

Grace and Responsibility
Micah 6:1-8
Matthew 5:1-12
January 30, 2011
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If you haven't seen the film, "The King's Speech," you should. Nominated for best actor, Colin Firth stars as Prince Albert of England, who reluctantly becomes King George VI. As King of England, he steps into a position of great power, but there's one problem. He has a terrible handicap: he stutters. The film is about the relationship between the King and his speech therapist, Lionel Logue, played by Geoffrey Rush.

These two have a rather unique relationship. Logue only agrees to work with the King under his conditions. He refuses to say, "Your Majesty," but instead calls the King by his childhood, family name "Bertie." Logue offends the King by sitting on his royal throne; he insists on being his equal. (When you're the King, you're not used to having an equal!) It's a rather lonely place to sit at the pinnacle of power. As trust develops between the two, Bertie admits that growing up as the Duke of York and then reigning as the King of England, he doesn't know what it would be like to have a friend. Logue becomes a friend and confidante. Bertie shares some painful childhood memories, when his older brother was regularly favored, and when his nanny mistreated him. All his life he was ridiculed for his stammer, and even into his adult years his brother poked fun at him, calling him "B-B-B-B-B-ertie."

Logue, the speech therapist, works with Bertie until the King finds his voice.

This is a true story. It's 1939, and England declares war on Germany. The King must give a speech over the radio. He calls Logue to the palace, and together in a room all to themselves, the King reads his speech over the air, with long, dramatic pauses to avoid stuttering. He reads nearly flawlessly. The speech is a resounding success; it bolsters the courage of the country and endears the King to his people.

What happened here was Logue accepted the man, Bertie, as he was, flawed. He drew him out and cared about him as a *person*, not as the *King*. And then he challenged him to overcome his disability. The King had a responsibility to his people. Logue used a "tough love" kind of approach, to convince the King that he could handle that responsibility and that he was up to the challenge, and the approach worked.

"Accept and challenge" was the motto of a remedial reading program I worked in one summer. I was studying to be a reading specialist, and we had a summer reading clinic practicum. Another grad student and I were the only teachers assigned to work with high school non-readers. These were kids who could read a stop sign or the name of a rock star off an album cover, but they couldn't read a novel or a textbook. They were failing in school because if you can't read the assignment from the board and you can't read the chapter in the book, in high school you're pretty well going to fail. Our task was to "accept and challenge" these kids. So we started with the DMV Driver's Manual and picked out words

and phrases that had pictures by them. There were diagrams with the words, like "passing on the left" and "passing on the right." So the kids learned to read those phrases and connect the meaning with the diagrams. There was incentive because every teenager wants to get a driver's license. These kids were smart; they just needed to be taught at their very basic level. We moved from pictures to words to phrases to sentences. By the end of the summer, the kids were getting the hang of sounding out words they didn't recognize.

This "accept and challenge" idea is a lot like a parent-child relationship, and it's a lot like our relationship with God. God accepts us as we are, with all our faults and shortcomings, and God loves us. And—there's more—God challenges us to be as God created us to be, in God's image—like God—which is to say, loving.

This is the central idea of United Methodism: grace and responsibility. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, talked about grace more than any other theological concept. We are showered with God's grace! It is unmerited—you don't earn it. It is universally available—even to people who aren't Methodists! We Methodists have always rejected the idea of predestination—that some are chosen and the others go to hell. We believe ALL are chosen and ALL are invited into forgiveness and fullness of life. But grace is resistible, that means, though it is freely given, it can also be rejected or ignored.

God accepts us and loves us, but we often don't see it; we don't always recognize grace from God. Maybe we feel too terrible about ourselves to realize how deeply loved we are. Maybe we cannot face the sin in our lives because facing it would mean changing our ways, and that would be too much to ask. Maybe we don't have the courage to accept God's love because when we really accept that gracious gift, then with it comes a challenge, a life-changing challenge.

The challenge is to respond to God's love by loving others. It becomes our responsibility as followers of Jesus.

John Wesley used a house as an illustration of God's redeeming grace. When you stand on the porch, of this theoretical house, you are showered by God's "prevenient grace." When you enter into the house by the door, you receive God's "justifying grace"—all is in alignment when you are accepted as you are and forgiven. Then you enter into the rooms of the house where you move around and respond in holy living, that's "sanctifying grace." "Prevenient grace," "justifying grace," and "sanctifying grace" aren't phrases you're likely to ever use or remember. But the point is, it's a process, this thing we call faithful living. It starts with God accepting us as we are, forgiving us, and challenging us to lead a life that goes beyond ourselves.

The Beatitudes are phrases of grace. They show God's love for the least, the poor, the forgotten; for the ones who are afraid, and for those who are in mourning. The Beatitudes start with "they," "Blessed are the pure in heart, for *they* will see God." But then by the end, it's "Blessed are *you*!" If you didn't fall into a category yet, of "poor," or "hungry," or "merciful," now you are included: "Blessed are YOU when people revile you and persecute

you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven." God loves you for identifying as a follower of Jesus.

