

Mark 9:38–50

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

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It is in the nature of grace that it slops the bucket, spilling over the edges, dousing every attempt to contain it. I suppose you younger people don't remember the imagery. When I was a kid we carried lots of liquids: input during the day and output in the morning. And of course it was in the nature of it that sometimes it would spill down your leg, onto your shoes or wherever. Grace is like that. You can't contain it. Once grace gets going, it just starts to take things over.

So one of the interesting things about grace is the way the church tries to contain it, to prevent the spillage. Our texts for Pentecost 18 are all, in one way or another, related to this topic of routing or containing grace, or spreading it in such a way that it doesn't get away.

As you might expect, James is real concerned about that. That's why he's in the canon: the bishops were nervous that Paul would get away with too much grace and that the whole ecclesiastical enterprise would fall apart. So little Jim is the muffler on the Pauline witness. Of course he is eager to make sure grace gets contained, but this time he's really cooking. This is a really fun lesson from James, and the psalm is like it. Both of them know grace, and both know what it's good for, and both plug us, with the gifts of grace, into practices we can rejoice in and enjoy. So we have a wonderful psalm and a better second lesson from James than we would have planned on. We're done with him today, and he has decided to rehabilitate himself with something better.

Then we have a wonderful text from Numbers dealing with Eldad and Medad, speaking of spillage. The Holy Spirit got away and, unfortunately for all of us, didn't obey Joshua the way he wished it would. So Eldad and Medad are out there in the tents prophesying, among all those griping Israelites who are most of all concerned with the quality of the menu, a concern I share, I have to tell you.

So there's one story, and then we have a very interesting gospel, which starts with spillage. There's an exorcist out there, not one of the disciples, who is delivering people from the demonic in the power of Jesus' name. And of course now John is upset about it, and Jesus corrects John in the nicest way. And then he puts a test to grace. This is one of the ways grace gets away, and it is really unfortunate; we have all had too much experience of it in recent years. Grace becomes ideology, and then it spreads like mad and undermines all standards. So Jesus is going to be as gracious as ever, but he is going to contain it a little. Lots of fun.

So we'll go to work on the supporting texts. First the psalm and James, which we'll take together today; then Numbers separately, because it is a very interesting text; and finally the gospel, Mark 9:38–50.

What Grace Does: Psalm 104 and James 5

The psalm and little Jim go together in a wonderful way: both of them show what grace does when it gets hold of you.

The psalm is one of the beauties, Psalm 104. The framers of our lectionary have broken into the psalm right after Leviathan has been swimming in the deep with all the fishes, Leviathan, whom God made for the sport of it. Right now the whales are making their way south from Alaska, down along the coast here, on their way to Mexico for the winter. They're no fools, those whales. We were down at the coast the other day and saw a whale swimming south, big as life. You can't see all of it, but Leviathan was sporting in the deep right in front of us, flipping its big tail and having a good time as it sought warmer waters to the south. A snowbird? What do you call a whale that goes south? Not a snowbird, that's for sure; even with evolution that's not quite right. But you get the picture.

"These all look to you": all these creatures of the deep, all these spiny creatures that are so ugly to look at, these crazy critters God made in the dark, they all look to you, and with them all the earthly creatures as well, "to give them their food in due season." "You open your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing"; that's the way I learned that passage. "They are filled with good things," it says here.

This is a really interesting text, and we could talk about it a long time, because it is an article of faith in traditional cultures. You can bet that the people of Israel and Judah knew this passage by heart. Tom Olson and the rest of you who have spent time in Africa, as I have, know how this passage is treasured by traditional peoples. It is an article of faith that God will

never let any of his creatures starve. And the fact of famine just makes the faith all the stronger. I have stood and talked with starving people who recited this passage full of hope. And I have sat with overweight students at Luther Seminary who were going to Weight Watchers because they were worried they wouldn't get a call, they were so obese. They started not with the promise but with the famine. They were so big they couldn't get into the chair, but they were worried God wouldn't feed them. Well, the skinny people are happy in this promise. It's a great promise, and you should set it out on the basis not of the exception but of the rule. There's more than enough for everybody. If Cargill and all the other companies weren't piling it up to keep prices high, we would all eat sensibly.

So this is grace. When God opens his hand, everybody is satisfied. When he withholds his hand, we all go hungry. "When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground." This is all grace, pure grace, just pouring out here. "Who looks on the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke. I will sing to the Lord as long as I live." The natural result of grace is grace. That's why the vision of heaven is always endless praise: because it is endless grace, and so there's nothing left to do but sing and enjoy it. There you go. Grace itself.

Now we'll have to give little Jim his due. My wife thought I was a little hard on him last week, so we have to be nice to him this time. This is a wonderful little lesson that shows how grace works. It begins with prayer. In suffering we naturally pray. Even people who don't know much grace will start looking for it in a time of difficulty. Praying in suffering is as natural as breathing. We call out to God for his help, because we know he is better than the current circumstances, that grace abounds.

When there is illness, the most natural thing in the world is to take a person by the hand, to put a hand on the forehead, to hold a hand. So James, in a wonderful passage, urges us to lay hands on the sick and anoint them with oil. You know, of course, that this is the basis of the Catholic sacrament of extreme unction. Luther said that James's promise that everybody will be healed is patently contrary to our experience. Not everybody is healed after the laying on of hands and prayer. But nevertheless, because we know grace, we lay on hands and pray. We get the oil out now and then, not necessarily always, though I generally keep it with me in my communion kit. I don't think any pastor should ever call on the sick without laying on hands in prayer. It's just part of it. Because God is gracious, we anticipate, even if last time it didn't happen quite the way we wanted, that this time it is going to work the way it should. He is

gracious, after all, and grace is going to get away with something; that's in its nature. So we count on it.

