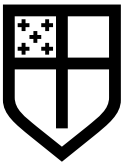
# Done and Left Undone

GRACE IN THE MEANTIME OF MINISTRY

*SCOTT ANSON BENHASE*



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*For my wife, Kelly, the love of my life.*
*Each day she has shown me grace*
*for the things I have done and left undone.*

# CONTENTS

# 1

# IRRESISTIBLE GRACE, MOSTLY

## Begin with Grace

Grace must be where we begin. Before we delve into *askesis* for leadership, we must have a foundation for such practices. If we are true to what the Church has proclaimed for the last two thousand years, then we can begin nowhere else but grace. God's intervening act in Jesus to redeem humanity on the Cross means that everything else must be seen and understood through that cosmic intervention into human history. And that, of course, means God's intervention of grace must shape how we lead. It makes no sense for us to lead with other stances such as utilitarianism, meritocracy, or social Darwinism that at one time or another seem to be the ruling paradigms in Western culture. If grace is true and it is what God has been up to, and continues to be up to in the world, we cannot proclaim it as the very nature of God and then not practice it in how we lead.

Although I am by no means a Calvinist, I am alert to my own life and to the world around me. Thus, certain aspects of Calvinism's TULIP doctrine[1] make a whole lot of sense to me (especially the Big T: total depravity). I recognize such depraved tendencies in myself and, to be fair and balanced, in others as well. Sin is everywhere and all the time. No part of me and no part of the world goes unaffected by it. As the Office of Morning Prayer in the 1928 Book of Common Prayer states: "There is no health in us."[2]

Well, maybe there is some health. Maybe the prayer overstates the human condition a bit. There is "health" in me. My intentions are good at least 51 percent of the time. I am able to do good. I can be kind, compassionate, and just. But I know that even my best intentions can become an avenue for my sin. Echoing the Prayer of Manasseh, I must conclude: "I have sinned, O Lord, I have sinned, and I know my wickedness only too well."[3] (And I know yours too, by the way!)

Still, I understand the biblical witness to be one of God's irresistible grace, mostly. That does not mean we do not resist it. We do in countless ways, sin being what sin is, but God has the last word on humanity's fate. God does not and will not leave us to our own devices. Grace intercedes in our path to personal and communal destruction and snatches us from the jaws of death. And this not only for the "sweet by and by." There is plenty of living death right now all around us as the people of this world live gracelessly. Grace is for now, and not just when we move into the "larger life" with God. In other words, we live knowing how the drama of the human story ends: with the New Jerusalem of John's Revelation coming to earth. And, as we say in the Lord's Prayer, God's kingdom will come one day to this earth "as it (already) is in heaven." God's grace in Jesus makes this possible. The human family, who has seemingly bought a one-way ticket to death and destruction, gets its destiny rerouted by God's intervention on the Cross. Our human trajectory changes from death to life. This is God's final word to humanity.

God's grace, then, should not be seen as God meeting us anything less than all the way. It is not as if God reaches half of the way to us and then waits patiently for us to come to our senses and then we reach the other half of the way. Our good works, our insight, our cleverness, or even our faith do not make up the other half so we can meet God somewhere in the middle. God through Jesus steps into the cesspool of our lives and brings us out all the way. We do not help one bit.

A favorite icon of mine is one I believe is called the "Harrowing of Hell," where Adam and Eve are emerging from prison-like square boxes (like a jack-in-the-box) as the chains fly off those boxes. They are reaching up with their arms from out of the boxes and God's arms appear in the top half of the icon. In a cursory look at the icon, you might see that these two first humans are holding hands with God. But if you look closer, then you see that God is not giving them the "right hand of fellowship." God has them both by the wrists and is literally yanking them out of their imprisonment in death. Neither Adam and Eve, nor we, meet God even part of the way. Martin Luther, it is said, once responded to a man who was bragging that he had accepted Jesus Christ as his "personal savior." Luther asked him something like this: "If someone came up to you and dropped a bag full of gold coins in your lap, would you then go around bragging about how clever and faithful you were in accepting the gold coins? Of course, you would not."

