

“The impact of grace” a sermon preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 30 July 2017.

I have heard the voice.

Others have told me they hear the voice, the voice that says ... “are you sure you are measuring up?” Or “you are not measuring up.” It’s a voice that reminds you of failures, mistakes, inadequacies.

A friend came from an accomplished hard-working family. She was smart, capable, confident. She had progressed in her profession, had a warm outgoing personality and was a great colleague. She told me though what it was like in the family in which she grew up. She did well at school. She would come home from school and show her father her school results. She told me of a time, when she had got a good mark for a paper, let’s say 85, and she was feeling good. Her father congratulated her, and affirmed her and then he said, you are only 15 short of a 100. And that 15 became the focus of attention, the subject of the conversation, not the 85 she had achieved. How could she work hard and smart enough to bridge the gap?

Haunted by the gap, between who we are and who we want to be. It is not always about academic achievement.

Fred Craddock told the story of the minister arriving in a new congregation. He was being hosted at a welcoming BBQ and got into conversation with one of the church members. “It is so good to come to a congregation where the vote to call me was unanimous”, he said. “Yes, said the parishioner, hesitantly “... nearly unanimous.” “Nearly unanimous?” the minister asked. “I thought everyone voted in favour.” “How many voted against.” “O, I am not sure, perhaps three or four.” The minister wasted what could have been a great ministry and became consumed by the gap.

Coming to terms with what we can realistically achieve and what we are told we should achieve, often by an inner voice. Between who we are and who we are told we should be.

“Are you measuring up?” It can be a haunting, disabling question.

The hymn we are singing shortly names another gap, between how we want to relate to people and how we actually relate.

“God, how can we forgive when bonds of love are torn? How can we rise and start anew, our trust reborn? When we have missed the mark and tears of anguish flow, how can you still release the guilt, the debt we owe?”

Moments of disappointment. Feelings of regret. Occasions of shame. Broken relationships. It is a figment to imagine ourselves never missing the mark, always doing what others expect.

The hymn also names the dynamic that helps us talk back to the voice of judgement – “When human loving fails and every hope is gone, your love give strength beyond our own to face the dawn. The ocean depth of grace surpasses all our needs, a priest who shares our human pain, Christ intercedes.”

I heard a sermon entitled “saved by laughter”. My memory is that the preacher focused on a supposed experience of Martin Luther. Luther was to pay penance for his sins. His penance was to crawl up the steps of the cathedral tower. And half way up he burst out laughing, realising how silly it was, that this would help him live the Christ-like way. I doubt the story is accurate, but the point is well made and is reminiscent of things Luther said –

"If you are moody, you shall remember that the Father now smiles at you. But our heart does not want to understand this, especially when we are challenged. We then think the opposite: that God is our enemy, that he does not esteem us and wants to beat us with the club."

At the start of this service we sang the old 100th from the Scottish psalter which contained these words:

*All people that on earth do dwell,
Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice,
Him serve with mirth, His praise forth tell,
Come ye before Him and rejoice.*

This is true to the meaning of the original Hebrew.

However, many modern hymnals have changed the wording, replacing “mirth” with “fear”:

*All people that on earth do dwell,
Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice,
Him serve with **fear**, His praise forth tell,
Come ye before Him and rejoice.*

What enabled that mirth? What caused the laughter at the gap between who we are and who we imagine we should be and our frustrated efforts to bridge the gap?

Martin Luther was appointed Professor of scripture at a new university in Wittenberg. He began to lecture on the Bible. It was his study, especially of Galatians and Romans that led to a break-through in his thinking.

Simply put, we cannot earn God's acceptance; we must simply receive it as a gracious gift. The phrase was justification by grace through faith.

We are never justified by works, but solely from God's side, by God's encompassing love, by God's accepting grace.

The language is from the court room, the pronouncement of a verdict of not guilty. And, to pick up the language of Paul Tillich, faith is about accepting that we are accepted. We do not have to justify ourselves. We do not have to earn our existence. We do not have to prove our worth. Before God we are accepted.

Luther said that for him the discovery of this truth was like being reborn, passing through open doors into paradise. As a result he was able to say:

"The Gospel is nothing less than laughter and joy."

It also takes us in to the third verse of the hymn we will sing:

"No more we play the judge, for by your grace we live."

Many things divided Roman Catholics and Protestants. One of them was how we understood our relationship with God.

In Wittenberg three weeks ago, in Luther's church, representatives of our Reformed tradition signed an agreement with Roman Catholics and Lutherans and Methodists. It was a consensus about how we understand that relationship. So ended a terrible division about a doctrine that had lasted for 500 years. Standing in the pulpit that day was Najla Kassab, a minister of the Church of Lebanon and Syria who is President of the World Communion of Reformed Churches.

Nearly 30 years ago, Najla felt called to the ministry of word and sacrament, but because she was a woman, her church would not let her study for the ministry. So she studied at Princeton Seminary in New Jersey USA and graduated. Because she was a woman, her church would not ordain her, so for more than 2 decades she helped lead her church especially in Christian Education. Then finally, in March this year, Najla was ordained.

Her church finally decided to ordain women.

It was a dramatic moment when she stepped into Luther's pulpit.

And after a moment, she said "Here I stand."

We knew the journey. We knew these words of Luther. Nearly 500 years ago he had uttered them:

"My conscience is bound to the word of God, and it is neither safe nor honest to act against one's conscience. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me."

And then she said:

"I wonder what he would say if he was here now? I think he would have said – what took you so long."

There was applause and shouts of approval because it was our resistance to God's grace that kept her from being there.

A God of grace – who is not consumed by the gap between who we are and who we might be.

That spirit of grace - enabling us to accept who we are with gratitude, enabling us to unfurl, to flourish, to laugh, not being turned in on ourselves, as people, as church.

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