

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling  
Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church  
October 28, 2012  
Mark 10:46-55  
Reformation Sunday

### **“Counting Your Blessings: God’s Grace”**

Today I’m beginning a short three-week sermon series titled “Counting Your Blessings”. It seems appropriate to do since Thanksgiving is only 24 days away. But we’re not going to count our blessings like we did when we were children by rattling off all of those things we’re thankful for, which consist mostly of material possessions save for our families and friends. We’re going to go deeper than that, and look at some core theological concepts for which we need to count our blessings.

Today, the concept we can count as a blessing is that of grace. God’s amazing, unconditional grace. It’s a good topic for Reformation Sunday, because grace is a thoroughly reformed idea. The last Sunday of October has long been recognized as Reformation Sunday, and it’s a time to reflect on who we are and where we came from and who we aspire to be and what we most deeply believe. And one of those beliefs we hold most deeply is the idea that God’s grace is given to us not because of who we are or what we’ve done, but because of who God is and what God does.

For evidence of this, we need not look any further than the story of blind Bartimaeus we heard today in Mark’s gospel.

Jesus, his disciples, and a large crowd have gathered in Jericho. We don’t know why, just that they have been there and are getting ready to leave. Upon leaving, they run into Bartimaeus. Poor Bartimaeus, he’s blind and begging at the side of the road. Sort of like the guy I gave a dollar to outside Busch stadium last Friday night.

Somehow, Bartimaeus gets word that Jesus is walking down the road. So he yells at the top of his lungs so he can be heard over the large crowd that surrounds Jesus, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

As an aside, this is the first time in Mark’s Gospel that anyone has called Jesus “Son of David”. This is probably Mark’s way of alerting his readers to who Jesus is, and prepping them for what comes next, which is Jesus’ entry in Jerusalem, what we celebrate as Palm Sunday.

“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me,” Bartimaeus shouts. Well, the crowd and disciples heard him, because they sternly tell him to zip it. Be quiet, they yell at him. We don’t know why they tell Bartimaeus to shut up, but it probably has something to do with the fact that he’s a blind beggar, and they are far too important to waste their time with him. Again, sort of like the beggar at Busch stadium most people choose to ignore.

But the crowd's disdain only causes Bartimaeus to yell louder. "Son of David, have mercy on me!" This time Jesus hears him, stops, and tells the crowd, "Call him here."

And so the crowd does, tells the blind beggar to take heart and get up. Which he does. Springs up, actually, and throws off his cloak while he does. "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asks him. And the man says, "Teacher, let me see again."

To which Jesus replies, "Go, your faith has made you well." Immediately, Bartimaeus regained his sight, and followed Jesus on the way. I'm guessing that Bartimaeus was the very next day waving a palm branch at Jesus when he strode into Jerusalem on that donkey.

---

Now, when we come across stories like this in the Bible, and Lord knows there are plenty of them, one of the most common reactions we have is, "How dare the crowd deny Bartimaeus' request to see Jesus. How dare they shush him!" After all, Jesus is in the business of healing and helping people, right? I mean, after all this time, three years, his disciples and followers should know by now that Jesus is going to stop and help blind beggars at the side of the road who request his help! That's what he does.

But 2000 years ago when people first heard this story, it would have come as a shock to learn that Jesus stopped to help the blind beggar, especially after hearing that Jesus came from the royal lineage of David. See, you need to remember that Mark's listeners would have equated Bartimaeus' blindness with sin, and if someone was sinful people didn't want anything to do with him. They didn't want the person's sinfulness to rub off on them, because if it did then they might go blind, too! So people stayed as far away as they could from people like Bartimaeus. After all they didn't need God's punishment raining down on them, because they were good, law abiding, upright citizens.

So before we make the crowds sit in the corner for being bad, we'd do well to remember that they were doing what they thought was right. They thought they were protecting Jesus. So the problem isn't that they were bad people; they were actually good people. The problem in this story is that crowds were too good, and trusted so much in themselves and their goodness that they believed they had no need for God's grace!

Bartimaeus, on the other hand, knew he needed God's grace and needed it pronto, so he's perfectly willing to yell "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" as many times as it takes to get Jesus' attention! He knew that in order to see again he needed God's help!

But the crowds thought they could see perfectly fine. They didn't need to yell out "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" because their vision was perfect. 20-20, in fact. Their standing in society told them so.

But Bartimaeus knows that he's not perfect; he knows he's got vision problems, and in order to correct them he needs God's mercy, God's grace.

The crowds, however, can't see their blind spots because they're so convinced they are good. The mere fact that they can see and are hanging out with Jesus has convinced them that they are good, moral, upright citizens who have achieved this status by hard work and discipline, unlike that blind beggar at the side of the road. Their success implies, ironically, that they have no need for God's mercy and grace. They've turned a blind eye to their sins of pride and self-righteousness. They believe they've earned their place at Jesus' side. But what they don't know, and what they can't see, is that there is no way to earn one's place at Jesus' side. You only get there because of God's grace.

Five hundred years after the Reformation, God's grace is still a difficult concept for Protestants to fully grasp. The Protestant work ethic has so deeply embedded in us the idea that if we just work hard enough and long enough that everything will be right between us and God. We spend our lives trying to earn the approval of everyone around us: our parents, our families, friends, teachers, bosses, and the approval of God. We believe that if we do enough good works and live as good, moral, upright citizens that we will be rewarded with God's favor.