## Grace and Human Choice

A few years ago as I was driving home one late Sunday evening, I saw a church sign that read: "Choosy Moms Choose Jesus." It was dark and late and I was not sure what I had read, so I stopped my car, turned around, and went back to double-check. Yep. My hunch is that the person who came up with that message, however unaware, was using an old marketing strategy: be timely and draw on the comfortably familiar to promote your message. It was, after

all, Mother's Day and the message related emotionally to a successful ad campaign for a peanut butter brand a few years back. Those two ingredients made the message work. Except it's horrible theology.

The idea that you or I or anybody else *chooses* Jesus is arrogant and gives us way more credit than we deserve. Such a claim presumes that a person has done her market research. She has tested all the other possible saviors or gods out there, weighed their strengths and weaknesses in providing the value she desired for her and her family, and then she chose Jesus, because, of course, she only wants the very best for herself and her family. Jesus then becomes the choice she makes to maximize her return as the choosy consumer of salvation that she is. Like I said, arrogance.

Jesus says in John 15:16 that we did not choose him, he chose us. It is egotistical for us to conclude anything else. As a disciple, I did none of the market research described above. I did not survey the salvation-market landscape and then conclude Jesus was the highest-value alternative among the choices. What actually occurred was quite different. Jesus worked his way past my pride, my self-centeredness, my presumption that I knew best about my life, and met me in the truthfulness of my pathetic, sinful weakness. His grace on the Cross gave me something I had no power to give myself, namely, forgiveness of my sins. I did not choose God's forgiveness. God forgave me in spite of myself.

That church sign manifests a larger cultural distortion of the Christian faith that syncretizes Christianity with modern capitalist presumptions about human behavior. It reflects the *commodification* of Christianity as just another transactional choice we make. But I had no hand in the construction of the Great Narrative of Redemption. Through this narrative, God in Jesus has grasped my life and has compelled me into a drama I had no hand in creating. Any other claim is, as I have said, clearly arrogant. As Lesslie Newbigin has written:

> My commitment to the truth of the gospel is a commitment of faith. If I am further pressed to justify this commitment (as I have often been), my only response has to be personal confession. The story is not my construction. In ways that I cannot fully understand but always through the witness of those who went before me in the company of those called to be witnesses, I have been laid hold of and charged with the responsibility of telling this story. I am only a witness, not the Judge who alone can give the final verdict. But as a witness I am under obligation—the obligation of a debtor to the grace of God in Jesus Christ—to give my witness.[4]

And yet we seem to return constantly to the theme of making the Great Narrative of Redemption to be about our efforts and our accomplishments. As Newbigin contends, we are merely "called to be witnesses" of the story.

## Hedging the Great Narrative

A recent survey of Christians who claim they hold orthodox theological views[5] reflects this *commodification*. The survey shows a wide divergence between their views and what the Church has traditionally proclaimed, particularly about God's redemptive grace. Two-thirds of the survey participants responded (and remember, these are self-described orthodox Christians) that we are reconciled with God by our own initiative and then God responds to our initiative with grace. What they are claiming is this: we first seek God out through our own initiative ("Choosy Moms Choose Jesus"), and only then does God respond with mercy and forgiveness through grace. This is how, they say, grace becomes operative in our lives. From my many conversations with Christians across the liberal to conservative spectrum, two-thirds seems about right. It may be even a bit low.

To be fair, this argument has its own internal logic based on Enlightenment constructs of individualism, fairness, and reciprocity (the old quid pro quo, as it were), but it is not the gospel we have received. It nevertheless makes sense to us. It sounds like it should be the way God works, given the intellectual constructs of the Western world. It has a certain "truthiness" to it, as Stephen Colbert might say. Apparently, many of us are so steeped in the deep internal codes of personal responsibility and rugged individualism in Western culture that we like the idea of having a starring role to play in our own drama of redemption. Just one big problem: that has NEVER been the orthodox teaching of the Church.

