

The Dog Days of Grace

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Let us pray: Our Father, help us to hear thy word as a word of grace, one that surprises and embarrasses us, that heals us even as it wounds us from behind. So may we be strengthened by that word, “for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father....” We ask this in Jesus Christ’s name. Amen.

“May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father...” (Colossians 1:11,12).

The sermon was not going well. He could tell that simply by looking at the blank page. It wasn’t that he didn’t feel inspired; he did. The Apostle Paul was writing to the Colossians about endurance and patience, and he was all set to unwrap Paul’s words for today. He remembered a story about Rosie Ruiz that Eugene Peterson had told.¹ He would retell that, he thought, reminding folks of how, several years ago, Rosie Ruiz had fraudulently finished first in the Boston Marathon by running only the last mile and a half. And he would compare her race to the Christian life, and how tempted we sometimes are simply to appear to be a winner, and forget what it takes to get there: the aching muscles, the long practices, the stumbles and falls, the setbacks and failures. So we find ourselves willing to settle for running only the last mile, never dedicating ourselves to the whole race, much less preparing ourselves for the hard slogs, but, rather, contenting ourselves with entering late and finishing first, looking good the whole while.

It was going to be a great point, he thought. He would top it off with a distinction between cheap and costly grace, a distinction Kierkegaard once drew between a wise old philosopher, who, at the end of his life, confessed, “Despite all my struggles, I see now that I can really know nothing,” and the freshman who, upon entering the university, decides after one or two tough days that he can say the same thing. One says it at the end of a lifetime of struggle to understand the world, the other to justify not going to class.²

Just then the phone rang. The dog had gotten out of the backyard and was trampling the neighbor’s flower beds; could he come home and fetch it?

“The dog?” he thought to himself. Here he was unfolding the mysteries of Paul’s letter, making Kierkegaardian distinctions for the assembled flock, and he had to leave that important work to track down a dog? Did this happen to lawyers preparing for trial? To bankers analyzing a loan? To other ministers preparing their sermons? The dog? He had better go; once he had found the dog over by Wal-Mart, where he had trapped a lady in her minivan and wouldn’t let her get out. What a mess. So, in anger, he dropped what he was doing to take care of the dog.

He found the dog by chasing him down on the bicycle. His legs ached, and forty minutes were gone from the day. He wanted to kill the dog, but the dog was quite happy. He had had a great run, and though his tongue was hanging out, his tail was wagging happily as they walked all the way home. He put the dog in the house, locked the door, and tried to set his mind on higher things.

When he got back to Colossians, the phone was ringing. It was a salesman who

wanted to sell the church some T-shirts with the pastor's face on the front. "You're kidding," he said. "No, lots of churches are buying them," the salesman replied, "and the ones who are, are growing. It's a way of promoting your image in the community." He shuddered and said "no, he didn't think the community was ready for that," and then he hung up. He thought for a moment. If my face is on the front, he wondered, what's on the back? My God, he thought, Paul was lucky. All he had to put up with was a Roman jail, and chains, and guards, and hunger, and darkness, and the prospect of hanging in the morning. But Paul never had to deal with dogs trampling the neighbor's flower bushes or T-shirt salesmen hassling him for a sale. He almost envied Paul his miseries. I could be a great saint too, he thought, if only it weren't for all these interruptions.

The phone rang again. I am going to have to tell them to hold my calls, he thought. It was his secretary. Two boys who had run away from home were hungry and penniless and in the lobby. Could he do something? He sighed. Was this sermon ever going to get written? He doubted it. Angrily, he walked into the lobby to talk to the boys. He was expecting young men, late teens or early twenties, but what he found was two boys there, midteens at best, perhaps younger, both vacant-eyed and hungry-looking, one almost near tears. They were from Florida and had not really run away from home. They had no home, not as you or I know home, not with a Mom or Dad, with a lawn and trees. Their parents had kicked them out or abused them or both. One day they decided they would go to California. The *golden* state. They didn't know what they would do there, but, hey, something would turn up, and it beat the heck out of the mean streets of Tampa. So they set out. They ran out of money several times along the way, and occasionally even did some honest work. They were thrown in jail in Louisiana and again in Texas, and by the time they arrived here, they looked like the "Pancho" that Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard sing about: skin as hard as iron and breath like kerosene. Hard cases at fourteen. CAM wasn't open, but he took them over and got them some food and a couple of vouchers for the bus trip. They didn't want to go to California anymore, they said. They wanted to go home. "Home?" he asked. They nodded in defeat. Better the hell they knew about than the one they still had to discover. Maybe, he hoped, that is the way people start to change, to grow up even, that is, by realizing that going to California isn't going to solve my problems, that the "me" here is the same in California or in Florida, and that "me" is precisely what I cannot escape from.

He asked if he could pray with them, and they smiled. They had been prayed over a lot, he suspected, and had no more faith in his prayers than they did in their own dreams. "Sure," they said, "you can pray," and though they did not say it, implied were the words "if it will make you feel better." Well, it would, he thought. So there in the bus station, with the tickets he bought with CAM's money (and which he would have to explain to CAM later, hoping that they'd understand), he prayed for those two boys, asking for a safe trip home and a safe home to receive them at the end of their trip. He also prayed that they would finish school and find a job and, above all, find something worthwhile to give their lives to. His prayer sounded kind of preachy to him, and he was afraid to look at them as he turned to leave. "Thanks for the tickets," they said, waving goodbye. "Thanks."

