

#759 Grace, Truth, and Glory

There's nothing like coming home for Christmas. For me, that homecoming always includes the services at Messiah Lutheran Church in Fairview Park, Ohio, with a Christmas sermon (or, if I'm really lucky, two) from Jerry Burce.

This year was no different, and I want to share with you the sermon that Jerry preached not on Christmas Eve but on Christmas Day. From the vivid images of his introduction, through to the resounding proclamation of the good news in his conclusion, he held us congregants in thrall. We left with a refreshed and renewed understanding of those words of St. John that we've heard so many times before, those words whose re-hearing is a homecoming of its own: that "we have seen his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth."

So, I send this Christmas homily along to you today with a prayer that it will leave you, as it left us, in awe at the glorious miracle that God has accomplished for us through Jesus Christ.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Grace, Truth, and Glory

A Christmas Day Homily on John 1:1-14

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth. – John 1:14, NRSV (variant)

It's astonishing how many sermons are lurking inside this one fairly short sentence. There's time this Christmas morning for

only one of them, of course, and a briefer one than that. So let me focus today on the glory the writer is talking about.

It was 17 years or so ago when I finally learned what "glory" means. I've told this story before, so please bear with me if you're one of those who have heard it already.

The year was 1995. One of the most exciting teams in the history of baseball was packing Jacobs Field in downtown Cleveland day after day, and day after day the crowd would stay till the last pitch was pitched, because you never knew what the Indians might do. From top to bottom the lineup was packed with high-percentage batters. Among them was a young fellow, just breaking into the major leagues. His name was Manny Ramirez, he of the sweetest swing that I for one have ever seen.

Came a day against the Oakland A's when the Tribe was down a run in the bottom half of an extra-inning game, with two outs, one man on base. Oakland at the time had a pitcher who, over his career, had come to define what a closer is. His name was Dennis Eckersley. He was now in the twilight of his career, but even so, hardly anyone that year was getting the better of Dennis Eckersley. So when Manny Ramirez stepped into the batter's box the city watched more out of duty than of any sense of expectation.

What happened next helped define the entire season. A fastball sped in low and inside, exactly where the pitcher wanted it. Manny swung the bat, and lo, there was the ball shooting hard into the left-field bleachers. Two runs scored, and that was the game. On TV that night you could see the pitcher twirling around to follow the ball as it sailed over his head. As it did you could see him mouth a word. What he said was "Wow!"

It hit me later that I had just witnessed the definition of "glory." Glory is people saying "Wow!" Glory is people being

stunned by something extraordinary. Glory is the quality shared by the crashing thunderstorm on the one hand, the exquisite snowflake on the other. Glory is the aftermath of the exquisite performance, the perfect creation, the monumental achievement, the crushing victory. Glory is people talking and pointing and after that recalling. Glory is yours truly, the most casual fair-weather fan a team was ever cursed with, still recounting a certain moment in a certain game that happened almost twenty years ago. Though come to think of it, real glory is the expert opponent, in this case Dennis Eckersley, pausing to honor and admire what has just taken place even as it sends him to defeat.

We have beheld *his* glory, says the writer of the Gospel. Translation: "We looked, we saw, and we all said 'Wow!' And years and years later we were all still talking about it as the one thing we've seen that we hadn't seen before, nor have we seen it since in anyone other than this Word-made-flesh, Jesus is his name."

In the great Christmas account that Luke wrote—we listened again last night—we heard at least four "Wows." There was the "Wow!" of angel armies singing their joy when the other angel broke the news that Christ was born. Then shepherds said "Wow" as they hurried off to find this Savior Christ was born to them. Once they got there and told their story "all they that heard it marveled," that is, they all said "Wow." Then came a final "Wow," this one again from shepherds as they headed back to their fields "glorifying and praising God for all that they heard and seen."

St. Matthew tells of another "Wow!", this one uttered by strange men from a land far, far away, now kneeling before a little Jewish baby and presenting him with gifts for a king.

St. John says his "Wow!" about the man the baby grew into. He

was, says John, like no else. What set him apart was the way he dealt with us, the way we watched him operate with other people too.

It was a gracious way, perfectly gracious. It was a truthful way too, and perfectly truthful.