That brings us to the fifth-century Englishman Pelagius. Yes, he was British, so those of us who are Anglicans must claim him as part of our spiritual family tree. He is like that crazy uncle we have whom no one in the family wants to acknowledge, but own him we must. Pelagius contended that humans first choose God by their own personal gumption. Our sin, original or otherwise, did not, according to Pelagius, impair our ability to choose wisely by choosing God. He thought we must choose to appropriate the benefits of God's grace through the power of our own will. His position came to be known as Pelagianism. Two church councils, first in 418 CE at Carthage and then in Ephesus in 431 CE, rightly rejected Pelagianism. A century or so later, a spinoff of Pelagianism, known rather noncreatively as Semi-Pelagianism, became popular. It sought to affirm the orthodox teaching about humanity's original sin while, at the same time, insisting that humans must take the initiative for God's grace to be operative. In 529 CE, the Council of Orange said, "Nice try, Semi-Pelagianists," and rejected their views.

As I listen to my fellow Christians, it seems to me that the overwhelming majority of us are either de facto Pelagianists at worst, or Semi-Pelagianists at best. God's grace makes us uneasy. Grace does not feel right or fair. It is like we are getting something we do not deserve or did not have to work for at all, that we did not get the old-fashioned way by earning it. It is as if someone

gave us something exceptionally amazing at Christmas, something it turns out that we really loved and needed, and it is not that we just forgot to get them anything in return, we actually chose not to get them anything at all. Christmas is the perfect season to illuminate the truth of God's grace. At Christmas, God said, "Here is my baby boy. Do with him as you will." And we did. Oh boy, did we! We laid the wood to him. Then God used our own sinful violence to redeem us.

## Self-Justification: No Leg to Stand On

God's grace, and God's grace alone, justifies us before God. We do not even justify ourselves a little bit through own hard work and goodness. A semithorough reading of St. Paul's epistles will result in only one conclusion: we are not capable of justifying ourselves because our sin is a too all-encompassing force over us. As the psalmist says: "Our sins are stronger than we are" (65:3). In fact, St. Paul spends the first four chapters of his Epistle to the Romans making one particular point: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). He could have saved himself the trouble of writing the first four chapters with just that one sentence.

So, St. Paul, in Romans and throughout his other epistles, urges us to throw up our hands in surrender; to admit that we are no match for sin, and to have faith in Jesus alone to justify us through his sacrifice on the Cross. The only way, St. Paul says, that we "obtained access to this grace" (Rom. 5:2) is through God's justification of us, not through our self-justification. But do we not hear that? It has been, and continues to be, the bedrock teaching of the Church, but so many Christians apparently do not believe it. We spend our lives in an ongoing self-justification project. When we seek to justify ourselves, we trade in the saving gospel of Jesus for a version that says all we really need to do is be a good person. Although we might not admit, it our actions also say we should spend time looking down on others who we think are not as good

as we are. We have bought into the idea that the Christian faith is about being good, and if we cannot be good, we can always find others who are not as good as we are. Like the Pharisee who looked down upon the tax collector in Luke 18:9–14 and said (I paraphrase here), "I may be a sinner occasionally. I make no claims to perfection, but look at that guy over there. What a scumbag! Now there's a real sinner." We build ourselves up by tearing others down. Such is the language of self-justification, and we are experts at it.

## Our Cultural Formation in Self-Justification

Many of us grew up thinking that church was about being good. I know I did. The church I grew up in was a place for nice girls and boys who obeyed the rules and always had good manners. It was about having pure and clean thoughts, even as we fought off the ones that were not. It was wholesome and sanitary, full of good deeds that proved we were saved, where good boys and good girls drank their milk and cleaned their plates. In high school, the guys in my youth group said, "I won't smoke, drink, or chew, or go with girls who do." Of course, there was more to it than that. The church of my youth also told me that Jesus loved me and saved me. But the church, as I experienced it, said that what really mattered was that I was a good boy, that I behaved myself. Sin was talked about a lot, but only as a cudgel to scare us back into good behavior. I did not begin to understand what grace truly was until I was well into adulthood (and *after* graduating from seminary).

