

Grace Upon Grace

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I recall as if it were yesterday going to a garden party in England. I don't know why, but you were expected to pay for your own tea, and I offered to pay for an acquaintance I had met at that party. Now he was perfectly entitled to decline my offer. But you could have knocked me down with a feather when he said, "No, thank you, I won't be subsidized." Well, I never! And yet I can understand now his attitude. For it is the attitude of so many of us who have been brought up on the success ethic. You recall how easily tired parents yell at their children, "Stop, it! Mommy and Daddy don't like naughty children!" And the impression is given quite early on that love is a reward for being good, that people are valued, cherished because they deserve it, because they are successful. And so early on we get our children accustomed to the rat race mentality which makes stomach ulcers a status symbol.

We get upset when our children don't do well in school. Prizes are given to those who top their class and hardly ever to that student, who perhaps is able to coax the best out of others. It seems in our culture that the worst thing is to fail, and the best thing is to succeed. And we don't care too much at what a person succeeds as long as he or she succeeds. We don't value people for who they are but for what they do. Is it not revealing how when we meet people for the first time we soon ask, "by the way, what do you do?" meaning what gives you value? And so we find people giving great play to the fact that you must do well, you should pull yourself up by your own bootstraps; and poor and unemployed people are often blamed for being poor and unemployed because it is assumed that they are just shiftless sponges who have only themselves to blame for being so spineless. No there may be some who are so, yet we know that many have the odds stacked against them. We have come to think that what endows people with value is a natural personal achievement, and we don't want to be subsidized, not even by God. And yet what is the good news?

When I was in England working for the World Council of Churches, I was invited by the then Bishop of Johannesburg to return home to become the dean of a cathedral in Johannesburg. After agonizing as a family about our response, I accepted the invitation and thought that what I most wanted to do, the one contribution that perhaps I was going to be able to make in our struggle for a new dispensation in South Africa, would be to say to black people that their value is something that is intrinsic to who they are. Only those who have been victims of injustice and oppression understand how corrosive it can be, how you begin to be filled with self-hate, to have a negative image of one's self. This often works out that because we are so angry at the things we don't like about ourselves, we project them onto those who may be somewhat like ourselves and become destructive of one another.

I thought I was going to have to help to exorcise this demon of self-

loathing and self-hate. For you see, friends, one of the most awful things about the system of apartheid, which appears to be on its last legs, is not so much the pain that it causes its victims, though that for sure is one of the evil things about it. It is not that it is just evil, which it surely is, but it is that it ultimately makes a child of God doubt that he or she is a child of God. And to that extent the system is blasphemous.

I thought that part of the calling that God was giving was that we should be involved together with our people to come to a recognition of the fact that we are of worth. But I was surprised when I got back home to find that this was a message that I probably needed to repeat much much more frequently to our white compatriots. What is the good news? The good news is that God created us because God loved us. And so we don't need to work ourselves into a frazzle trying to impress God. God does not love us because we are lovable. That God loves us freely, graciously, gratuitously is the most important fact about us. Everything flows from that fact. I want to be good, not in order to make God love me, but merely as an act of thanksgiving for the love that I already have from God. God's love is unchanging, God's love is eternal, and it does not matter how I am. I cannot alter God's love for me. There is absolutely nothing I can do that would make God love me less. Incredible! And of course there is nothing I can do to make God love me more! The scriptures try to stress that fact. Ephesians Chapter 1 speaks about how God has chosen us in Christ to be God's children before the foundation of the world. Long before we could have done anything to deserve it, to earn it, God already decided to choose us.

Isn't that the point of the preamble to the decalogue? "I am the Lord your God." Which God? "This God who has delivered you from bondage. I have already done this - long before you had a law, and I gave you the law as a gracious gift." And we ought to add, "I am the Lord your God who did all of these things. Therefore, thou shalt not." For the law is given as the gift of God to enable you and me, all of us, to express our gratitude to God. I don't know where we have perverted the gospel of Jesus Christ. And so, we say to white South Africans, "hey, God loves you. You don't need to find ways of proving that you matter. You don't need to behave like a goolie throwing your weight around in order for people to say, 'Ah that is what makes this one tick.' You don't need to amass all of these material possessions. They are good, but that is not what invests you with worth. Your worth comes in the package of being human." And that is why the scripture is so often subversive of injustice and oppression. We have kept saying to the South African government, "ah, ah, ah, you are already late. The book that you should have read long ago is the Bible." For nothing can be more subversive, more revolutionary, when you say to people that it doesn't matter how you are, or who you are, or what your background is.

