

Ephesians 4:25-5:2 Gracing
August 8, 2021

There is a lot in this little grab bag of a text from Ephesians, too much to tackle in only one sermon, so let us focus upon this one verse;

“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God has forgiven you.”

It is not so much that Paul, in this brief set of lines, has caught some facet of our faith in a particular light, as it is that he has summarized the whole of the biblical message: that we are to be kind, compassionate, and forgiving. When push comes to shove, we are meant to extend this practice to everyone.

In other places the gospel is also summarized:

In Deuteronomy we are taught, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind,” and in Leviticus, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” which is repeated throughout the gospels and the epistles. In the gospels Jesus adds, “and strength,” and says these two commands sum up the whole Law. Jesus also said, according to John’s gospel, “there is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for a friend.”

Or Paul, in the great practical conclusion to his entire line of reasoning in the Epistle to the Romans, writes, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy, and pleasing to God, this is your spiritual act of

worship (or reasonable service).” The translators here had to choose, and they chose “spiritual worship.”

But it is not love or sacrifice explicitly that is presented here in this little verse in Ephesians, but grace. The primary word for forgiveness is absent in this command to forgive, but the term ordinarily associated with grace appears instead.

The word, “grace,” is one of the bible’s more remarkable words. It has a multifaceted nature, a little like the Hebrew word “hesed” in the Old Testament that can be defined only by a litany of expressions, no one word or phrase is able to carry the freight.

It means; kindness, goodwill, favor - the expression of favor that is associated with doing someone a favor or giving a gift. It is one of the chief words used to convey the state of being blessed, or happy, very close to “joy”, and it is the root imbedded in the concept of gratitude. Sometimes it is even used when Jesus healed the sick. It implies mercy, and is one of the Bible’s words for forgiveness.

So: gift, blessing, mercy, forgiveness, gratitude, kindness. To give, forgive, and to be thankful, all wrapped up in one word. It is associated with power as well, because it takes an almost divine power to be full of grace in all these ways.

The underlying principle that governs the way people behave, and have organized their relationships with one another, is something like the so-called survival

instinct: look out for yourself, no one else will, don't trust anyone, if you want something done right, do it yourself, go for the gusto, do whatever it takes to survive.

Under this principle people will go to great lengths to help and care for one another if it is necessary, or justify outlandish greed, brutal oppression, and indiscriminate killing, if it is necessary. This is not a very noble truth about human beings.

There is a stark contrast between "anything to survive self-concern and a divine love that sacrifices, and it is with that contrast that we are confronted. It is to a life of service and sacrifice that we are called. A focus on the self is set against a focus on God and the world.

Let us not be deceived about this great calling. At first it seems reasonable, but after awhile it is revealed as difficult, and after awhile more, impossible. We all participate in the Sin of the world, try as we might to avoid it. We are unable to avoid this situation even when we take the harshest steps in both our personal and communal lives.

It is not uncommon for the most intently religious to become hyper-judgmental and self-righteous, creating a set of relationships characterized by accusation and condemnation. One might call it a cursing culture.

One of the catch-all words for this calling, is grace. In the English language, the noun "grace" is not accompanied with an associated verb. Think about it.

But here in this verse that is exactly what we find, the verbal form. Let me suggest we create one, even if only for the purpose of this day's reflection. The term is "gracing."

Let us think of it as a verb, and a rich and varied one at that, one that can only be defined by a litany of expressions; giving generously, being kind and compassionate, having gratitude and mercy, healing, serving, sacrificing, forgiving. The translators had to choose one word, and they chose "forgive."

Let me restate this sentence in terms of a literal translation, hoping to remind us of the power of the word that has served as the focus of reflection on this holy day, keeping in mind the rich variety of meanings imbedded in the this one word. And never mind if you are not very good at it, aspire to it. Hear it this way:

"Become to one another kind, and tender-hearted, gracing each other as God in Christ has graced you."

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