

SERMON – January 27, 2007
Luke 4 “Words of Divine Grace”

G&P...

Ruby Bridges is the true story of the six-year-old girl who, in 1960, became the first person of color in the U.S. to attend an all-white school. By federal law, Ruby faced overwhelming social adversity in segregationist New Orleans, Louisiana.

At the start of this scene, Ruby is walking through the angry crowd outside the school with four federal agents around her. As she goes up the steps, she suddenly turns around, walks down a few steps, stops, and appears to say something to the crowd. The agents try to coax her back up the steps. She resists for a moment, her lips still moving. A psychiatrist (an expert in child stress who had offered the family free counseling) is looking on. Ruby then turns around and is escorted into the school.

In the next scene, Ruby and the psychiatrist are sitting alone at the family's kitchen table. She is coloring. He says, "But honey, I saw you talking to them. Did you finally get angry with them? Did you tell them to just leave you alone?"

Ruby answers: "No. I didn't tell them anything. I didn't talk to them."

"But Ruby, I was there. I saw your lips moving."

"I wasn't talking to them. I was praying for them."

The doctor is startled. "Praying for them?"

"Yes, I pray for them every day in the car. But I forgot that day."

"Oh. What prayer did you say?"

Ruby puts down her crayon, folds her hands together and says, "Please God, forgive these people, because even if they say these mean things, they don't know what they're doing, so you can forgive them, just like you did those folks a long time ago, when they said terrible things about you."

The doctor, deeply moved, closes his eyes.

Just like Jesus did a long time ago. She prayed in the midst of those who wanted her dead because of her color, no more no less. She had the audacity not to return that hate with her own hate. Rather she echoed what Jesus taught on that Sabbath day in Nazareth. We can see Jesus in her as we look at Luke chapter 4.

For when Jesus closes the scroll of Isaiah, he sits down and announces that:

“Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

and all were amazed at the words of divine grace that came from his mouth. Words of divine grace, this is much more than just gracious words, these are words that set people free to love in the face of hate, free to forgive when they in fact are the victims, free to see God in the midst of great hurt and sorrow. Word of divine grace that set people free to live in God's grace.

These are the kind words that Jesus shared that really captured the attention of those who heard them. Words for the poor and the imprisoned and the disabled. Words of divine grace that touched their own hearts as well.

But then the lights went on, because they knew Jesus, he was Joseph's son. He had helped build many of their homes. He was a part of the community. He had been at their weddings and at their funerals. They knew him. They knew his faults and his blemishes. At least they thought they did. They started to grumble against him and to find fault in the way he conducted himself.

Jesus could feel their hostility and their hate that just bubbled to the surface. Then Jesus became the prophet of old, like Elijah who was rejected by his own people, Jesus reminded them all of the time when God was only bringing grace and healing to the outsiders, to the gentile woman of Zarephath, who was widowed and whose son was starving. He reminded them of the time that Elisha brought healing to the enemy of Israel, Naaman the Syrian.

Both stories reminding the people of the time of God's judgment upon Israel. Their anger rose to a tempest. They began to drive Jesus out of the town and the stoning hill, where they threw heretics off the cliff and then stoned them to death.

Jesus stopped in his tracks at the edge of the cliff and walked right through the anger and the hate. Because he had been prepared for them, he had prayed for them and had prayed for his own protection for his time was not yet. He had set his face to Jerusalem and that is where he would give himself up, but not here, not this time. He was in the power of God.

The same power of prayer that moved Ruby through the people who were so afraid that their prejudice just boiled over. In the power of God, she had the audacity to pray for those students as she walked.

Jesus wants all of his children to walk in such words of grace. Words that come from the very

mouth of God. Words that make alive, and bring life to all who hear them.

“The people were amazed at the Words of divine Grace that came out of this mouth”

Why? Because Words of grace are absolutely foreign to the way we live our lives. Yes, we will try to live such grace as long as the people around us are the same color and in the same economic place. But when a person of color different than our own shows up, those tapes that run in our head start to play. I remember as a ten year old living in California in 1965 going up on our roof to watch the fires from Watts and Compton burn some 15 miles away. The house I grew up in was prejudice. But all this was challenged when I came home from parochial school with my friend, Tom Jackson. Tom had just come to our school. We were the two shortest in the class and we became fast friends. Tom is an African American. This new friendship challenged all of those tapes in my head that said, hate those who are different. Tom was my friend. This changed the way I thought about others.

But 42 years later, our world has become much harsher world wide. Religion has entered the battle. It becomes a loyalty to MY kind of religion, MY understanding of God, and if you do not conform to MY way of thinking, well you are going to go to really hot place, or you will be killed. We need these words of divine grace now more than ever. We need to hear world wide that Jesus loves all of us, Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist alike.

Hate begets hate but love transforms us to see with different eyes and hearts. This is what Jesus does with this divine grace, he transforms hearts with one cross and one resurrection for all time. He challenges the hate tapes that turn on in our heads at the wrong time. Hate that is often driven by nothing but fear of the unknown.

Tom and Jean found each other late in life. Tom had been a confirmed bachelor for 55 years, had a good job and income. Attended church once a month or so. Gave when he felt he could. It was in that church that he met Jean. She was also single, marriage had eluded her or maybe she was just about as confirmed to the single life as Tom was. But then love struck with a loud bang. These two fell in love with such a passion that those who knew them were in awe. No one saw it coming especially Tom and Jean.

They brought their two households together. Jean was a regular giver at church and this challenged Tom, but they prayed about it and decided that they could give more together to the mission of the church. Everything had come together. That is until about a year after their marriage, when Jean was driving to work and a man with no insurance ran a stop sign and just destroyed her car. Jean was laid up for more than a year. In the midst of this Tom was laid off after the merger of his company with another one.

They stretched their pennies until Lincoln didn't look like Lincoln any more. Their income had

dropped dramatically. But their giving to the mission of the church was still part of what they gave. Their church was there in the midst of their struggle to pay the bills. The prayers kept coming. Soon Jean was back on her feet, the employment situation was righting itself.

But the miracle of this story is yet to be told because in this midst of their crisis they heard the words of Divine Grace speak to them. Words that pointed out that there were others who needed to hear that word who may not be recovering as fast as they had.

One day at work, Jean came home and told Tom about a woman in her office who was having a really down day, single mother with two children. She had said in the office to no one in particular that she had never felt so tired and alone. She was at the end of her rope. As Jean told her story to Tom, they remembered the jar of change on the refrigerator that they had been saving for no particular purpose. But now they had one.

Jean knew that whatever they gave to her co-worker had to be anonymous to save the embarrassment. SO they put the ten dollars from the coins in a card that read:

“Go have some fun with your children. You are special.”

On that Monday, the woman came into the office with the greatest story of taking her children to the matinée movie and ice cream. That someone cared for her.

This idea just took off for Tom and Jean. They named their jar,

“God's Love Jar”

When they had collected enough change, they would find someone to surprise with God's love. That became their mission. To spread the love of God one person and one gift at a time.

It all began on that day in Nazareth when Jesus spoke words of divine grace to the world. Words that said that you and I are worth going to the cross for. You and I are worth coming back to life for so that we can live in those words of divine grace that say simply:

“We are loved by a gracious God”

Let us live those words in all that we do, for in so doing we complete the mission of God in Jesus Christ!

AMEN