

“The ABCs of Faith: Grace and Goodness”  
Sermon by Rev. Katherine Raley  
First Christian Church, Colorado Springs, CO  
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**Romans 3:20-24 (NRSV)**

For ‘no human being will be justified in his sight’ by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin. But now, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift.

**Romans 8:28 (NRSV)**

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

1) In a moment, I’m going to ask you to close your eyes, and I want you to play a video clip in your mind. This clip is from the movie *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, starring Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett. Ready? Close your eyes. Imagine that you are pressing play. You see a dancer rehearsing on stage, Cate Blanchett’s character. She’s going through her routine with her dance partners, practicing movements that are controlled, perfect, testing the limits of what she can do and doing it beautifully.

Now, press pause, open your eyes. Remember the dancer’s movements, flowing, controlled, beautiful?

That’s grace. Aesthetic, physical grace – control, beauty, perfection.

2) Close your eyes again. Press play. You see a building with the side door to the street. The dancer, changed and dressed for the outside world again, comes out of the door with her co-dancer, and begins to spin animatedly as she talks to her companion. And then, a car comes toward her, the driver distracted for just a moment. Breaks start to squeal, but it is too late. There is a terrible thudding as the car hits the spinning dancer. Imagine her falling to the ground, pain on her face, her limbs spread out, one of her legs at an unnatural angle.

Press pause again and open your eyes. That is *not* grace.

And yet, it is in *that* type of scene that we so much of the time are tempted to press “pause” on the videos of our lives and leave it there too long. To focus in on the moment of the tragedy. Essentially pressing pause in our minds at the moment of the car accident. When that’s what we focus on, it makes us unhappy, we wonder why God lets these awful things happen, and yet we miss seeing God in the bigger picture.

3) Close your eyes again, and press play. Now, you see the dancer again. She's teaching a young girl how to dance. She's passing on her knowledge and graceful skill to another person, and there is passion and excitement in her eyes. Go ahead and press pause and open your eyes. The dancer did not give up her passion when she could no longer do it perfectly, but she transformed her gifts to another use.

*That is God's grace. **God's grace is that bad things never have the final say. And we can live life better if we remember the transformation that is always taking place through the grace of God.***

Transformation – one thing changing into another – happens around us all the time. It doesn't only just *happen*, passively; as human beings, we *make* it happen, too. We change the world around us every minute, every second.

How many of you ate breakfast this morning, or had a snack at Chat 'n' Coffee? As you were eating or drinking, you probably didn't think about how you were transforming one form into another, chemically breaking down the coffee, bread, or fruit into energy that your body would then use to keep itself running. No matter what you were thinking about as you ate, that transformation was happening.

There was a time when we didn't understand that break down process of food, and just knew that we became weaker and died if we didn't eat. Today, we can't avoid that knowledge, because our doctors, weight loss experts, *everyone*, it seems, tell us that the food we eat matters. *Because* we understand the way our bodies transform food into nutrients, we can make better choices about the food we eat. And even though eating vegetables instead of chocolate may not be our first preference initially, our bodies crave the things that make it feel better, that give it more energy, and that help us function better in the world.

We make choices all the time that transform *us* and transform the world around us. Some choices are better for us and the world, and some are worse. The thing is, our lives can be better if the choices we make are based on the gift of God's grace, rather than pressing the "pause" button in our minds too soon, too long, and focusing on the tragedies that are inevitable in life. Just like choosing good food helps our bodies function better, choosing to live focused on the goodness of God's grace makes us and our world *better*, happier. We could choose to be bitter

about suffering, or we could choose to look for God's new, transformative possibilities and goodness.

Theologians throughout history have described the grace of God in a million different ways, the basic foundation of which is that grace is the gift of God's unconditional love to an undeserving people. The sin within each of us separates us from God – as Romans 3 says it, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God – but *all* of us sinners **also** receive the gift of God's grace – despite the sin in each of us, God loves each of us unconditionally, eternally, abundantly. God's grace means that *nothing* can separate us from God's love – not our sin, not even our disbelief.

Let me say it another way. **Grace is a gift and a power in the world that overcomes evil. Grace means that bad things *never* have the last word.**

I want you to think about two specific types of evil. **First, the evil of suffering and tragedy.** Think again about the dancer from Benjamin Button. The tragedy in her life was almost overwhelming – her whole identity up to that point in her life was lost in an instant. But the story did *not* stop there; it *never* stops there. Her life kept going, and as difficult as it was, and whether or not she knew it, she chose to live out God's grace. God transformed her tragedy into something even more beautiful. Evil did not have the last word.