Growing up, I was all about being good and having a good testimony, but deep down inside, I knew that I was not good much of the time. It was a short step for me to conclude that Jesus loved me only when I was good. The catch was this: if I were just good enough, then Jesus would love me. The church's message started out as the gracious word that Jesus loved me, but it wound up in a very different place. It became an ominous threat. Yes, Jesus loved me, but that love seemed to come with certain conditions in

the fine print of the contract. Just how good did I have to be and how often? Fifty-one percent of the time? Seventy-five percent of the time? Ninety percent of the time? All the time? I never knew exactly where the goal line was. It kept moving.

If we look at recent studies, many young adults feel betrayed by the church because the church they hear does not sound much like the Jesus they hear in the gospel.[6] What they hear is a church lecturing them about being good but what they see is a church that seems more concerned with obeying its rules and surviving as an institution. And the church bears most of the blame because we have not told folks the truth. We were wrong about who we were and what we were about. Christianity is not about being good; it is not about hanging up our clothes or having good manners; and, I discovered, Jesus does not care one bit whether I clean my plate.

Christianity is not about our being good. It is actually about our regular failure to be good. It is about the brokenness of human life. It is about our repeated inability to be the people God created us to be. It is about how everything about us—even our best intentions and motives—can become an avenue for self-justifying sin. Christianity is not about us being good. It is about God's goodness. It is about what God has done on the Cross of Jesus Christ. In spite of our sin and failures, God has justified us through the blood of Jesus. Our self-justification must stop.[7]

You and I are no better than anyone else in God's eyes. We are no better than the homeless person we meet on the street. We are no better than the drunk we see stumbling into an AA meeting. As long as we pretend we are, we stay trapped in the self-justification business, and that will not save us. Only Jesus and his Cross has the power to justify sinners like you and me. It is time to throw up our hands and surrender. It is time to stop believing we are in some card game with God where we play our ace of good deeds, our king of generosity, and our queen of being a nice person. We need to throw in our cards and admit we are not playing with a full deck. Only God's amazing and forgiving grace justifies us. That is why St. Paul insisted that we "preach only Christ and him

crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). Anything else places us back on the slippery slope toward self-justification. It is so easy for us to go there.

## A Hopeful Universalist

Since God's grace is more powerful than even the worst of human sin, I am a hopeful universalist, but I cannot go all the way to universalism without the modifier "hopeful." I am a universalist in that I hope when all is said and done at the end of human history, everyone will accept the gift of God's graceful acceptance of us. And yet, I must hold out the possibility that some in the end will not and instead will reject the gift of grace. That is what hell is, and that is who is in hell. Hell is the place for those who reject the gift of grace. That is what C. S. Lewis claimed in his book *The Great Divorce*. All those who took the daily bus ride from hell to heaven had to do was humbly accept God's gift of grace and heaven awaited them. Lewis makes it clear, however, that some may decide to get back on the bus and return to hell (there is one vignette in the book that has a bishop get back on the bus because he simply could not admit to one of his former vicars that he might well have been wrong about some theological positions he held while alive). Perhaps grace is in some way resistible, but for the life of me I cannot understand why anyone would turn it down.

## Bad News before Good News

Grace, God's acceptance of us in spite of very good evidence not to do so, is the primal message of God's Good News in Jesus through his atoning sacrifice on the Cross. It comes to us in the Great Narrative of Redemption in the Bible. But grace, as I have written, has an antecedent: what the Church calls sin. Grace is necessary because of the bad news we have come to know about ourselves. Without sin, there simply would be no need for grace. As Frederick Buechner writes in his book *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as*

*Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*, the good news comes to us first as bad news before it is good news. It is the news that we are sinners; that we are evil in the imagination of our hearts; that when I look in the mirror what I see is at least partly a chicken, a phony, and a slob. That is the tragedy.[8]

Buechner may have made the most honest statement ever about who we are and how we see ourselves when we are all alone staring at our reflection in a mirror, but his statement is insufficient without its conclusion. Buechner continues, "But it [the gospel] is also the news that [we] are loved anyway, cherished, forgiven, bleeding to be sure, but also bled for. That is the comedy."[9]

In the end, it all comes down to God's grace in Jesus. "All other ground is sinking sand," as the old gospel hymn tells us. Or, as my friend Paul Zahl has said, "Grace is love that seeks you out when you have nothing to give in return."

