

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
February 7, 2016

Living Up to Our Name

Luke 4:21-30

Thanks to some hard work by Jerry Coombs and G. C. Rogerson, the light is back on here at Grace Baptist Church. I'm talking about the light on the outside, not the light on the inside. Our church sign is now fully lit again. Remember that our sign is part of our presence in the community, a means of witness to the community. In a busy, commuting culture like ours, it's important to get the word out there and visible to the eyes of passersby. Our thanks also to Dennis Janke for helping us keep the message on our sign updated on a regular basis.

Part of the church sign changes, and part of it stays the same. Today I want us to focus more on the part that stays the same, the upper portion that displays our congregation's name: Grace Baptist Church. Grace. I don't know the details of the story behind the selection of our church's name, but I do know that those who picked it took one of the most significant words in the Christian faith and attached it to the life of our congregation, past, present, and future. Grace. Whatever messages we want to convey on the lower portion of our sign, the message at the top is always about grace.

Part of what this means is that we as a congregation are supposed to always be about grace. But ironically, the name at the top of the church sign is the piece we probably think about the least and get used to the most. So think of today's sermon as an opportunity to slow down, pull over to the shoulder of the road, look at the church sign, and think more carefully and deeply about the importance of God's grace in the life of our congregation. Today's Scripture passage from Luke can help us do that.

Remember that this morning's text is basically part two of a story that began last week when Jesus was preaching and teaching in his hometown synagogue. In last Sunday's sermon, we focused on how Jesus utilized part of the message of Isaiah in order to declare who he is and what he's all about. He's the one sent by God to announce and inaugurate God's promised kingdom, which brings with it release and reform. "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor" (v. 18a). In other words, God has finally arrived to reign, and this event takes so many of society's structures and values and turns them upside down. No doubt this came as good news to the people in the congregation at Nazareth. Most of them probably saw themselves as poor, wronged, and oppressed, especially by the Roman authorities.

So we can understand why the worshipers thought highly of Jesus' sermon. In many ways, his message was pleasing to their ears. As Luke says, "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips" (v. 22). There was no doubting Jesus' skills as a preacher. He was eloquent, well spoken, and persuasive. "Gracious words" came from his lips. It's an interesting expression. It can mean "pleasing words," words that uplift, comfort, and reassure. But it can also mean "words filled with divine grace," "grace-filled words."

And the thing about grace-filled words is that they can do more than just comfort. They can also confront. That's what seems to be happening as Jesus goes further into his sermon. These words of grace take on a sharper edge. Our Lord shifts into more of an in-your-face style of preaching. For one thing, he senses that the hometown folks want special treatment and some extra favor, so he puts words in their mouths and pokes them with a proverb about how they're expecting a miraculous display of power. Then he riles them up a little more: "I'm not surprised that my message is getting under your skin. It's just like they always say, no prophet is acceptable in his home country."

By now, the mood in the sanctuary has completely changed. Jesus then adds to the tension by alluding to a couple of famous prophets, Elijah and Elisha. Of all the stories he could have told, he picks two about prophetic ministry to people who weren't part of the people of Israel, the hometown crowd. In other words, Jesus tells the people that God's saving power is for you, but not just for you. God's grace is awesome, but it's also beyond your ability or desire to control. In fact, God already has a long history of showing up in places we don't expect, working redemptively in the lives of people whom we've conveniently categorized as outsiders.

So what began as just another day of worship where the people would exit the sanctuary, shake Jesus' hand and politely say, "Nice sermon," soon turned into a congregational revolt. God's people had heard enough. Before Jesus could even begin the benediction, they chased him to the edge of town where they could throw him down the cliff. If they couldn't hurl stones at Jesus, they would hurl Jesus against the stones. Same result. But Jesus, says Luke, managed to escape. Now how's that for a day of worship! And all because Jesus preached grace.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells about a minister who was leading a study group and asked the participants, "Who has been like Jesus in your life?" The members of the group each gave their answers in turn, telling stories of people who had helped them grow in faith. But at the end, there was one woman who had not yet spoken, so the leader asked her, "What's the problem?" The woman answered, "I am just trying to think of someone who has told me a truth that is so difficult to hear that I wanted to kill them for it."¹

Who knew that grace could be such a dangerous and deadly topic? Jesus must have been onto something that we often lose sight of, namely, that God's saving power, God's grace, operates beyond the boundaries of what we think is just, fair, and proper. The problem is, grace has become one of those overused and worn out theological concepts that we speak of frequently but reflect on rarely. Grace shows up regularly in our Christian lingo, but in ways that don't really capture the depth, the risk, and the offensiveness of God's expansive mercy.