Thomas Reynolds is one of those theologians who speaks about grace. He describes it beautifully, saying “divine grace can work amidst tragedy through the power of love, bringing opportunities for healing, wholeness, and mutuality. God does not cause pain in order that wholeness can occur. Nor does God guarantee a beneficial outcome, overcoming by vanquishing tragedy.... Yet transformation can happen in the midst of tragedy. Why? Because love, not tragedy, is the final word of existence.”<sup>1</sup>

Recall Romans 8:28 – “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”

As Pastor Chuck has been teaching us in his recent sermons, it would be a mistake to take this verse to mean that God *causes* suffering because it is actually good for us, or even that God only cares about those who care about God in return. God's unconditional love, God's great creative abilities, show us that God cares for each and every one of us.

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<sup>1</sup> *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality*, Thomas E. Reynolds 166-167

God does not need to *cause* suffering in order to work *through* suffering. All things work together for good – because God’s love and grace mean that evil *never* has the last word. God’s grace *transforms* all things through God’s love, transforms all things into God’s *goodness*.

**Now think about a second type of evil – we have suffering and tragedy on one hand, and the evil of sin on the other.** Tragedy might require our strongest faith in God’s grace, but our faith is also required in the things of our daily lives that might not be called “tragic.” It is in our daily living that it can be hardest to accept and live out grace for ourselves. Bad things happen all the time, of course, but not only do bad things happen TO us, but bad things happen BECAUSE of us. Our actions and our feelings frequently go against God’s love. Our sin is evil; but, even our sin does not have the last word.

One example of sin in my life is when I frequently try to do things by myself instead of asking others for help. It’s the sin of pride, the sin of building walls that isolate me from the gifts of the people around me. I want to prove myself worthy for leadership; I want to prove that I’m capable and can do great things by myself. If I try to do something by myself, and can’t, it feels like having to admit defeat to say “I need help.” “Admit defeat”...*that* thinking is how I know that it is sin. That word “defeat” seems to say that the whole goal of the project had been for me to do it by myself, rather than to do a good job, or to make sure that it was the best it could be by involving other people’s gifts and perspectives. But, it’s not “defeat” to need help. It isn’t defeat to *ask* for help. It *is* a necessary step to success. Asking someone for help, working together to get the job done, learning about someone else’s talents and personality, celebrating our differences – that’s not defeat, *that* is grace. *That* is something beautiful.

Thanks to God’s grace, our sin *never* has the final say. Our sins, the sins of others, everything in the world that seems hurtful and bad, it is all intertwined with *grace* – the love and goodness that *transform* bad to good, that keep life moving forward in continuous creation and transformation.

We all have situations in life in which something feels like it is defeating us. What is it for you this morning, or this last week, or last month, or year? What feels like it is weighing you down, or like it is a storm that is just tossing you around? Like a tsunami wave that you’re in a boat trying to fight against, a small motor pushing its hardest to try to take you out of harm’s way?

However much it might feel like it sometimes, the current struggles of your life are *not* your whole world. They will pass, and yes, new ones will take their place, and they will also pass. As these struggles seem to engulf your life like a tsunami wave, maybe you could remember what it says on the front of your bulletin – “Always remember to do the things that bring you joy.” Always remember that joy *is* possible – do the things that bring you joy. God’s grace is in those things. God’s grace is in the help that you receive from others, and God’s grace is in the help that you *give* to others.

Again some words from Reynolds: “Creation is unfinished. It is a work in progress, summoned into more complex and fulfilling relationships. The tragedies of annihilation and suffering are openings to the possibility of a future glory in the divine.

“However, presently we wait, perhaps with anguish and lament, even angry protest. For we live in the midst of dissonance, a gap between beginning and end, a time when God seems to hide the divine face....Hope is born not in facile optimism, but in the midst of genuine grief. And here, in our grief, divine grace suffers with creatures to offer renewal and facilitate new creation.”<sup>2</sup>

Life is not a series of perfect steps from beginning to end. It is not a flawless dance performance with controlled movements every step of the way. My life and your life and the lives of everyone you know are strings of beautiful moments punctuated by failures, by problems, by tragedies, all of which God continually transforms into something even more beautiful and more loving than ever before. That is *God’s* grace.

**Bad things never have the final say. Choose to live your live better by remembering the transformation into goodness that is always taking place through the grace of God.**

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality*, Thomas E. Reynolds 167-168