidden attitude of heart. So, Simon, put down the stone.”

“Simon, she has grasped the meaning of grace. She is experiencing the reality of God’s forgiveness and the freedom of God’s acceptance. You’re not grasping that. You are begrudging of grace, and as a result you are still locked in your own self-righteous prison. You are a victim and a prisoner of your own efforts to somehow deserve and win God’s acceptance.

Does Simon ever get it? I don’t know. Does he ever really grasp the meaning of grace?

Do you? Do you see this woman? Can you see yourself in her? Can you grasp the meaning of grace as it applies to you? Will you let yourself receive God’s grace of forgiveness in Jesus Christ and know the freedom of God’s acceptance?

I will never forget a woman in my previous charge in Massachusetts. I’ll call her Mrs. Fitch. She was a very sophisticated woman, well educated, an artist, and a leader in the woman’s literary society. Mrs. Fitch was extremely careful about everything. She was up in years and living in an up-scale home that cared for the elderly. The home, quite exclusive and accommodating only five residents had a large waiting list. I think Mrs. Fitch rather liked the idea that there were others waiting. It may have kept her living longer. When I would call on her, she was very critical of the other residents and could hardly abide sitting next to some of them at the evening meal. She was flat out self-righteous and priggish. She kept her nose clean and well elevated.

One day she called me to let me know that she was coming to my office to see me. I offered to come to her, but she insisted that she would arrange for a taxi. As we talked, she offered that she was not happy with herself and seemed unsure of her true spiritual standing. She cited a long litany of her past involvements in the church and community that were indeed noteworthy. Yet she was quite troubled. Our conversation led to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and how it is not so much about what we do to win God’s acceptance of us, but about what Jesus did for us and how God accepts us in his grace.

After a while a kind of wash came over her disposition and she looked at me in a kind of puzzled delight and said, “Do you mean I can stop trying so hard?” Yes, Mrs. Fitch! Yes, that’s the Gospel Good News!

Mrs. Fitch was beginning to grasp grace. Have you?

Amen.