

## Holy Fire (3): Grace and Forgiveness

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*Romans 7:19-25*

*John 8:1-11*

Most Christians can articulate the love of God on a rational level, they can even offer that love to others. But It is one thing to say “God loves *you*” and quite another to admit “God loves *me*.”

Me? Impossible.

St Teresa of Avila writes that God beckons us at every moment; in fact, God prepares a bed for us. But “most look into their life’s mirror and say ‘I am not worthy to leave this sadness.’”<sup>1</sup>

Are we too proud for God’s love, or too aware of our brokenness?

Lauren Winner is the author of a book about Christian sex. She wrote it in her late 20s, and published a treatise on the importance of Christian marriage and fidelity. She became well-known for this and other books—a household name among seminarians like myself. Little did she know that her next book, a memoir published just 8 years later would begin like this:

I simply could not stay married. I came to believe that I could not do this thing I had said I would do; I could not do it. I was unable to do it. It is a mark of my charmed life that this was the first time I had ever tried to do something, and simply failed. And it was a failure: a spectacular, grave, costly failure.<sup>2</sup>

Failure, screw-ups, regrets, things we would do differently, ways we wish we could be different. We all experience these in our single lives, our married lives, our sex lives, our everyday lives.

St. Paul articulates the struggle well when he says: I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> St. Teresa of Avila. “He Desired me So I Came Close.” Translated by Daniel Ladinsky. *Love Poems from God: 12 Sacred Voices from the East and West*: (USA: Penguin Compass, 2002), 274.

<sup>2</sup> Lauren Winner. *Still: Notes on a Mid-faith Crisis*: (New York: Harper One, 2012), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Romans 7:19-25

The only way we can look at ourselves truly, look in our life's mirror and not crumble under the weight—is grace.

Grace: The unmerited favor of God.

The Netflix Series “The Crown” tells the story of the early life of Queen Elizabeth of England. I’m not qualified to say how accurate or inaccurate it may be, but I can say that it’s a beautifully rich portrayal of the lives complex people. Aside from the crowns and gowns these people who are more or less like you and me. One of the nuanced storylines which is well-told within the series is the relationship between Elizabeth and her husband. In the early years of their marriage, you see them delighting in each other, in vacations, laughing with their small children. But as they grow, and when she becomes queen, their relationship becomes more complex. Will the duke bow down before his wife at her coronation? He thinks no, she thinks yes. The duke feels trapped by the rigid lifestyle of the monarchy, he flounders in a palace that is not his own. And eventually, you see a frost between them. She sends him away on a tour for five months, and though they both clearly miss each, their reunion is a bitter one.

Even the press seems to have caught on that there is tension in the royal marriage. To mark their ten-year anniversary, Elizabeth suggests a dinner. Her husband agrees, and rises at the event to give a toast to his wife. What would he say? What could he say with authenticity at this low point in their marriage? He gives a toast with a candor and honesty that no one expected, not least Elizabeth:

When I imagined our marriage in the early days, I imagined two people welded together in some sort of combined existence. 10 years...10 years has taught me the secret to a successful marriage is to have different interests...

It’s a funny business—you see the whole of that person, even the part they do not see of themselves.

And presumably, they see that hidden part of you.

One ends up knowing more about one’s partner than they know about themselves—and it can be pretty tough to keep quiet about it. And so you have to come to an agreement, an arrangement, a deal – if you’d like – to take the rough with the smooth.

The extraordinary thing is—down there in the rough, in the long reeds of difficulty and pain—that is where you find the treasure.”

Do Christians have a word for this—this taking the rough with the smooth? We do. The word is “grace.”

Grace: God's unmerited favor is the textbook definition of "grace", but how can a textbook contain the real meaning of this truth:

That God desires you. God loves you—the rough and the smooth. That you are worth God wading into the long reeds of difficulty and pain, a treasure you are—in the eyes of God.

By what means will we come to know—I mean really come to experience this grace? Do Methodists have a word for this? We do, we call it: "the means of grace."

Communion – when you take the bread which is Christ's body and bring it to your hungry lips— it's a means of grace.

Scripture – when the word of love, or rebuke, or insight hits the spot –it's a means of grace.

Church community – when the people here watch over you in love, bind your broken-heart, make you that casserole – it's a means of grace.

But there is another means of grace that didn't exactly make John Wesley's list, though it surely makes God's list: and that is intimate relationships—friendships, partners, family. And when we talk about marriage, we can also talk about sex. Good Christian sex is a means of grace.

How?

Paul Scott tells the story of a young woman named Sarah who has a romantic encounter with a young man. The circumstances are not ideal. The commitment level is not ideal. But hours after the sexual encounter she has an epiphany. She is riding a train back home, she looks in the mirror and sees that "she had entered her body's grace."<sup>4</sup>

Rowan Williams reflects on the meaning of this "she has discovered that her body can be the cause of happiness to her and to another. This discovery...is why we might want to talk about grace here. Grace, for the Christian believer is a transformation that depends...on knowing yourself to be seen in a certain way: as significant, as wanted." Indeed, "the whole story of creation, incarnation and.. Christ's body tells us that God desires us."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Rowan Williams, "The Body's Grace," in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*. Edited by Eugene F. Rogers (Malden: Blackwell Publishing 2002), 311.