We still believe that we need to please God.

Five hundred years after the Reformation we still believe, if only just a little bit, that we need to persuade God to be gracious, and that we can do that by working hard and doing what is right. And yet Luther and Calvin and the other reformers said, "No, you've got it backwards. You don't have to persuade God to be gracious. You don't have to persuade God to be loving. God already loves. God already forgives. God already is gracious." That was an entirely new way of thinking about God.

---

I believe that in order to fully experience and live with God's grace, not to receive it, but to fully experience and live with God's grace, in order to truly count God's grace as a blessing in our lives, we need to come to the realization that no matter how hard we work, or how good we are, that we are still in need of God's mercy. That we, too, need to shout out to Jesus, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Because we all have blind spots. We all fall short of God's vision for God's world and God's people.

Now I realize that's not a popular message, because no one wants to have a finger wagged in one's face telling him (or her) she's a sinner. But if we don't acknowledge the fact that we do fall short, and no amount of hard work or being good will make up for that; that the only thing that can make up for it is God's grace, we'll never fully experience it. That's a hard truth to accept, because the Protestant work ethic is so deeply ingrained in us and our culture.

But if never fully acknowledge that we're in need of God's mercy, we'll never fully experience the beauty and blessing of God's amazing grace.

In order to explain this a bit better, let me share with you a story. It's not my story. It's another preacher's story.

Picture, for a moment, two young men, brothers, playing soccer on a deserted high school field. After playing for some time, they begin to argue (over what they will later not recall), and then to push and to shove each other. Finally the older of the two shoves the other one violently away, and then, clenching his fists, taunts him saying, "Go ahead. Hit me. Give me an excuse to crush you." The younger one just shakes his head, moving neither closer nor further away. The older one, angered further, repeats his taunt: "C'mon. Take a swing. I dare ya." Again, the younger brother shakes his head from side to side, as the older one continues to badger and ridicule him. Finally, as tears begin flowing out of his eyes, he manages to choke out just one word, "No." Enraged at being denied, the older one moves forward and shoves his younger brother again, harder than before. "C'mon. Hit me! Hit me!" The younger brother, tears streaming down his face, says amidst his sobs, "No. I will not hit my brother." "C'mon," the older one jeers again. "Go ahead." "No. I will not hit my brother. I will not hit my brother. I can't hit you, David. I love you."

How did David respond? One *would think* that being confronted by his younger brother's word of love, he would have immediately acknowledged his poor behavior and tried to make amends. But not so. No. The only thing that he acknowledged in the face of his brother's grace was that he had not gotten his way, that his brother had thwarted his will, and so, far from making amends, David strode off to their car, bitter and angry, and pulled away, leaving the younger brother to walk the four miles back to their home. But then, as he was pulling away, he looked over and saw his brother, with the soccer ball tucked under his arm, walking home with his head bowed in pain, tears still streaming down his face. And he stopped...but not because he wanted to. No, not even then did he want to stop, but he could do no other, for finally the younger brother's love had -- had what? -- won his over? No, exactly the opposite: Finally his love had broken his will, killed that prideful self that demands to be always in control.

The only way to fully experience God's grace and count it as a blessing in our lives is to admit that we are not in control; God is. And God grace isn't dependant on who we are or what we've done; it's dependant on who God is and what God does.

The great theologian Paul Tillich once wrote:

*Sometimes a wave of light breaks into our darkness and it is as if a voice were saying, "You are accepted. You are 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; 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."*

And then went on to write:

*We cannot compel anyone to accept himself or herself. But sometimes it happens that we receive the power to say “yes” to ourselves, that peace enters into us and makes us whole-grace has come upon us.*

Before I end, I want to bring us back to Bartimaeus, and the image of Bartimaeus throwing off his cloak as he runs to meet Jesus. I think that gesture is important and symbolic. It's quite reasonable to think that the cloak would have been Bartimaeus' most treasured possession. After all, it kept him warm during those cold nights living on the streets. But Bartimaeus was willing to toss it aside in order to see.

I wonder, what are we willing to toss aside in order to gain our sight? What are our security blankets? What's holding us back from crying out to Jesus, “Lord, have mercy on me.” What's holding us back from admitting that God's grace comes to us, not because of who we are or what we've done, but because of who God is and what God does? Is it our need to be in control? Is it our unwillingness to admit that we do fall short of God's vision for God's people? What's holding us back from throwing off our cloaks and fully living and experiencing God's grace and accepting it for what it is: amazing and unconditional.

Being a Christian is not about being good enough so that God loves us; it's about being grateful that God loves us for who we are, sins and all. It's not about feeling guilty that we aren't doing enough; but believing that God will love us even when we aren't. And that what God wants for us, is a life lived in joyful gratitude. A life that counts as a blessing God's grace, God's amazing, unconditional grace.

May you in your week ahead count as a blessing in your life God's grace.

Amen.

Sources:

[http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear\\_wp.aspx?article\\_id=520](http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear_wp.aspx?article_id=520)

John Buchanan, “Stewardship, Reformation, and God's Amazing Grace”, October 30, 2011

Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4, Lincoln E. Galloway, Homiletical Perspective

Michael Lindvall, “Everybody's Favorite Parable”, October 24, 2010