**Grace Upon Grace**
John 1:1-18

Christian theologians have spent much of the last two thousand years trying to understand and define grace. Augustine said that grace is the unmerited love and favor which God makes available to all human beings. Martin Luther believed that God’s grace was God’s mercy and forgiveness freely given to human beings without any merit whatsoever.

Thomas Aquinas said that grace was any gift freely given with no thought of reciprocation. This included mercy and forgiveness but was not limited to it.

Paul Tillich simply called grace “reconciliation.”

Asked to define grace, author Philip Yancey put it this way: I don’t even try. Jesus talked a lot about grace, but mainly through stories. I remember once getting stuck in Los Angeles traffic and arriving 58 minutes late at the Hertz rental desk. I walked up in kind of a bad mood, put the keys down and said, “How much do I owe?”

The woman says, “Nothing. You’re all clear.” I said I was late and she smiled, “Yes, but there’s a one-hour grace period.” So I asked, “Oh really, what is grace?” And she said, “I don’t know.... I guess it means that even though you’re supposed to pay, you don’t have to.”

Did you hear that? “Even though you’re supposed to pay, you don’t have to.” It’s like the guy who bought a brand new Jaguar convertible when he came home after his tour in Viet Nam. Still wearing his army fatigues, he set out early one morning driving down a lonely stretch of road in Oklahoma.

Wanting to see just how fast his jag would go, he accelerated to its maximum speed. Just as he came to the crest of a small hill, reaching top speed, just over the hill and out of sight, was a highway patrolman sitting in his car, radar pointing out the window. He knew he’d been caught, and slowly brought the car to a crawl, pulled to the side of the road, and sat waiting for the patrolman to catch up with him.

The patrolman pulled up behind him, got out of his car, adjusted his hat, and slowly proceeded toward the speeder, who was waiting in the hot sun, driver’s license and registration in hand.

“Do you have any idea just how fast you were going?” he asked. “Not exactly,” said the driver, sheepishly. “One hundred and 63 miles per hour,” the patrolman responded. “That sounds about right to me,” my friend said.

And here’s where the day took an unexpected turn. The patrolman’s next statement was: “Would you mind if I took a look at that engine?” he asked. A good while later, the patrolman drove off never having issued a ticket!

Novelist Victor Hugo makes the same point in *Les Miserables* - that grace is never cheap for the giver. In the play and the movie the character of Bishop Myriel is given fairly little space. In the book, however, Hugo tells us much of the bishop’s life story.

He was born to a noble French family, a nobleman himself, well married, devoted to gallantry. When the French revolution exploded he fled to Italy. While they were in exile in Italy, his wife died and no one knows what else happened to him but, when he returned to France, he was a priest.

Myriel lived the life of a simple, village priest but one day, by chance, he met Napoleon and the emperor was so impressed with the kindly old man that he ordered him to be made a bishop. Myriel, however, continued to live as a humble priest.

He moved into the hospital and gave up the lavish bishop’s manse to be used as another hospital. He kept only a tenth of his salary, giving the rest for the feeding of the sick and the poor, and the villagers called him by the affectionate nick name Monseigneur Bienvenu (Welcome).

Hugo sums up the bishop using these words: “There are men who toil at extracting gold; he toiled at the extraction of pity. Universal misery was his mine. The sadness which reigned everywhere was but an excuse for unfailing kindness. Love each other; he declared this to be complete, desired nothing further, and that was the whole of his doctrine.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

One night the protagonist of the story, Jean Valjean, shows up at his door, desperate, cold and hungry. The bishop invites him in, feeds him, and offers him a bed for the night. While the bishop sleeps, Valjean steals the silver in the house and flees.

The police catch him and bring him back to the bishop’s house and ask the bishop to identify the silver. He does but allows that he gave the silver to Valjean as a gift. Then, he chastises the thief for not taking the candlesticks as well and insists that he take them now.

After the police leave he tells Valjean to use the silver to start a new life as an honest man. “Forget not, never forget that you have promised me to use this silver to become an honest man.... Jean Valjean, my brother: you belong no longer to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God!”

I think, maybe, Philip Yancey is right. We can’t explain grace, we can only tell of it in stories, in parables and, sometimes, in our own biographies.

For me, theologian Paul Tillich said it best in these words: “Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged.

It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us.

It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage.

Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: “You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later.

Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!”[[2]](#endnote-2)

Amen.

1. Hugo Victor, *Les Miserables*, Kindle Edition (English language), 54; Vol. 1, Book 1, Chapter 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. https://anitamathias.com/2013/02/18/what-is-grace/ [↑](#endnote-ref-2)