<sup>5</sup> Rowan Williams, "The Body's Grace," in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*. Edited by Eugene F. Rogers (Malden: Blackwell Publishing 2002), 311-312.

In our most intimate relationships, we taste that same desire—a desire that ideally encompasses the whole of who we are—body, mind, spirit, soul.

A married colleague says: “sex can show you that your body is more desirable than you ever thought possible.” “But at the same time sex requires an extraordinary amount of grace—in addition to the terrible vulnerability of nudity as you age, and the comic tragedy of trying to get it right—it takes a lot of grace to let someone into the most intimate part of yourself. Especially because your spouse has likely at some point in the day or week or month—hurt you.”

“There is a distinct feeling of gratitude and relief when the other person lets you back into that space. You know that you’re not worthy, but you’re welcomed back into that intimacy by grace alone.”

Americans have grown quite accustomed to equating sex with love—by which we usually just mean warm hormone-related feeling—but Christianity pushes us to see it as more.

When sex is a grace, it’s one of the most beautiful things that a human can do.

But too often—its not.

I’m going to ask for your trust and understanding in what I’m about to say. I think you know that I don’t try to be sensational, I just try to keep it real. I think this is a really helpful concept. There is a word used all the time in our culture—I’m talking about the f-word. What does it mean? It means sex without grace. Graceless sex. That’s what the f-words means. Sex with vengeance, sex with selfish aims, sex with a callous disregard for the other’s God given identity. If we’re honest about it, there is violence to this kind of sex because it destroys the wholeness of another.

A Methodist chaplain was discussing campus hook-up culture with a campus men’s group. What they concluded was this:

If you convince yourself that it’s nothing more than [“casual sex”,] then you can pretend like you don’t care about being accepted and loved in the way that every human needs. A society where sex is mostly just f’ing with zero spiritual investment is a society that is sabotaging its mental health.<sup>6</sup>

Every time we have sex without soul, our hearts become more callous.

Next week after service I’ll be having a Q&A with our youth on this topic. What is most important to me—is not giving them a list of rules which are easily broken, but

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<sup>6</sup> Morgan Guyton, “Sex as Grace: (Reflecting on a Discussion with College Men),” MercyNot Sacrifice Blog <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/mercynotsacrifice/2017/11/30/sex-grace-reflecting-discussion-college-men/>

teaching our young people that sex is meant to be grace that brings us into greater communion with God. And if it is not a grace—if it is selfish, self-seeking, uncommitted, irresponsible, prideful—sex is likely doing harm.

But there is something else we must say to the youth as well. Who among us hasn't done harm in one way or another? Who among us is 100% proud of our past and satisfied in our present? Sexuality is the messiest of all human endeavors. It's a fire, remember? A holy fire. And sometimes the best firefighters in the world struggle to contain a forest fire. Sexuality is fraught with complication, sadness, hopes and disappointments, and therefore it is an absolutely a place where God's grace abounds.

"Yeah, but not for me." You may be thinking. Yes, for you, and me.

A woman has been caught cheating on her husband, and she is put on trial for it by the religious leaders of the day. Think *Scarlet Letter*, think embarrassing public humiliation. What she has done is clearly harmful, it was graceless. Though there is no accountability for her partner—the religious elites would like to make an example out of her. They drag her before a large crowd. "Jesus," they say, "according to the law, this woman she but stoned to death for her indiscretion. What do you say?" Their arms are raised, ready to pounce. <sup>7</sup>

"Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone."

And one by one, they put down their stones.

Jesus responds to her graceless behavior with... an invitation for the whole community to practice grace. As so often happens after an unexpected pregnancy or a breakup—the church community at its best surrounds the situation with love.

Jesus turns to the woman caught in adultery: "has no one condemned you? Neither do I condemn you, go thy way, but do not sin again." Forgiveness is not a cover up. Forgiveness is an invitation to do the hard work of make amends to live a life that is different.

At the Royal Wedding between Kate and William, the Bishop of London quoted Catherine of Sienna: "'Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire.'" He continued, "Marriage is intended to be a way in which man and woman help each other to become what God meant each one to be, their deepest and truest selves."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> John 8

<sup>8</sup> <http://royalweddings.hellomagazine.com/prince-william-and-kate-middleton/20110429662/royal-wedding-sermon-bishop-of-london-richard-john-carew-chartres/>

Do Methodists have a word for this? Becoming our deepest and truest selves. We do: Sanctifying grace. It's the grace that actually smooths out the rough spots. Sure, we all have a past, sanctifying grace is interested in our futures--over the long years of a relationship with God, with a spouse, or with a church we become patient, kind, steadfast, true.

My friend Anna told me about a silent retreat they attended. After they had gotten out all their chatter, there was a liturgy of for the closing of the lips. The pastors came around, made the sign of the cross over their lips and said "may you see the truth of who you are, no matter how beautiful." Of course, Anna finished the line in her head differently "no matter how broken you are." But that is not what the minister said, the minister drew the sign of the cross over her lips and said "may you see the truth of who you are no matter how beautiful." Do we have a word for that? Grace.

So friends, whatever you are doing with your lips, may it show it you how beautiful you are. Amen.