

September 30, 2018  
Romans 3:21-28  
Pastor Rosanna McFadden  
Creekside COB

### **“Wonderful Grace”**

**Good morning. An unusual and unsettling thing happened to me this past Thursday. The last time something like this happened was over 17 years ago: I turned on the TV in the morning and sat and watched it for the entire day. The previous time that had happened was September 11, 2001. This time was a senate hearing about a Supreme Court nomination, something I would typically not track at all, but I found Thursday’s coverage to be compelling.**

**I am not going to weigh in on the politics of the situation or the Me Too movement. Believe it or not, this coverage took me to reflections about grace, partly because of the backdrop that the principal players were in high school in the early 1980’s, my high school era. It was a desolate time without cell phones or even home computers; microwaves were just becoming popular and one of my friends was the first in our group to get a crazy piece of machinery called a video player: you could actually rent a movie and watch it at your house whenever you wanted. I’m not even going to talk about shoulder pads and Farah Fawcett hair.**

**Through my school years I attended the Fellowship Church of the Brethren in LaVerne. All of the college-age students in that small congregation were, as far as I remember, students of my dad’s at LaVerne College. I’ve forgotten most of them, but one I remember was named Steve White. He was one of my dad’s favorite students; I assume he had a good grasp of biblical principles, but I didn’t really care. He was my youth leader, maybe after he been around for a few years and was out of college. He was bright, friendly, and fun. His wife used to say that if he could play guitar he would have been the perfect youth leader. He couldn’t play guitar, but he was -- at least as I remember it -- sort of the favorite son of the congregation. He got**

married to a woman with the glamorous profession of flight attendant, while he went on to law school. They had an adorable daughter, who was a toddler in my early high school years. During a youth group gathering, Steve shared a description of grace which I still remember. I don't know if he thought of it himself -- he might have. I suspect the illustration came up because of Romans 3 verses 23-24. I bet you've heard this before: "since all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." And here is the illustration which has stayed with me for a long time:

A group of people are trying to cross a deep canyon to get to the other side. It's too steep to climb or to scale another way. Fortunately, each person has a board, something which would be wide enough to walk across if they could lay it over the canyon. Unfortunately, no one had a board long enough to reach to the other side, and there was no way to join them together. Some people had boards which were pretty long, and some people had boards that were pretty short, and some people were hardly holding anything at all -- it didn't really matter, because everyone's board was too short. Even though people did it anyway, it was kind of pointless to brag about how long the board is that they were holding, because none of them were long enough to reach across the canyon. Grace is the bridge which Jesus builds across that canyon and invites everyone to walk across to get to the glory of God. Some people cross the bridge immediately, and some people stay on the wrong side, trying to get others to recognize what an impressive board they have, even though it will never be enough to get them to the glory of God.

It's a simple illustration and a pretty literal way to imagine falling short of the glory of God. I don't think I ever used that example in a systematic theology class. For me it's more of a parable than an allegory -- and by that I mean that everything doesn't have to represent a specific thing: that is, the canyon doesn't have to be a particular kind of sin, those boards could be our own good works -- which are never enough -- or they could be the kind of arrogance or self-reliance which blind us to the bridge which Christ has already made. The boards could even become weapons which we use against other people. The truth which this story holds for me is that my best intentions and sincere effort may be admirable, but they are

never enough. I can't justify myself any more than I can cross that canyon with a board which doesn't reach all the way. Romans 3 doesn't use the image of a bridge, but here's what it goes on to say about what Jesus Christ has accomplished by his death on the cross: He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteousness and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:25-26)

In its simplest form, grace is giving up the need to justify myself. It doesn't mean ignoring bad behavior, it doesn't mean not trying to do the best I can, it doesn't mean covering up the truth about myself or anyone else. Grace means I don't have to justify myself -- first, because it isn't possible -- that board is always going to fall short; and second because Christ has already done it. Christ has already made the sacrifice on the cross which built the bridge from where we are to the glory of God. We don't have to present our credentials or earn our ticket, we just have to accept the gift and cross the canyon with the faith that Christ's grace will get us to the other side.

That youth leader, Steve, was a mentor and supporter for me. He encouraged me to try to aim for a more prestigious college than my parents had planned, and even offered to pay for additional application fees -- something my parents swiftly declined. Two years after I graduated from high school and got engaged at the ripe old age of 19, I invited Steve to help my father officiate the wedding. He had moved on from Fellowship Church, had a law degree, and had opened a restaurant in the area. He flew in from a meeting out of town to officiate the wedding. I found out about a year later that he not been out of town on business, he was in Las Vegas spending a couple days with a woman who was not his wife. Shortly after that, there was a fire which destroyed his restaurant which was later found to be an arson fire which he had set to collect insurance and destroy financial records which would have -- and ultimately did -- reveal illegal financial practices.

I don't know how long he was in prison. We didn't keep in touch. But this person who taught me about grace challenged me to think about grace in ways I didn't expect to have to. He had not done me any emotional or financial harm. I believe he was genuine in his support

of me as a high school student, and he was a great youth leader, even though he didn't play guitar. I don't know if in the immediate aftermath of the fire he tried to justify himself: if he did, it obviously wasn't effective. I don't know if his wife and daughter ever forgave him, or if he found a way to forgive himself. Maybe even more than with his illustration about grace, he made me realize in a profound way what it means to fall short. I have been falling short ever since -- not in such dramatic criminal ways, of course, but in small and occasionally not-so-small ways which remind me that my own efforts are never going to get me there; I have to set that board aside and accept Christ's grace -- not just once, but again and again.

You may be wondering -- and I'm sure you could get different answers from different people -- is grace a one time thing, or do we have to accept grace over and over again? I think the answer is Yes. Here's what I mean: I believe that becoming a Christian means putting down our boards and accepting the gift of Christ's amazing grace. For some people this is an event -- like a lightning bolt, for some it is a process that can take years. Either way, it is the beginning of a journey of faith. But when we have crossed the canyon from unbelief to faith, from non-Christian to Christian, we are still at the beginning of the journey. There are going to be plenty more opportunities and temptations to rely on ourselves, our good works, our great reputation, whatever. The journey of faith usually leads us to some obstacles and through some dark valleys. Grace does not keep bad things from happening to us, and it certainly doesn't keep us from doing stupid things to ourselves, but grace is the assurance that there is nothing in the world which is stronger than the love of God in Jesus Christ. That grace is a gift which we are given whenever we have the humility to stop trying to justify ourselves, and recognize that we are already accepted and loved because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

I am glad that I do not have to re-live the 1980's -- although I wish I could still fit into those Ditto jeans. But I am grateful for what I learned at that time in my life: lessons about faith and forgiveness, and especially about the wonderful grace of Jesus. God bless you.