

Grace Abounds

When I was growing up my father often had recent seminary graduates serving at his church. They were essentially curates, although Lutherans don't call them that. I remember one in particular who was missing a finger, probably from some previous accident. After he had been to dinner one night I overheard my father say to my mother, "I wish we still had young children at home to ask him what happened to his finger." I learned two things that night. I was no longer considered a child, and children ask questions that adults are too polite to ask.

It wasn't the only time my father taught me how adults should treat people. Sometimes I accompanied him to Sunday afternoon services at what was called a home for the incurable. I tried hard not to stare at the paralytic lying in a bed or at the enormous heads of those with hydrocephalus, a congenital condition that is now treatable. My fascination may have been why for a while in high school I wanted to be a doctor.

We all have a natural curiosity about people who are different. Had I been in the crowd with Jesus that day as he walked toward Jerusalem, I probably would have stared at the lepers as they came into view. I would already be on edge because we were about to travel through Samaria, a place I considered full of undesirable people. The lepers made it worse. They were disfigured and ritually dangerous. Anything they touched would become unclean. I hoped they would follow the Law, keeping their distance and shouting "Unclean! Unclean!"

Instead they came closer and shouted "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" Or as the Greek says, *eleison*. Have mercy. The very word we say in Kyrie *eleison*, Christe *eleison*. Jesus didn't even hesitate. "Go and show yourself to the priests," he said. Jesus knew that the priests could certify that the men were clean and renew their passports into society. So the lepers took off. I would have been glad to see them go – so glad I would not have noticed that they were healed on the way.

Then a strange thing happened. One of them came back. I could tell by his clothes that he was a Samaritan, so I started getting edgy again. He came right up to Jesus, fell on his face at Jesus' feet, and praised God. Jesus became agitated – not because the man was a foreigner, but rather that he was the only one who came back. The other nine hadn't returned to give thanks. "Giving thanks," by the way, is *euchariston*, another word that should sound familiar. Jesus said to the one at his feet, "Arise, go; your faith has saved you."

It's a dramatic moment. If you remember last week, Jesus compared the faith of the disciples to the size of a little mustard seed. Now a foreigner, an outsider, is saved by his faith. The message is that grace abounds for those who ask Jesus for mercy.

The grace of God didn't suddenly appear with Jesus, of course. It has been present since creation, even if most of the time it's hidden. Take today's reading from Jeremiah, for instance. When this passage was written, Jerusalem had been sacked and its leadership hauled off to Babylonia. A few escapees fled to Egypt, dragging Jeremiah with them. In exile himself, he gave instructions to those in Babylonia who were expecting to head home soon. Forget about that, he said. Build houses. Plant gardens. Start families. You're going to be there a long time. Not only

that, pray for the foreign cities where you live, because if they do well, so will you. In other words, even in a foreign land one can expect to find God's grace. God is faithful, as the letters of Paul constantly remind us.

That grace of Jesus is still available to us today. That's why we still say Kyrie eleison (or Lord, have mercy) and celebrate the Eucharist. Grace comes through bread and wine. It comes through friends who check up on us. It comes in a hundred different ways every day. Most of the time we miss its appearance unless we remember to look for the presence of Jesus.

I still have a natural curiosity about people. Now it's more about what makes them tick than their physical appearance. I'm sure that comes from watching my father all those years. He treated people as children of God no matter who they were or what they looked like. He wasn't perfect; none of us is. But he was a follower of one who *was* perfect, who heard cries for mercy and immediately acted on them.

Today's Collect perfectly sums up the need for and the presence of grace, so I can think of no more fitting way to end than to pray it again.

Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, that we may continually be given to good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

[Pentecost 18: Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; Psalm 66; 2 Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19.]