The Sermon on the Mount in the Book of Matthew goes on to spell out the challenge that following Jesus brings. Through February we will be speaking about ethical living, responsible living. (It's pretty radical stuff, in this book we call holy.)

Micah says it in a nutshell: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (6:80)

God is like a good parent. God blesses us and showers us with grace unconditionally—and then asks us to live with responsibility for the needs of others around us: to work for justice for all, to demonstrate kindness in acts of service, and to be humble about it!

In the past weeks we've looked at atheism, at monotheism, at Christianity, and today at Methodism. We Methodists are known for our hymns and for the teaching of God's grace. We are not a denomination that makes people memorize doctrine or dogma. We encourage people to ask questions about the meaning of life, the relevance of God, the purpose of the church, and the nature of God's saving grace.

I see grace as the salvation of the world. It's amazing—it saves even "a wretch like me," or you. It picks us up and gives us hope that God isn't finished with us yet. God has a challenge for us. There are so many people who are hurting out there (and in here). There are people who feel unworthy, because of something—we all have something. There are people who are lonely and don't have a church or any way to connect. There are people who are hungry and homeless. There are people who are stuck in a rut—they are depressed or in bad habits or simply without hope. These people are our challenge. They are our responsibility. God calls us to live for others, to change the social systems that create inequity and despair, to help those who are less fortunate.

Our denomination is on the forefront—we are "Protestants," protesters at heart and "Methodists," tireless, methodical workers for freedom, for justice, for peace, and for a realization of hope.

It all comes from God in the invitation to grace and responsibility.

I'm not sure what challenge each of us will take on as our responsibility. Maybe some of you are already meeting the challenge—Maybe you are already volunteering for NOAH or COTS. Or maybe you are offering your home or resources to family members who would not otherwise be able to manage in the economic downturn. Or maybe your work is your calling to serve humanity, and so you work with all the energy you've got. Or maybe being a parent or grandparent is your challenge and you've taken it on as your major responsibility. I have heard people say, "I want to do something for others." "I want to give back." Some are saying, "Now that I'm retired, I want to serve." That's God's call, right there, to serve.

Then the discernment process starts—where can I serve? Maybe you can train to become a hospice volunteer, or a reading tutor in the schools; or maybe you can help build awareness of world needs by working for Habitat for Humanity or Heifer Project International. Maybe you will help us start a relationship with a congregation of another faith, or advocate for people who are marginalized in our community. I read of a need for nurses to educate our churches about world diseases. There are so many needs—it should not be too hard to find one that matches your gifts.

This was the week of the State of the Union address. If I were to give the State of the Union—not for the United States of America, but for The United Methodist Church, I would say something like this:

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I want to begin by congratulating you this week on passing a balanced budget, one that pays full apportionments and gives our St. John's staff small but significant raises.

Our church is strong. We have our problems: not many children, not many youth. Like other mainline denominations, in The United Methodist Church we have a smaller percent of the population in our churches on Sunday morning now than 50 years ago—Yes, it's true, our membership has dropped from 6.5 % of the U. S. population to 3 %. But we are still the third largest denomination in the United States (after Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists). We are, worldwide, 11 million strong, and growing in developing nations.

I don't pretend that we all agree with one another. It's no secret that those of us here today have had our differences. Some say our social principles are too liberal; some say they are too conservative. Some say we should spend more in order to grow the church, some say we should spend less. The debates in two centuries of the Methodist movement have been contentious. During the Civil War we were a church divided over the issue of slavery. But our debate over the years is a good thing. That's what a robust church demands. That's what helps set us apart as a denomination. We are not afraid of tough questions because we know we have been abundantly blessed with God's grace, and because we are blessed, we are also challenged. The world United Methodist Church has *taken* the challenge, and we have formulated 4 goals. Our denomination commits to meeting these goals: to train lay and clergy leaders, to grow

new and existing churches, to feed the hungry, and to wipe out global disease caused by poverty. We do big things. Why? Because we believe in a big God, a God who calls us to look forward, and reach across the aisle, and work together for the common good. Maybe one of these 4 goals will pull at your heart: to become a leader, to grow our church, to serve the poor, or to help eradicate disease.

Rather than look back, we will look ahead. What comes of this moment will be determined not by whether we can sit together in this room, but whether we can work together tomorrow. I believe we can. And I believe we must. No matter who you are. No matter where you come from. God loves you and calls you.

John Wesley preached the gospel of hope to coal miners, and prison inmates, to high society and low. He organized folks into class meetings and asked them to be accountable to each other. There was always expectation of faithful living, stewardship of resources, and acts of charity in the community because accepting the love of Christ means committing to love our neighbors, whoever they are—the unemployed, the poor, the children in need of better schools, the regular people on Main Street.

No matter what, our faith endures. We are saved by God's grace. We have an invitation, to receive that grace and to use it to transform the world, nothing less. And today, more than two centuries after the founding of Methodism, it's because of our people's response to God's love that our future is hopeful, our journey goes forward, and the state of our union is strong. God bless you, and may God bless The United Methodist Church (phrases borrowed from President Obama's State of the Union address, Jan. 25, 2011).