

## **“The Nature of Grace”**

**Acts 15:1-11**

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Earlier this spring I was showing a friend my raspberry patch. I was showing it to her for two reasons; one, I am genuinely excited about my patch, I love raspberries especially when they are warmed in the sun and ripe for eating; the second reason I showed her my patch is that she is a great gardener and my patch has been limping along for a couple years and I wanted her advice about how to improve it. She looked at my patch, asked a few questions about watering and she said with clarity – “Your main problem is that you have way too much grass and weeds in with the canes. The competition is too strong, get rid of that stuff.”

The clarity of her statement set me on a focused course of action – getting rid of that stuff.

For the last couple of weeks I have been on a mission, not just in my raspberries, but in all our gardens. Each free moment at home I throw on my old pants and head out into the dirt, sometimes with trowel and shovel, but mostly with my bare hands. I have been pulling and tearing out unwanted grass, creeping Charlie, dandelions and a host of greens I don't have names for. I bend, squat, kneel and contort for hours. My hands tire, but I go on pulling. My back aches, but I go on bending. Ibuprofen has become an intimate friend, like a squire keeping me fit for combat.

Though I have grown physically tired, my spirit has not diminished. I am determined to get rid of that stuff so that I can enjoy more berries, more asparagus, more garlic and more blossoms.

I am becoming acutely aware of each blade of grass sticking up among the black-eyed Susans. I have followed the creeping Charlie, pulling every new branch from among the iris, the phlox, the yarrow, and the daisies. Even the stinging nettles that hug my raspberry canes I dispatch with bare hands. There has been no hiding from my keen eyes and grasp.

The other night Wendy and I sat on our back deck eating a wonderful dinner. Nothing fancy, just simple tasty food. As we relaxed feeling a bit of summer warmth I looked out at our yard and gardens. Daffodils were blooming, primrose were blooming, the forsythia bush was canary yellow, the bluebells were hanging gracefully and the leaves of later summer flowers looked thick.

But it wasn't long before the weeds and not the blossoms drew more of my attention.

When I began my assault on the gardens the purpose was to create space so that the flowers and fruit of my desires could emerge and I could enjoy them. But as I focused more and more on my eradication efforts the wonder of blossom and berry became secondary, holding my attention for shorter and shorter moments.

It wasn't long before I got up from dinner with Wendy to clear more of what was unwanted so that what is wanted could flourish.

Of course the unwanted stuff never ceases to come up again. The places where I first pulled are challenging me again and I have not gotten to all areas even once yet.

A gardener like me has to decide some things or he or she will go crazy and run out of ibuprofen. The main things that need deciding have to do with how much effort and resources one can put forward to eliminate competing plants before losing sight of the desired goal, and how does one continue to find wonder in the beauty that comes without our intervention.

Turn with me to our passage from the book of Acts for this morning. Described in this passage is an ancient struggle for the community of God's people. The struggle has to do with the value of requirements for inclusion in the community – circumcision being the focus of this concern, and letting go of requirements for the sake of a greater desire – Peter speaks of God's grace having been poured out on people regardless of their background.

Originally the requirements established by the people of faith were meant to strengthen people's trust in God and each other. Moses didn't talk of circumcision because he wanted people to go through needless pain, he did so for health reasons and to increase people's sense of identity as children of God. Circumcision was not essentially about eliminating the possibility of being loved by God, it was about the physical reminder that one is loved by God.

Over the centuries however, circumcision became a means by which people were identified as the only people of God. Instead of being a mark of God's grace it became a mark of superior worth.

When Peter speaks to the assembly in Jerusalem, he, like Paul, was trying to reconnect the community to God's gift of grace. Grace to Peter was not a gift God withheld until requirements were fulfilled. Peter says that on Pentecost God poured out the Spirit of grace indiscriminantly on all the people. On Pentecost God poured out mercy, joy, reconciliation, understanding and peace in boat loads. No one held up signs saying

“circumcised” or “uncircumcised” because there was no need. It was clear that all those who were present were God’s children.

The word “radical” means “to return to the beginning, to one’s origins.” Peter was radical in that he spoke of God’s original purposes, to have all people know they are recipients of God’s grace.

Christians like us have to decide some things or we will become crazy like the guy who predicted the world would end yesterday. We have to decide whether the weeds are what we are to be most concerned with, or is it the beauty, the blossoms and the berries? We need to decide whether to be more concerned with actions that seem devout or the proclamation of God’s abundant grace.

One of the great difficulties regarding these decisions is that pulling weeds and doing things that cause us to appear devout are things that we control, they make us feel we are accomplishing something.

I saw a short interview of the man who predicted the end of the world yesterday. He held his Bible in his hands. It was well worn. Pages were bent, a bit torn and there was writing all over them. He had obviously spent a great deal of time pouring over the pages and words unlocking the mystery of the rapture, its time and place. He appeared devout and all kinds of people sent him money so he could get the word out about the world ending.

I don’t know this man, but I am deeply saddened that he would spend so much time and energy on something that is so destructive toward God’s creation and people. Obviously faith is central to his life, but he is consumed with calculating God’s actions instead of proclaiming God’s gifts.

This man expresses a trait familiar to most of us, the desire to be active, defining and ahead of the game. But we read in the Bible that we are called to trust, appreciate and be present. This is the spiritual side of life. The Bible directs us to be attentive to all that is given to us, instead of what we make with our own hands. The Bible points to unmerited graces instead of what we have earned and therefore claim as our own.

The nature of grace is that it is freely offered, abundantly offered, indiscriminately offered. Faithful people are those who persistently recognize and receive God’s gifts of grace, as well as offering that grace as often as we can.

A little over a year ago the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Committee in our church went to the Church Council and said, “As part of our anniversary year we think it is important that our church

undertake a significant mission project.” The Council affirmed this goal and instructed the Anniversary Committee to talk to the Mission Committee about what this project might be.

So the Anniversary Committee brought to the Mission Committee the request that they decide on a project. The Committee didn’t hesitate and started exploring possibilities. Our church camps were in need of people to restore cabins, Back Bay Mission was still in need of people to restore homes destroyed in Hurricane Katrina, the domestic abuse shelter needed repairs, Stepping Stones was undertaking a capital campaign for their new building and Habitat for Humanity was looking into a build in Menomonie. All these projects and more were worthy of our efforts.

The Committee narrowed the selection down to raising \$10,000 for Stepping Stones or helping build a Habitat House. Both were very challenging projects. We have never raised \$10,000 to just give away and leading an entire house building effort was huge. The Mission Committee liked both of the projects and couldn’t decide between them. Finally one member said, “Let’s do them both!” Everybody else said “Really!, Yeah let’s do them both.” Then everybody said, “Yeah, let’s do them both.”

The Mission Committee told the Council this and they said, “Great idea! This will really stretch us, but everybody seems to be excited about it.” Even in the midst of the recession, or maybe because of the recession, leaders of our church put forward a most generous mission proposal with joy.

To me this is what it means to live as gracefilled people. Generosity pouring out of what feels like scarcity. Possibility flowing from limits. Service offered in a time of selfishness. As people of faith we decide where our focus will be – will we concentrate on eliminating the weeds of scarcity, selfishness or the end of the world, or will we embrace the grace of generosity, service and life. Let us continue to choose the latter.