

Series: The Words of Jesus in Intimate Conversation
Today: Love One Another

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
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One of the theological concepts we speak of most often in our life together as a Christian community is “the grace of God.” Yet we live in a society which is filled with quid pro quo relationships (I’ll do this for you if you will do this for me), so it is hard to imagine love which is unconditional and unilateral. In our scripture this morning Jesus commands his disciples to “*Love one another as I have loved you.*” So this morning I want to explore with you our experience of the grace of God. How can it move from an esoteric concept to a tangible reality?

Frederick Buechner, in his book *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, defines grace like this: “*Grace is something you can never get but can only be given. There is no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth. A good sleep is grace, and so are good dreams. Most tears are grace. The smell of rain is grace. Somebody loving you is grace. Loving somebody is grace. Have you ever tried to love somebody?*” (p. 33)

I think what Buechner is saying is this: We will only be able to understand the grace of God when we have experienced some other form of grace in our daily lives. In short, you and I are meant to be tangible signs of the grace of God by the way we live our lives with one another.

Bruce Larson says that one sign of being agents of God’s grace is the way other people feel around us. He asks the question, “*Do other people feel important around you?*” He says that this is the measure of what it means to love someone, whether they are family, friends or lovers; do they feel important when they are around us?

When our daughter, Holly, was in college, I learned this truth in a very painful way. It is always dangerous to tell a personal story about a family member, but this story is 15 years old, and our relationship has moved beyond it today. I pray that there is a statute of limitations.

It was one of those times in our lives when we were having a terrible time connecting with one another emotionally. Holly and I were often like flint and steel with one another. I still remind her that during her adolescence she was lucky to survive my thoughts of homicide, and she assures me she felt the same toward me. A few years ago, when I purchased long term care insurance, she said, *“Be sure to get the kind that will allow me to take care of you in my home.”* And I responded, *“Holly, we barely survived your adolescence. What makes you think it will be easier to tolerate me when I am a grumpy old man?”*

However, this particular time it was really bothering me. This was my firstborn child. Both she and her brother are precious to me, but somehow it seemed that every time we tried to talk to one another we would end up in a shouting match. Feeling the distance between us, I asked if she would give me some time. I even promised her dinner at her favorite restaurant, but her first response was a flat out NO! She told me she was busy; that she had a life too, and she didn't have time for me.

It stung, but as I thought about it I realized that I was part of the problem. I had allowed my life to become filled with so many other things that she no longer felt she was important to me. I approached her again and told her how far away I felt from her; and that I didn't want to feel that way anymore. The ice began to melt, and she consented to a dinner with me.

At dinner I told her all the things I admired about her: how I liked her independence; how she didn't go along with popular opinion but was always thoughtful in her own opinions; how she sought to find a truth that fit for herself. I told her that I admired her willingness to fight for

the underdog; her tenacity in her sports and her willingness to hang in and stay competitive when the going got tough. I praised her for her faithfulness to her friends, and the way she made little children feel special. When I was through, it was as if the wall between us had been hit by a bulldozer. It had been a long time since I had made her feel important, but that night she heard me.

Rest assured that I did what I did because I loved my daughter and because I wanted her to know how uniquely special she was to me. There was no other motive than that. However, as it is also my prayer that one day she will connect to that experience and the other experiences she may have had with believing Christians in her life, and that she will realize that the depth of God's love for her in Jesus Christ.

As in all things, our model for our relationship with others is Jesus Christ. In our text this morning he communicates to his disciples just how important they are to him. He calls them his "friends." He lets them know that he values them; that they are an important part of his life; that what happens to them and between them means a great deal to him.

Last week we told you that the 15th chapter of John is set in what are called the "farewell discourses of John's gospel. Jesus is preparing his disciples for his own death. He was concerned, as we all are, about what they would remember about him when he was gone. What would their understanding of God be as they recalled what he taught them? Among all the other theological nuggets he taught them, he wanted them to know that they were friends.

Jesus mediated the grace of God for his disciples by the way he related to them. He let them know that they were important; that what they said and what they did counted for something. He was a tangible sign of grace in their lives, and we are meant to live the way Jesus lived with them. We are meant to be tangible signs of God's grace for each other.

Do other people feel important around you? Let me quickly suggest three ways that you can be a tangible sign of God's grace for others; loving one another as Jesus has loved us: First, give of yourself. Second, be transparent. Finally, look beneath the surface.

Give of Yourself

Giving of ourselves is following the example of Jesus. He gave his time. When he was needed at a wedding feast in Cana, he gave up. When people approached him for healing, he allowed himself to be interrupted. Nobody had a more pressure packed schedule, but as people sought him out, he gave them the time they needed to receive the healing and the wholeness of God.

As Christians we fall into the dangerous trap of doing things for others in the name of Jesus Christ without ever giving of ourselves. To the poor we give food, or we pay their rent. When people are sick, we send flowers, or we give them something tangible. There is nothing wrong with being generous. However, the Jesus style of relationship was to give of himself.

Jim Wallis of the Sojourners Community in Washington, D.C. tells a story which comes from the war in Iraq which he heard on the radio. A reporter who was covering the conflict saw a little girl shot by a sniper. The reporter threw down his pad and pencil, and he stopped being a reporter for a few minutes. He rushed to a man who was holding the child, and he helped them both to his car.