## But What about What Jesus Said and Taught?

Up until now, I have not addressed Jesus in the Gospels, only St. Paul in his epistles and, to a lesser extent, the Revelation to John that promises us the hope of the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven at the end of human history. So we ask, "Is grace as central in Jesus's life and teaching as it was for St. Paul?" There have been commentators who contend that St. Paul shaped the Christian narrative in an antinomian way that moved away from the teachings of Jesus and developed a separate religion that did not agree with the Jesus we meet in the Gospels.

## Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount

Jesus is God in the flesh. If we want to know the nature of God—what God is like, if you will—then we look to Jesus. We should see in Jesus the grace of God embodied, not only in his atoning work

on the Cross, but also in what he taught. In reading the Gospels, we find this congruence of grace in Jesus.

The longest and most comprehensive teaching of Jesus is found in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5–7, Jesus first lays out God's nature by letting us know who God chooses to bless, in the so-called Beatitudes. If we can know who and what God finds worthy of blessing, then we have an insight into God's nature, because presumably God would not bless that which was not congruent with God's very nature. In the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:1–12), we learn that God blesses the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, and those who suffer evil for attending to their discipleship in Jesus. Jesus concludes the Beatitudes by saying that his disciples should "rejoice and be glad" when such evil comes because the Hebrew prophets of old got the same treatment.

Since God chooses to bless the attributes of God's nature, then God is one who has poverty of spirit; who is mournful, meek, pure-hearted, righteous, merciful, a peacemaker, and willing to suffer evil for the sake of such a nature (sounds like the cross to me). Jesus is saying that if we want to throw our lot in with God and participate in God's very nature, then we need to adopt and inculcate these attitudes in our daily lives. How is that going for you? I get some of those right some of the time. The longer I am at this discipleship thing, I get more of those right more of the time, but at the rate I am going, it would take me a thousand years to get them all right all of the time.

Jesus knew that, I believe, when he spoke those words. He, however, did not take one word of them back. As he said: "Not one iota." The first part of his mission was to let us know who God was and what God was up to in the world, so he did not parse words. He is not going to say: "Just kidding. None of those things matter all that much. Just do your best. Try to be nice when you can. It is okay if you don't." No. The Beatitudes tell us who

God is and who God blesses. It is our responsibility if we cannot live our lives in congruence with what God expects. As Jesus says later in Matthew 5:20, God expects righteousness from us, and that is where the second part of Jesus's mission comes in: making righteous the unrighteous on the Cross. God knows I do not have a thousand years to get it right. Neither do you. In Christ, God exercised a core aspect of God's nature: mercy. God's mercy leads to sinners like you and me being justified through the merits and mediation of Jesus and his Cross.

The Beatitudes are just the overture in Jesus's symphony known as the Sermon on the Mount. He is just getting warmed up. Jesus goes on to say that if we traffic in anger, insult, or slander (5:21–26), then we are mere kindling for hellfire. If we look at another person with lust (5:27–28), then that is just the same as if we committed adultery. If a part of our body leads us to sin (5:29–30), then we just ought to get rid of it and live with that deficiency, since it is better to live that way than for us to keep on sinning with that body part. Divorce (5:31–32)? Forget about it. Adultery again. Swearing oaths is a dead end (5:33–37), as is retaliating against evil (5:38–42).

