

Pentecost 3A

June 29, 2014

Ken Wratten at St Stephen's, San Jose

Genesis 22:1-14

Abraham almost sacrifices Isaac

Romans 6:12-23

We are not under law but under grace

Matthew 10:40-42

Discipleship, living under Grace, encompasses carrying our cross AND having God's blessing – eternal life

Life of Grace

Last Friday Ruth and I (and at least five others of us that I saw there) attended the funeral service for Bishop Mary's husband, Michael Reeves. The service was at St Andrew's in Saratoga, which was filled to standing room only. There were more than 800 people who attended the service. When I spoke with Bishop Mary after the service, I told her that it was wise to hold the service for Michael at the largest church in the diocese, because it was the only facility large enough to contain the amount of love we have for her.

Bishop Mary told Ruth and me that an 83 year old man was driving his car on a two lane road and without warning turned left directly into the path of Michael, who was bicycling toward him in the other lane. Michael was hit, and was killed instantly. She told us that she had already written to the driver, to tell him that she has forgiven him. Her eyes were puffy from crying, she looked tired, but she was completely sincere. She knew he would be charged for the accident; he would never drive again; this had taken away the man she met in college 31 years ago; the father of their two children; but she forgave him.

Mary Gray-Reeves' actions gave me at least two reminders of what happens when we commit our lives to living a life of Grace. In fact, Grace was the topic of the sermon at Michael's service; it was the topic Mary asked the preacher to speak on. Grace is the topic that every Christian needs to understand, because Grace uniquely distinguishes the Christian faith from every other religion in the world. Our understanding and applying the life of Grace can transform our Christian life.

One of the talks in Cursillo teaches that Grace is an invitation from God. We cannot initiate it and we cannot deserve it, because it is God reaching out to us. Grace is not an 'object' we receive, but it is a relationship – God giving Himself to us. Finally, Cursillo teaches that Grace, if we accept it, begins a life-long transformation in us.

There are several forms to Grace. I said earlier that Bishop Mary's actions showed at least two of those forms. One form of Grace is Sanctifying Grace, which has been defined as grace that works within the true believer in such a way as to bring growth, maturity, and progress in the process of becoming Christ-like. I frankly do not know where else she would have the compassion and caring to forgive the driver who hit Michael. She told me that she knew he was going to have to live with what happened for the rest of his life, and she needed to forgive him.

Another form of Grace that I saw on Friday late afternoon is Sustaining Grace, which is given at special times of need, especially during adversity or suffering. Hebrews 4:16 says, 'Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need.' Mary was sustained through an emotional service, and 3 hours of greeting people afterwards.

The Apostle Paul said that living in grace leads to our sanctification, and to eternal life. But he said that it also reaps rewards in this life. God's grace frees us from being slaves to sin – not free from ever committing sin, or from being tempted to sin, but we are not slaves to sin. We are instead made slaves to righteousness. Our lives are committed to making God our Master, and making God's character our example.

Jesus had already warned his 12 disciples about the rejection and even persecution they would suffer in the process of living out their responsibility to witness for him about God's Kingdom. Now Jesus describes the rewards that will also come to them. He was describing that the life of Grace has difficult aspects and amazingly wonderful and rewarding aspects to it.

Abraham was instructed to offer his son as a sacrifice to God. This is not only inconceivable to expect of a father, but this was also the son who would fulfil God's promise for Abraham's offspring to be more numerous than the stars in the desert sky. But Abraham had such unconditional faith in God that he knew in his heart that God would provide. And he experienced God's grace. In fact, it seems that this OT episode was an experience for Abraham to learn about the character of God; because Grace IS the description of God's character.

We can't understand the Christian life unless we understand grace. It is the heart of our faith. It is the heart of our relationship with God. When you understand grace you feel closer to God. The more you understand grace the more you are drawn to God, the more you love God, the more you are grateful to God. It is by grace that God brings us to Him, in a journey that continues throughout our life.

Our lessons today all illustrate aspects of living a life of grace; it is not about living a life without temptation, or without struggles, or being protected from grief. But it is about living a life, good and bad, in committed relationship with God. The service for Michael Reeves was a brilliant testimony of celebration of his life. That service was filled with signals of the presence of God's Grace. That message should remind each of us what lies at the foundation of our Christian faith, and is offered to each of us, and when accepted, transforms each of us and empowers us. That is the ideal of the Christian life. It only requires that we accept the invitation.

Amen.