Your worth is intrinsic to who you are. It doesn't matter whether you are rich or poor, whether you are learned or stupid, whether you are tall or short. It has nothing to do with these intrinsic things. But it is something that is given freely, gratuitously. Someone told the story of the actress who was attending a film premiere. She was dripping with diamonds from every conceivable

ble place, and someone in the crowd quite overwhelmed by the spectacle, said, "Goodness, diamonds!" to which my friend is related to have retorted, "Lady, goodness has nothing to do with it!" Precisely, and that is the the good news. It is not a matter of goodness or virtue or achievement. It is all of grace, of a gift freely bestowed, unearned, undeserved. Remember how the prophet, Jeremiah, heard God assure him "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. Jeremiah, yes I know I'm calling you to this horrendous vocation to be a prophet to these stiff-necked people, but hey, you aren't an afterthought." It's not as if God scratched his head and said, "Look, you people are in a heck of a mess. What am I going to do? Ah yes, I'm going to call Jeremiah to be a prophet! Uh, uh, Jeremiah, you have been planned from all eternity. And you have a unique and indispensable part in God's plan which no one else can perform." God knows the meaning of unique. Once I got a birthday card from my wife, which of course is the least a husband can expect from his spouse, and it showed a couple on the outside with the caption, "We have a beautiful and unique relationship" (which was rather nice), and on the inside it said "I am beautiful and you are certainly unique."

Often in an orchestra there are all kinds of instruments, oboes, cellos, etc. The members of the orchestra are usually dolled up in formal wear, and sometimes in the back of the orchestra there is someone equally formally toggled out carrying a triangle. The orchestra will sound off and the conductor will be creating all those wonderful sounds that happen, and now and again the conductor will point to our friend in the back who will strike the triangle, ping. Now that may seem to be an insignificant contribution but in the conception of the artist something quite unique and indispensable would be missing if that ping did not happen when it should. And so we say to our people at home, black and white, "only you can love God as only you can. Not even your identical twin can stand in for you. And something quite indispensable would be missing from heaven if your kind of loving of God would go missing." And so God in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ and Savior said, "I love you. And when you go wrong I still love you. And I have given the most precious thing, my son, to die for you precisely at the time when you sinned. I did not wait until you deserved to be died for. I did not wait until the cows came home. I love you as you are, and when you go astray, yes, I continue to love you." For "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Someone said most of us have distorted the parable of the lost sheep. Because if you look at our religious pictures, almost always Jesus is shown as the good shepherd carrying a nice fluffy, frisky little lamb. Now frisky little lambs are not known to stray away from their mommies. The sheep that is likely to stray is that recalcitrant old ram. And that is the one the good shepherd is prepared to leave ninety-nine perfectly behaved sheep to go after. And when he finds it, it has probably been through a wire fence which tore its fleece, and it has fallen into a dirty ditch of water. That smelly, ugly, unattractive one, is the sheep the good shepherd takes on his shoulders, brings back home rejoicing, and says, "let's have a gig - I found the one that was lost!"

That is the good news that emboldens people to stand up against injustice and oppression. It lets them know we count, we matter. We matter not because

of achievement, we matter not because of biological irrelevancy such as skin color. We matter because God has endowed us with worth, coming out of the love, the infinite love that God revealed perfectly in Jesus Christ on the cross. And so we come to know the depth and the height, and the breadth of the love of God. And God seeks to draw all of us. Doesn't Ephesians say this was God's intention from the beginning? To bring all things to unity, things in Heaven and Earth. Jesus' arms outflung on the cross seem to be saying Jesus wants to embrace all there is in a cosmic embrace. So that in South Africa black and white and all of those who are told they are made for alienation and separation and apartness, for hatred and hostility, come to know that they are made for togetherness and fellowship, for family, for reconciliation; and not a cheap reconciliation that cries out "peace, peace" when there is no peace. For in order for us to be reconciled to God and to one another it cost God the death of God's son. So we say, God loves you, as you are, to make you into all that you have in you to become. God looks on you and when others see a slug, God sees the butterfly you'll become. God wants to help us to become holy, beautiful and good; to enable us to become freely human with a humanity that is measured by nothing less than the humility of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. God has made us, all of us, for togetherness, for family, for love, for caring, for sharing, for compassion. Yes, God loves us and subsidizes us, and our worth is infinite, because God the infinite one loves us with an infinite love forever and forever.

John the Baptist said to Jesus, "remember you are the Son of God, and behave like one." And we need to tell all of our people, "remember you are the son, the daughter of God. Go forth and behave like one, upsetting all the structures of injustice and oppression and working so that the kingdoms of this world become as a kingdom of our God and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever, Amen."