Jesus ends the first movement of his symphony with a riff on loving one's neighbor and hating one's enemy (5:43–48). Loving our neighbors makes sense because they are probably from our family and tribe. Charity begins at home, after all. And hating enemies makes equal sense because they are opposed to us and out to destroy us, but Jesus says we are to love our enemies just as we love our neighbors. Here we get back to being congruent with God's nature when Jesus says that we love our enemies "so that you may be children of your Father in heaven." Loving our enemies is a way to become part of God's own family. It is a way to participate in God's nature. After all, as St. Paul wrote, "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). We were God's enemies through our sin, but God loved us anyway. It is God's nature to do so.

As this symphonic movement comes to an end, and since we are already not feeling inadequate enough, Jesus, because he wants to leave no doubt where he is coming from, says, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." So, I ask you, how is that whole perfection thing working out for you? I have read and reread Matthew 5 and it never fails to raise feelings of inadequacy and failure in me. Jesus is not backing down on the expectations for his disciples. "Be perfect," he says and he means it. Yet, the message of the Cross of Jesus is that inadequate failures like you and me are made adequate and given rest and reprieve from their failures. In Matthew 11:28–30, Jesus makes this clear.

> Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Jesus is about giving us rest for our souls. We are weary from the heavy burden of trying to be perfect. The yoke of grace actually liberates us if we learn from it. The heavy burden we bear becomes light as Jesus transfers it from our back to his on the Cross.

## The Parables of Jesus[10]

If Jesus is consistent, and I believe he is entirely so, then the grace we see in the Sermon on the Mount and his other teachings will also be present in the primary way he communicated, in parables. He told stories to illustrate God's nature and will for humanity to his listeners. Let us look at a few.

## The Gracious Father

This parable, more commonly known as the parable of the prodigal son, is very well-known and often misunderstood. We know it

has been misunderstood because of the common title it has been given over the years. Why is it named after the younger son in the story? He is but a supporting actor in the drama. It is the gracious father whose actions take the story to its surprising, outrageous conclusion. The story Jesus tells goes (only something) like this.

The younger of two sons decides he has had enough of family life living under his father's rules, so he demands his cut of the inheritance. His father gives it and the young man takes off to the equivalent of Pinocchio's Pleasure Island, where he engages in all manner of self excess. When his money runs out, he is in a pickle. He had not planned for the future. Left with nothing, he gets the only job he can find: slopping the pigs, an awful job for a good Jewish boy. While he is knee-deep in pig slop, he comes to the obvious revelation that he would be better off back home as one of his father's hired hands rather than as he is right now there in the pig slop.

He sets off for home hoping his father will not gloat too much over him and say, "I told you so." He hopes even more that his older brother will just leave him alone and not rub it in. While he is still far off from the old homestead, his father, who has stood on the veranda with high-powered binoculars combing the horizon every day since his son left, spies him limping home. The father drops the binoculars and races toward his son. He moves pretty well for an old guy. When he gets to his boy, he stops. He wants to give the boy some space, given what the kid has been through. The son falls on his knees blubbering about how stupid he was for doing what he did, and how sorry he is now. The father really does not pay any attention to what the boy is saying. It does not matter. All that matters is that he is home. He does not make the kid grovel or trek the rest of the way to the house on his knees. He takes his son in his arms (he's also strong for an old guy) and cradles him as he did when he was a baby. Then he rushes with his boy back to the house yelling like a crazy man, "Get the best clothes out of the closet for him. Find the shiniest bling for his finger. Oh, yes, and get the fattest of the fat calves ready for a barbecue. For this

son of mine was as good as dead, but he is back in my arms now. He was lost out there in the world, but now he is back home where he belongs." The parable continues with the second half that deals with the older brother's incredulity at his father's behavior, but I want to stay with the first half of the parable.

All the parables of Jesus give the reader a glimpse into God's nature. In a sense, Jesus's parables answer basic questions, such as What is God like? or What does God expect from us? God, of course, is the gracious father in the parable. God is the one who is scouring the countryside with his binoculars looking for us. When God finds us, God does not wait for us to come begging on our knees. No. God runs to us, embraces us, and carries us back home. This is unmerited grace. Conventional wisdom would be that the father would require the younger son to do some sort of penance, some act over time that showed he had learned his lesson and earned a spot back at the ranch. If not, how would the boy ever learn any personal responsibility? The world's wisdom would say, "Inflict some tough love on the boy. That way he will learn his lesson and never do something stupid like that again." Jesus does not offer tough love. The love Jesus offers is the one-way variety. Is it any wonder that many people do not want to see the deeper meaning in this parable? It upends their understanding of fair play and just deserts. I know it upends mine. God's nature depicted in this parable is outrageous. No self-respecting father would ever do that. Yet, for Jesus, it is exactly what God does.