We frequently use the language of grace in ways that are too flat and benign. We think of grace as God's leniency with us, his willingness to look the other way and put up with a lot of our unruliness. Or we think of grace primarily as God's kindness and gentleness in the face of our own meanness and misbehavior. Or we think of grace as God's unconditional love and acceptance of us, even though we fall so far short of his standards and expectations. Now don't get me wrong, there's some truth in all these things. But they don't really convey the radical, scandalous reality of how God comes to our rescue in Christ. As Preston Sprinkle puts it, "Grace is more than just leniency and unconditional acceptance. Divine grace is God's relentless and loving pursuit of His enemies, who are unthankful, unworthy, and unlovable."²

If God wanted to stay within certain boundaries, or give certain people favored treatment, then grace would not be grace as it has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ. In both his preaching and his ministry practice, we see Jesus himself violating people's sense of privilege, taking God's favor to those who to human eyes seemed undeserving and beyond reach. And yet, Jesus understood himself to be doing what God had always been doing, that is, bringing his divine grace to all people, regardless of human attitudes about privilege, prejudice, or propriety. Perhaps Jesus remembered Jonah, the embodiment of human resistance to God grace, who was very clear with God about why he didn't want to preach to the Ninevites: Because "I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity" (Jonah 4:2).

No matter how mission-minded we believe we are, or how much money we put in the plate for the Lottie Moon Offering, or how much we pray for the men and women and children in our mission videos, all of which are good things, the biggest test of our belief in grace is how much we embody and reflect this boundary-crossing God in our relationships with those who are different from us, particularly within the life of the church. It's not only about how we bring Christ to others. It's also about how we respond to Christ when he comes to us through others, particularly those who aren't part of the hometown crowd that we're most comfortable and familiar with.

One pastor tells a story about a church that decided to open its doors to the people in the neighborhood around it. The neighbors were poor and homeless, including some with mental illness. Though the church developed programs to feed them, cloth them, and support them, with time some problems and difficulties emerged. Finally, one prominent member of the congregation came to the minister and said, "This mission business is all right as far as it goes. Maybe it has gone far enough. It is time to pull back a bit." The minister replied, "I understand your concerns, but I just think it's important to give everyone an opportunity to meet Jesus." The man said, "Yes, I understand that those kind of people need Jesus too, but . . ." The minister interrupted and said, "I wasn't talking about them. I was talking about us. I think it is important that we have an opportunity to meet Jesus."³

You never know exactly how Jesus is going to come to meet us and confront us with the reality of God's grace. It could be through other people that we're called to go to, or people who are coming to us, whose presence testifies to the fact that divine grace is always bigger than we imagine and more than we can control. Or it could be a sermon, like the one Jesus preached to familiar faces in the synagogue at Nazareth. I'm reminded of a line in George Herbert's *The Country Parson*, which says, "sermons are dangerous things; that none goes out of church as he came in."⁴ That was certainly true of the folks who heard Jesus' message. They heard it so well that they turned on him, because God's grace was just more than they could handle.

Or it could be that Jesus comes to us through something as familiar as a church sign. A sign that reminds us of our name, and announces it to thousands of passersby, every single day. A sign that tells us who we are and why we're here. Grace. Divine, disruptive, dangerous grace. Grace Baptist Church. May God continue to enable us to live up to our name.

¹ As told by Christine Jarrett in the sermon, "An Opportunity to Meet Jesus." <<https://christinejarrett.wordpress.com/tag/barbara-brown-taylor/>>.

² Preston Sprinkle, *Charis: God's Scandalous Grace for Us* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2014) 24.

³ Jarrett, "An Opportunity to Meet Jesus."

⁴ Quoted in Richard Lischer, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 164.