He found his way back to his office. Now where was he? Ah, yes, Kierkegaard's distinction between the wisdom of age and the foolishness of youth, of costly grace which yields in the end to humility and a cheap acceptance which yields too quickly to defeat. A cheap defeat, a lazy defeat, a defeat that has given up the struggle, that

believes in nothing, a defeat that wants only to be left alone.

Which one was he, he thought. Where were his great struggles? He remembered a confrontation he had seen recently on television in South Central Los Angeles between a black woman and the vice-president. She was full of anger, and finally was screaming at him, "Why are you here? You don't know what it's like to live here. In thirty minutes you'll be gone, but I live here. I'll live here till I die. Our kids are dying here. Do you know what that is like, to be at work and wonder if your kids will survive school that day? Get out of here. You don't belong here."

He felt sorry for the woman, but also for the vice-president, helpless in the face of such rage. But the fact of the matter was that he himself didn't live there either; the fact was his biggest worry was how to keep his dog out of his neighbor's flower beds. Where were his wounds? His chains? His scars?

The truth of the matter was that he hadn't any, or, at any rate, very few. He looked again at Paul's letter. Strangely, though Paul was writing from jail, he does not go on about how hard it all is, about his troubles and woes. Instead he writes about gratitude: "We thank God when we pray for you...." And for faith and hope and love. And, in the end, joy--simple, enduring, patient joy.

He wondered which was harder: understanding what it was like to suffer for the faith or what it was like to rejoice, to take joy in the presence of God and his mercies precisely where one lived, even where one stumbled and fell. He remembered something C.S. Lewis had said in *The Screwtape Letters* about how God is not upset at his children's failings. "He wants them to learn to walk," Screwtape says in speaking of his enemy, "and must therefore take away his hand; and if only the will to walk is really there, He is pleased even with the stumbles."³ Indeed, he suspected, the stumbles are where one finds the joys that best teach us how to rejoice, to rejoice even when there seems no obvious reason to do so.

That was a new and strange thought to him. He had always wondered if he were brave enough to suffer, worthy enough to incur wounds, always a bit ashamed that he had so few battle scars. But here was Lewis, and behind him the apostle Paul, suggesting that the real test was whether one could *learn* to be grateful, as if joy could, like scales, be practiced. Can one practice gratitude? And do so without becoming *duly* grateful, without making of gratitude yet another obligation? Evidently Paul thought so, knowing as he did a gratitude that could sing, that could practice its scales because it loves the music--in jail or out, in Colossae or Kerrville, in worship or in work. He thought for a moment of the happiness he had seen that day: a dog wagging his tail after a delicious run, a hard-eyed teenager looking at him and saying "Thank you," his own face breaking into a smile at the thought of T-shirts for Jesus. What was it that Paul had said? "To be strengthened for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father...." His dog knew how to be grateful, and those teenagers were even saying the word for him. Indeed, every interruption he had had that day had been an invitation to joy. And he had missed every one: angry with the dog, rude to the salesman, impatient with the boys. How humiliating to discover that the cross that was his to bear that day was not one of pain and suffering but endurance, patience, joy, and thanksgiving--just what Paul was talking about. He had been too busy to laugh, he thought; he had sermons to write, a grim business that permitted very little time for joy.

That night, after the kids were asleep and "Cheers" was over, he put the leash on his dog and went for a walk. It was a lovely night, the stars buzzing around his head like mosquitoes. A breeze blew against them gently as they headed south toward W.

Main. The dog seemed happy to be out of the doghouse, walking contentedly now alongside his master. His master? So little he knows. Yet so little it takes to make the dog happy--walking down the street in tandem with an old friend and adversary. After a while they headed home. Now the breeze was to their backs, blowing them home through the bright summer night. Was that what Paul was writing about 2,000 years ago? Walking in company with his Master, a Master who was not ashamed of folk in jail or hucksters hawking their wares, or children who had lost their way, confusing the gospel of joy with the grimness of duty? Is that why Paul could practice his scales and sing even in prison and do it not as a martyr practicing sainthood or glorying in the squalor of it all, but as one who had been taught to sing and could not keep the music down, any more than he could keep from loving the Colossians, or frightened teenagers, or hopeless situations?

As they walked on, he remembered a letter from a missionary friend who had written recently telling of his return to Zaire, truly a troubled country, filled with corruption, disease, oppression, and death. "Why go back there?" he thought, and his friend replied, quoting Desmond Tutu: "Because as a Christian, I am a prisoner of hope."⁴ A prisoner of hope. Was there a better reason?

He and the dog walked on. In the distance they could see the house in the glow of the streetlight. How strange, he thought, to be imprisoned by hope. He was ready for anything but that. Hope. Hope for those teenagers? Hope for the cities that had broken them and the mean streets that had sent them on their way? Hope for himself—not that he would be a great preacher or scintillating teacher or caring pastor but that he would find his heart captive to hope and joy and laughter?

The dog strained at the leash as they turned into the driveway and then stopped and looked quizzically at his master, who had begun to sing. He looked down at his dog and smiled. "Sounds funny, doesn't it?" he asked. And, indeed, he felt strange standing in the driveway singing to his dog on a summer night. He laughed as the silliness of it all and looked up into the summer night sky, to the heavens, and said, "Thank you. Thank you for this day." And then he went in and went to bed. He slept well that night.

NOTES

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Run With the Horses* (Downer's Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1983), 106.

² A distinction borrowed from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's essay on "Costly Grace" in *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM Press, 1948), 45.

³ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1944), 47.

⁴ Dr. Walter and Nancy Hull, "Newsletter," Summer 1992.