## The Great Banquet

This parable, like the gracious father, has an authority figure, this time a man who has planned for a huge party with a long guest list. The story goes (only something) like this.

When the day of the great party arrives, the day the man has been planning for months on end, none of the invited guests show up. The man guesses that in everyone's busy lives they just forgot about his big shindig, so he sends out word by his servants,

reminding those he invited that the day and time have come, so come on down. But when his servants return from the in-person invites, all the man hears are the excuses the invited guests gave for not showing up. One had to wash her hair. Another had to mow his lawn. Still another did not want to miss his favorite TV show. The man, clearly hurt and perplexed by their responses, changes the guest list and instructs his servants to invite the bums on Skid Row and the guys holding signs that read "will work for food." He says, "Go to the charity hospital and get all the wheelchairs they have and roll those folk in here for the party." His servants do so and the banquet hall starts to fill up.

But his servants tell him it still is not full. That would not do for the man. He wanted no empty seats, so he instructs them to go outside his mansion and invite anyone they find passing by to come on in and join the party. In fact, he tells them, "Don't take no for an answer. If you have to, pick them up, hog-tie them, do whatever it takes to get them in the door for the party. I want the house full." Then he mumbles underneath his breath, "None of those sorry folk who ignored my invitation will get to enjoy this spread."

Again, if parables tell us God's nature, then this story tells us that God is throwing one amazing party and wants everyone to join it. God takes the initiative and even compels folks off the street to come in and feast. The participants in the feast were not even on the original guest list. They were minding their own business by the side of the road with sign in hand, or waiting patiently in the hospital for some sign they were getting better and could go home. They did not appear deserving of the invitation. Yet they were brought to the party—some, possibly, against their will. And there was no cover charge at the door. This parable tells us that God is the one who will not take no for an answer (unless we insist upon it) for eternity. God does not wait for us to accept. God is preemptive. God stops at nothing to bring us to the great banquet of fellowship around the heavenly throne.

## The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin

In these two parables, Jesus is addressing a diverse crowd, not just his disciples.

Present were not only the Pharisees and the scribes but also the tax collectors and other assorted sinners—the same crew who heard him tell the long parable of the gracious father. His parable of the lost sheep has a bit of twist to it at the beginning because he asks what appears at first to be a rhetorical question. It goes (only something) like this: "Which one of you fine human beings, if you had a hundred sheep and one wandered off, would not leave the ninety-nine all alone to the wolves and go after that one lost sheep?"

You see what he is doing here? My hunch is his listeners would be thinking, "Well, I'd leave that poor wretch of a sheep to his own devices. I can't sacrifice my entire herd just because one ignorant lamb wandered off. What does he take me for, a fool?" Jesus goes on to say that when the shepherd returns with that one lost sheep, his friends and neighbors are going to rejoice with him. Those listening to Jesus probably were thinking, "No, they wouldn't. They'd be saying to themselves, 'Boy, did he get lucky that the rest of the herd was not slaughtered by wolves. What a dunce.'"

This parable shows the scandalous nature of God, who goes against reasonable behavior to seek us out and find us when we are lost, and then brings us home safely even as his friends and neighbors question if he has a lick of sense. The unspoken point of the parable is the outrageous chance God takes in saving the one lost sheep.

