

Date: September 12, 2004

**SUNDAY:** Ordinary 24

**SERMON: Grace Abounding**

Text(s): 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

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Seeing the students begin to arrive at Bowdoin reminds me, as I'm sure it does many of you, of my own college days. And when I think back, I realize that there were many courses and professors that I really don't remember very well. On the other hand, some, either because of the subject matter they taught, or their distinctive style of teaching, are unforgettable. One of the more memorable and interesting courses I had to take in college for my major was a course on 18<sup>th</sup> century English literature. The professor was a stimulating and provocative lecturer, and he made the study of Alexander Pope and John Dryden and Jonathan Swift come alive for us, which in itself was no mean feat. In one of his lectures, he spoke about John Bunyan, surely the most popular writer of his age and the author of the allegory entitled *A Pilgrim's Progress*, that has been recognized ever since as one of the classics, not only of English literature, but of Christian literature as well.

But it was not that universally-known work to which the professor was referring in his lecture that day. Instead, it was the lesser-known autobiography of Bunyan entitled *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. The professor scornfully referred to it as perhaps the most arrogant and egotistical title of any book he knew, and said he couldn't imagine how a Puritan preacher could ever think that he had, so to speak, cornered the market on sin.

As he spoke, I began to wonder if he had even read the book, and during the break, I asked him. He acknowledged that he had not—the title had put him off and his natural prejudice against the Puritans did the rest. I asked him if he was aware that the title was taken from a line in the First Epistle to Timothy in the New Testament. He said no, he wasn't aware of that, since he had never read the New Testament either. But even

so, he argued, appropriating such a title for one's own autobiography surely indicated a monumental egocentrism. How could an 18<sup>th</sup>-century Puritan pastor possibly conceive of himself as the "chief of sinners" unless he were a supreme egoist?

His attitude told me more about my professor than about Bunyan. If he had read the book, he would have known that the point was not about how wicked Bunyan was or whether he was more wicked than anyone else. In fact, Bunyan was apparently nothing like the vile wretch he claimed to be. It was fashionable in English Puritan piety, to greatly exaggerate one's own moral failings and sins, presumably on the grounds that therefore more glory was due to God for managing to forgive them. But fashion or not, it was not the "chief of sinners" part of the title that was the significant focal point of Bunyan's book or his life; for Bunyan, always, it was the part about "grace abounding." The wonder was not in how wicked he was, or at least felt himself to be; the wonder was in how gracious God was.

Marvel at the overflowing grace and love of God is always the response of those who have experienced it, and it always seems to have the effect of making them aware of their own unworthiness. In fact, the key to this experience of wonder at the grace of God may just be the recognition that we are indeed sinners. That is, we are not the people God intends us to be, and, to a large extent, it is our fault that we are not.

That recognition may be just the sticking point for many people in our secularized society, and even for many church people who have been schooled in other ways of speaking about what it is that ails us. It's not particularly fashionable these days to speak of ourselves or of human nature in general in the moral and religious language of sin and guilt; we tend to leave that to the right wing of the evangelical groups. It's much more acceptable to most of us to speak in psychological or sociological or neurological categories to explain human behavior. We think that if we can describe the behavior as a neurosis

or as a compulsion or as the result of an imbalance in our brain chemistry, or having an abusive parent or growing up in an educationally-deprived environment, we have explained it. And having explained it, we can excuse it, much as the teenage gang members in Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* do when they tell Officer Krupke that they're not juvenile delinquents. They can't help themselves because they've got a "social disease." But as useful as psychology and sociology and neuroscience are, no amount of sociological analysis or psychological probing has ever resulted in curing the fundamental self-centeredness which is at the root of all human wrong.

The loss of the language of moral discourse is hardly new. More than 25 years ago, the psychiatrist Karl Menninger, founder of the Menninger Clinic, wrote a best-selling book called "*Whatever Became of Sin?*" In it, he argued that by bracketing out the categories of sin and guilt from our attempts to understand and explain destructive human behavior, we have done ourselves a disfavor. He went on to suggest that a surer road to mental and emotional health was to accept that the religious language of sin and guilt puts us in touch with a deeper reality that has to be given its due if there is to be the possibility of transformation.

Menninger himself was only recovering and re-stating in modern clinical terms what St. Augustine taught nearly 1500 years ago—that the doctrine of original sin, by which is meant this fundamental self-centeredness, is an optimistic doctrine, because it accords to human beings real dignity as beings created in God's image with the free wills to make choices and respond to God. We are not creatures of determinism or blind fate, at the mercy of our genes or our surroundings. We are beings with dignity, with the moral capacity for choosing between good and evil. We were created to what St. Paul calls *parrhesia*, or "free speech" with God. And that's good news. The bad news is

that we have trampled on that privilege, we have used our freedom to serve selfish interests rather than using it to serve one another in love. And that is the essence of sin. Sin is always about relationships. Sin is, in fact, a social disease.

So to confess that we are sinners is not a demeaning, derogatory, act that destroys our self-esteem, unless it be false self-esteem that is really pride. Confession of our sin is in fact, the act of beings who were created for fellowship with God and for community with each other, and who recognize that we have, by our own fault, breached that relationship and destroyed that community. To confess that I have lied or cheated or stolen is not to make me less than what I am, but opens the way for me to become what I was meant to be with the help of God's overflowing grace.