Never before, says John, had we seen those two things come together in one and the same person. Overflowing grace, overflowing truth, the two encountered simultaneously, in every moment we spent with him. Had we not seen, we could not have believed it. It changed the way we think about God.

After all, grace is one thing. Truth is another. As a rule, in our usual experience, grace and truth don't walk hand in hand. They don't coexist. They simply can't.

As a rule, in our usual experience, grace will stop where truth begins. As a rule, truth cancels grace. It makes it impossible.

So, for example, in a courtroom. As the proceedings open, grace is in charge, or at least it's supposed to be in charge. In our usual language we call it a presumption of innocence. Maybe the person accused deserves this, maybe he doesn't, at this point we just don't know. We grant it anyway. That's grace. Meanwhile the lawyers stand and start digging for the truth, or at least that's what they're supposed to be doing. At some point the jury heads off to decide what the truth is. The moment it returns the day of grace is over. Now truth takes center stage. If the verdict is not guilty we let the fellow go not because we want to, but because we have to. The truth requires it. Or again, if the verdict is guilty, no judge in the world is free to set the sentence aside merely because he's kind, merely because he wants to. Truth, remember, owns the field at this point. Grace is in the locker room, taking a shower, waiting for another day, another moment, when truth is up for grabs.

It's that way too, of course, in more ordinary affairs, as in the relations we enjoy, or don't enjoy, with most any other human being. I presume, graciously, that she's a good person who thinks well of me if she thinks of me at all, and that's how I treat her. It's how she treats me in turn. With grace. But the better we know each other, the less we'll rely on gracious instincts to get along. Now truth will start controlling how we react to each other, each of us responding as the other deserves. And if, in the emerging of truth, she learns that I'm a jerk, we don't see each other anymore. That's how it works.

What stuns us, John, says, is how it didn't work that way with Christ. Nor does it now.

Instead he saw us, he knew us. The truth of who we are was ever before his eyes. The whole truth. Nothing less than the truth. Even so he called us friends. Even so he treated us as brothers. Even so he invited us, outrageously, to think of each other as sons and daughters of the Most High God.

In the person of this Jesus grace and truth were always side by side, never one on center stage while the other lurked in the wings. Instead, says John, we can't recall a moment with him that was less than truthful, nor any moment that was less than graceful. While we were still sinners he loved us to his death.

Enter the glory, as in glory like no other, unmatched and everlasting. On the third day the Father said, "Wow." We saw that too, says John.

Today we're still sinners. In this day of his life, Christ loves us still with a love that wraps the Father's "Wow" around us all.

My turn, says John. "Wow!" And in saying that today, he invites us all to say it with him.

And he invites us to say it all the louder, the more it sinks home that in this Jesus we see the very heart of God and the person of God's Son, the one and only. Who but God, after all, can be so truthful about who we are, and yet so gracious that he'll stick with us in life, and in death?

Who but God, the one who made all things, through whom all things were made—who but true God from true God can bear with us as he finds us to be, doing that in the utter certainty that we'll one day be the glorious creatures he turns us into?

Who but God can give a wrinkled, decaying person—I just turned 60; I know whereof I speak—the power to look in a mirror today and to see in it the honest and truthful reflection of nothing less than a child of God, dear beyond all understanding to the Father's gracious heart?

Who but God can make us strong to name and treat each other as brothers and sisters of the Most High God, and to do this both in truth and in spite of the truth? Who but God can authorize you to call me a saint when you know me to be sinner? Who but God can let me name the sinner in you though the Spirit of Jesus has stamped you as a saint?

"Wow!" says John. And today, this Christmas Day, it's our turn to say it too.

"Wow!" What wondrous things our God has done for us in Jesus Christ. What impossible things he'll do in us and through us as his Spirit shapes our hearts and teaches us to trust him.

What a gift our God has given us in the marvel of his Son, the Word made flesh, who dwells with us today against that other day when at last he'll bring us home.

Isn't that, after all, why grace and truth in wondrous

combination spilled into the world when Christ was born? For your sake, for mine? To get sinners like us, by grace, to the home reserved for God's true children?

Wow!

Merry Christmas indeed!

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