The parable of the lost coin also begins with a rhetorical question. It goes (only something) like this: "What woman, who has ten shiny silver coins and loses one, would stop at nothing to find it?" She is in a frenzy. She gets out her flashlight and lashes it to her broom with duct tape. She sweeps the entire house from one side to the next, from top to bottom. She looks under every rug and behind every piece of furniture. Her neighbors pass by and

look in the windows, thinking she has lost her mind. Does she keep on looking until she is exhausted and cannot go on? No. Does she look for the lost coin until she becomes self-conscious about the scene she is making? No. She keeps on looking—until she finds it. When she finally comes up for air and emerges from her house to show her friends and neighbors she has found the lost coin, she asks them to celebrate with her. But as his listeners heard this parable, my hunch is many were thinking, "What a crazy person. She just lost a day's wages to find one coin. Not a good cost-benefit analysis there. She'd have been better off to be thankful she still had the nine other silver coins and write the lost one off on her taxes."

God's nature in this parable defies common human sensibility. God is the woman who no matter what will not stop looking for the lost. No amount of exhaustion or potential public ridicule will dissuade God from searching out the lost and finding them. As with the other parables, Jesus depicts a God who does not make sense, if one is making sense by human standards. God is not prudent. God is not concerned with how things look. God does not appear to care about what seems fair. Rather, God is flagrant with grace. God is inexhaustible when it comes to finding sinners and showing mercy. God seemingly has only one desire: to seek out the lost, especially the ones others may see as undeserving, and bring them safely home.

This is irresistible grace, mostly. As I have written, and I hope the reader now understands, grace is both God's *modus operendi* and *telos*, made possible in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Grace is the very nature of God, at least as God is revealed to us in Jesus.

## Grace and *Askesis*

Such flagrant and unmerited grace must form the core of how we lead in the Church. For us to lead from that core stance of grace, however, we need insight and help from what we know about

human behavior and how people function in systems. While grace is irresistible, mostly, we humans know how to mess things up—even the best of things. We are messes, as my mother was fond of saying. Francis Spufford in his brilliant book *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense*,[11] creates an acronym for this tendency: HPTFTU or the "human propensity to f**k things up." Once he creates that acronym in his book, he no longer uses the word "sin." He just writes HPTFTU. From my experience of life, it is a completely accurate definition of sin. We humans regularly and consistently "f**k things up." Thus, we need some good *askesis* both to empower healthy, faithful leadership and to mitigate against our HPTFTU, which we do through things done and left undone, to be sure. That does not mean we are left without some capacity to be bearers and stewards of God's Great Narrative of Redemption. We have that capacity. I have seen it all around me throughout my life. But we must see things clearly. We have to see ourselves clearly (self-awareness). We need to see others honestly and compassionately for who they are (empathy). We must understand what is happening around us in the system of the church (insight from experience). And we need to learn from our failures so we do not repeat the same ones too often (there are always new opportunities to fail), so we will not lose our nerve. It is so easy to lose our nerve in parish ministry. Since we know that God has not and will never give up on us, we should not give up on ourselves or on this world that God so loves, and the Church God birthed to bear and steward the Great Narrative of Redemption.

On to *askesis* as the way to faithful and healthy church leadership.

## NOTES

1 TULIP stands for: Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, Perseverance of the Saints. Matthew J. Slick, "The Five Points of Calvinism," Calvinist Corner, accessed May 28, 2016, http://www.calvinistcorner.com/tulip.htm.

2 BCP, 6.

3 BCP, 90.

4 Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt & Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 82.

5 Kevin Emmert, "New Poll Finds Evangelicals Favorite Heresies," *Christianity Today*, October 28, 2014, http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/october-web-only/new-poll-finds-evangelicals-favorite-heresies.html.

6 David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church . . . and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2015).

7 I am grateful to the Reverend Will Willimon, who preached a sermon I once heard and in it used some of the images I have appropriated in this section. I do not know if the sermon was ever printed, but its images have stayed with me all these years.

8 Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 7.

9 Ibid.

10 I am indebted to the late, great Robert Farrar Capon, who helped me hear Jesus's parables with fresh ears. I now cannot hear a parable of Jesus without hearing it through Fr. Capon's writing. Readers will no doubt hear some of his voice in the way I address Jesus's parables.

11 Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense* (New York: HarperOne, 2012).