I'm not advocating that we go back to the fashion of exaggerating our sinful status like Bunyan did, or as the New England Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards did in his famous sermon "*Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*," which has become a classic of American literature. Despite a weak voice, an unprepossessing appearance, and being so nearsighted that he had to hold his manuscript up to his face to see it, he caused people in the congregation to faint from sheer terror at the visions of the gaping jaws of hell he conjured up. (We have ushers standing by with smelling salts just in case any of you are similarly stricken this morning.) I'd never want to see Edwards' understanding of a God who viewed us as "loathsome spiders," and who relished the prospect of casting us into hell for our wickedness, come back again. Edwards, like many of the Calvinists of his day, so over-emphasized divine sovereignty and human depravity that they forgot that the first and most fundamental truth about God, as St. John tells us, is that God is love. But there was nevertheless something valid in the self-understanding that he and his congregation shared that we increasingly

lack today— the knowledge that we are moral beings who have the freedom to make choices for good or for evil, and who bear responsibility before ourselves, our neighbors, and God for the choices we make.

Nor do I mean to suggest that all of our troubles are due to personal moral failure on our part. Sometimes in addition to our own choices, we are victims of the evil choices that other people make or of social forces beyond our control. Our troubles are many and the causes are many and varied. I'm only recalling Menninger's warning that we are rapidly losing the ability to think and act in moral categories, and that loss is a loss of something essential to our humanity and essential to a healthy society.

There are links between personal ethics and morals and the global crises that confront us. When enough people are false to sworn oaths, enough lies told to one another, when mass murder of civilians justified as the necessary cost of revolutionary struggle or religious *jihad* or hidden behind a euphemism like "collateral damage," when personal and corporate greed brings down companies and destroys jobs and pensions, when enough of us remain blind and deaf to the evidence that we are poisoning our environment, when enough people agree in their hatreds and prejudices toward those who are different, then all these personal evils take on corporate dimensions. They become institutionalized evil, and thus, demonic in their scope and power. We will never begin to get the global ecological crises, the global political crises, the cycle of violence, injustice, and poverty under control, until we acknowledge our personal and corporate responsibility and throw ourselves on the mercy of the judge.

And the judge is merciful! The good news, friends, is that the judge has already shown us mercy. *"The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners— of whom I am the chief. But for that very reason, I received mercy."* Notice that

neither I nor the writer of our epistle lesson said that God *will* show us mercy, but rather that God *has* shown us mercy.

That is also what the stories in our gospel lesson reveal to us. Jesus was criticized by the people of the highest moral standards and impeccable behavior because he seemed to prefer the company of tax collectors and sinners theirs. His critics were probably the sort who were married with 2.3 children, paid their taxes honestly, went to public worship every week, worked hard and were thrifty, didn't have any major vices, and probably only a few minor ones. Jesus doesn't attack them and tell them they're hypocrites. They're not hypocrites. They probably are truly offended by the fact that Jesus makes it appear that their moral goodness and hard work doesn't give them a better claim on God's mercy than those tax collectors and sinners.

But Jesus says, "No, you've got it all backwards. It's the other way round— first comes God's mercy, and then comes good behavior and high moral standards. In both the case of the lost sheep and the lost coin, there was nothing that either the sheep or the coin did to cause them to be found. Rather, all the initiative was on the part of the finder. The shepherd would not rest, but left the ninety-nine sheep who were not lost behind while he went out and searched for the one lost sheep until it was found. The woman who lost her coin wore out her broom sweeping every corner of her house until she found the coin. *"Herein is love,"* says St. Paul, *"not that we loved God, but that God loved us"* so that *"while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."*

In fact, our very ability to recognize that we have lost our way, our ability to repent, to recognize our moral culpability, to confess our fault that sets us against the very grain of the universe, is the result of God's abounding grace and mercy. Were it not for God's mercy, we could not see our own need of it. Were it not for

God's abounding grace, we could not have hope that our lives can change and that we can become better people. Were it not for God's grace, we would have no hope of breaking free from the compulsions and addictions that enslave us. Were it not for the mercy of God, any efforts we make to create a more just society or more humane social institutions would be doomed to failure. We can work toward these things just because we *have received* mercy.

When we finally come to realize that we are sheep who have gone astray and lost our way in the moral wilderness, as it were, only then do we begin to understand that we have already been found. Or as a wonderful old hymn puts it,

*I sought the Lord, and afterward, I knew*

*he moved my soul to seek him, seeking me.*

*It was not I who found, O Savior true;*

*no, I was found of thee.*

To know ourselves not as victims of forces beyond our control, not merely neurobiological organisms who must obey deeply imprinted genetic patterns woven into our DNA, but moral beings, free beings who can choose the good, even though we often choose the wrong, is a powerful and liberating knowledge. It is knowledge that springs from overflowing grace. It is knowledge that recognizes, as the old saint of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Julian of Norwich said so wonderfully, "Before ever he made us, God loved us." To know ourselves as loved, as forgiven, as found, is to know what is necessary to begin to really live, to make the right choices. And that's good news. The nature of God's abounding grace is that it liberates us from all forms of determinism, and enables us to begin living a truly free, a truly human life.

Sinners we may be, but we are not "sinners in the hands of an angry God." Rather we are sinners who are loved beyond comprehension by a God whose steadfast love and mercy is from everlasting to everlasting, a God who comes looking for us to bring us back

home, and who does not quit until we are found. That is the truth which overarches all other truths about us. We are loved. Completely. Eternally. And when that love finds us, crouching in the dark corners of our fear, of our guilt, of our feelings of inadequacy, of our selfishness, it sets us free to repent, to begin to live again. And then all the hosts of heaven rejoice.