As the reporter stepped on the accelerator and began racing to the hospital, the man who was holding the child said, "*Hurry, my friend. She is still alive.*" A moment later the man said, "*Hurry, my friend, she is still warm.*" Finally, he said, "*Hurry, my friend, she is growing cold.*"

When they got to the hospital, the little girl was dead. The two men went to wash the blood off their hands and clothes, and the man who had been holding the child turned to the

reporter and said. *“This is a terrible task for me. I must go and tell her father that his child is dead.”* The reporter was amazed. He looked at the grieving man and said, *“But I thought she was your child.”* The man looked back and said, *“No, but aren’t they all our children?”*

If the love of God is to be embodied for others, we must first learn to give of ourselves. I wonder how many spouses are here this morning that have everything they want or need in terms of material goods, but who would give it all away for a healthy relationship with someone they love? I wonder how many adult children are here this morning that have spent their lives trying to prove to someone else that they are valuable because a parent never took time to affirm them for who they are. Give of yourself, and if God is at the center of your life, you will be surprised at how easily people will see God.

Be Transparent

Next we must learn to be transparent. It is the Jesus style of relationships. He brought transparency to every encounter. He threw his arms around people and told them how much they meant to him. He got angry. He wept. He grieved the loss of friends. He did not hide his feelings, but used them as a means to minister to the needs of others.

I had a seminary professor who told the story to his class of being raised in an orphanage until he was about ten years old and of the deep emotional scars it left on his life. However, at age ten he was adopted by a simple, poor man who took the boy home, gave him a name, and somehow managed to reverse the damage that had been done early in his life. As an adult, the professor wrote a letter to his father expressing his love and gratitude for what he had received. He wrote in great detail. However, the letter was never answered, and it was never mentioned by the adoptive father in all the visits the son made to be with him

At his adoptive father's funeral, the professor asked his adoptive mother, "*Did Dad ever get my letter?*" She answered, "*Son, you will never know what that letter meant to him. It was the greatest treasure of his life. No one who ever came to visit, be it a friend or a bill collector, could leave without your father producing the letter and reading it to them.*"

The professor felt somehow cheated, and now he shares the experience with his class. He tells them, "*My own father was afraid of his emotions, and he was unable to respond to that special letter. Don't get me wrong. I am glad I wrote it. It's just that had my Dad been able to be more transparent with me, he would have given me a priceless gift—which is often the way we describe GRACE.*"

Look Beneath the Surface

Finally, we need to look beneath the surface of what people present to us if we are to love them like Jesus loved them. Remember Jesus and the woman at the well, and how he told her of the shambles she was making of her life and offered her a chance to change. Do you remember how he was able to see the person beneath the behaviors of the man possessed by demons. There is something to love in all of us, but some of us cover that over with prickly defenses which make us difficult to love, unless someone is willing to look beneath the defense and see us for who we are.

I am reminded of a poem I have shared with you before. It is entitled *A Crabbit Old Woman*, and it was found in the effects of an elderly woman in Dundee, Scotland who had died in a nursing home. Many of her caregivers had written her off as cantankerous and incorrigible. However, beneath the surface there was this woman who was full of life hoping against hope someone would take the time to find out who she was and respond to her as a person.

What do you see, nurses?
 What do you see?
 What are you thinking
 When you're looking at me?

A crabby old woman,
 Not very wise,
 Uncertain of habit,
 With faraway eyes?

Who dribbles her food
 And makes no reply
 When you say in a loud voice,
 "I do wish you'd try!"

Who seems not to notice
 The things that you do,
 And forever is losing
 A stocking or shoe?

Who, resisting or not,
 Lets you do as you will,
 With bathing and feeding,
 The long day to fill?

Is that what you're thinking?
 Is that what you see?
 Then open your eyes, nurse,
 You're not looking at me.

I'll tell you who I am
 As I sit here so still,
 As I do at your bidding,
 As I eat at your will.

I'm a small child of ten
 With a father and mother,
 Brothers and sisters,
 Who love one another.

A young girl of sixteen
 With wings on her feet
 Dreaming that soon now
 A lover she'll meet.

A bride soon at twenty,
 My heart gives a leap,
 Remembering the vows
 That I promised to keep.

At twenty-five now,
 I have young of my own,
 Who need me to guide
 And a secure happy home.

A woman of thirty,
 My young now grown fast,
 Bound to each other
 With ties that should last.

At forty, my young sons
 Have grown and are gone,
 But my man's beside me
 To see I don't mourn.

At fifty once more,
 Babies play round my knee,
 Again we know children,
 My loved one and me.

Dark days are upon me,
 My husband is dead,
 I look at the future,
 I shudder with dread.

For my young are all rearing
 Young of their own,
 And I think of the years
 And the love that I've known.

I'm now an old woman
 And nature is cruel;
 'Tis jest to make old age
 Look like a fool.

The body, it crumbles,
 Grace and vigor depart,
 There is now a stone
 Where I once had a heart.

But inside this old carcass
A young girl still dwells,
And now and again,
My battered heart swells.

I remember the joys,
I remember the pain,
And I'm loving and living
Life over again.

I think of the years
All too few, gone too fast,
And accept the stark fact
That nothing can last.

So open your eyes, people,
Open and see,
Not a crabby old woman;
Look closer . . . see ME!!

My friends, if we are to love one another as Jesus loved us, we are intended to be tangible signs of the grace of God: As a friend who gave of himself; as one who risked being transparent; and as one who looked beneath the surface. This is our call as followers Jesus Christ. Amen.