So we pray in suffering, we lay hands on the sick, we forgive one another's sins. Here is the absolution: not simply an occasional event when I feel guilty, but part of the ritual of the day. I can't imagine living a day without hearing the words of forgiveness from my wife. And when I hear them from my pastor, at church, the formality of it brings it home even more strongly. Because of grace we live in the forgiveness of sins. If James knows that, my goodness, we certainly should. This is as good as it gets.

And here he is even talking about bringing the wanderers home. What a joy that is: the lost, the least, and the lonely, how we find them and bring them back. This is the joy of grace, that it restores the wanderer to the community. The one who had no place has a bed. There you go. So we have a very nice psalm and a wonderful lesson from little Jim, who is finally in the groove just before he quits. Good thing. I don't want to tempt him any more than I have to.

Eldad and Medad: Numbers 11

But now we have this great text from Numbers, and we can have a wonderful time with it. This one is a little less predictable. It begins with the founding of the bureaucracy. You can guess it.

Moses has a problem, and of course it's a problem virtually every pastor recognizes. The flock is discontented. They are griping about the menu. They are complaining bloody murder about what they can remember back in Egypt; they'd just as soon be back there right now. If I were Moses, I would have said, "Find your own way, you buggers. I'm done with you." But he is a little more gracious. He has trouble, so he gets officers. So now we have seventy elders, and a president, a vice president, a secretary, and a treasurer, and the whole apparatus developing to care for these people going through the wilderness.

Well, it's necessary. Even as grace leads the way, they have difficulties, and they need to address them, and as they address them, they do it by seeking order in the chaos. That is a good thing, even if it makes a lot of us suspicious. And what really should make us suspicious is the absence of Miriam from this text.

One of my happy memories of running around the church is being down at California Lutheran one time with Phyllis Tribble. She is not exactly number one on the hit parade of a lot

of Lutheran theologians, but she and I were lecturing there together one day, and I came to think the world of her for the way she treated Miriam. She had pretty good evidence that there is a tendency in the Old Testament to eliminate Miriam from the text. The men don't want her. Talk about grace spilling: here is grace spreading across gender lines. There is Miriam right there with her brothers, probably telling them what they really ought to be doing, and she is necessary to the story. She is so necessary to the story, in Phyllis Tribble's analysis, that even though the priestly writer is trying to cut her out, he can't. She is the spokesman for Israel after the exodus. She is the one who sings.

I'll never forget it: two years ago, when we were in Ethiopia, we went to an Oromo festival. It was just fabulous. The Oromo are one of the great peoples of Ethiopia. In the east most of them are Muslims, but in the west a lot of them are Christians. You know that East African people like to jump; it's part of their makeup. There are all these gorgeous people, just tall and thin and incredible, and when they get excited they start to jump. You see Maasai warriors jumping along the road. And here was a woman singing Miriam's song, "Horse and rider he has thrown into the sea," and then she jumped straight up about four feet off the ground and came right back down again, and kept right on singing.

Miriam is a great woman, and probably they needed to elect officers because they didn't want Miriam around supervising. If they'd let her go, they would have had a lot more fun. But of course, with men, if we don't do it, we don't think it's going to get done, even when it's telling our wives what they really ought to do. So here is Miriam outside the camp, and we have officers inside the camp. That ought to scare you a little. "For God so loved the world that he didn't send a committee." This is it. We have a committee forming now, and the committee is going to bring order.

Now God expresses his opinion of all this theory of governance, this emergence of church order and all the rest of it. He expresses it by sending his Spirit so broadly that it falls on Eldad and Medad, these interesting guys who are out among the tents prophesying. It sounds like some charismatic in the congregation, or like somebody who has gotten full of the Holy Spirit and gone off half-cocked, spilling all over everything. Well, that's grace.

So there is a very interesting reaction. Joshua, whose spies explored the Promised Land by spending the night in a brothel in Jericho: I don't know if I trust him completely. That is probably typical of him: he wants to control us so that he can sleep where he wants at night. Anyway, he wants Eldad and Medad brought to heel, because we don't want any of this

spontaneity and expressiveness, we don't want this joy, we don't want this benevolence, and we don't want mercy and grace spilling all over everything. We've got to contain it. So he wants to put these guys out of business.

But Moses: if James looks better than he ever has in the lesson we just worked with, Moses is just wonderful here. Moses is the lawgiver. I get so sick of Moses I can hardly stand it sometimes: rules, rules, rules, regulations, regulations, regulations, do this, do that, the Ten Commandments, and then "What does God say concerning you?" It just never stops. But Moses turns to Joshua and says, "Let them be." The Spirit has gotten loose, and even Moses is not going to shut Eldad and Medad down, because it is in the nature of grace that grace slops the bucket. Grace spills over everything. Grace runs and flows. And of course, when you start trying to put everything in order, some of the grace disappears in the emergence of the order.

I remember my young cousin, who grew up in an apartment in New York City. When a couple of my uncles and our family took him camping, he looked around the campground and said, "Boy, I could really clean this up if I had my vacuum cleaner." That's the human inclination: to route and empty and control and protect. And grace breaks out and starts to flow. That's the fun of it.

Whoever Is Not against Us: Mark 9

So now we're well prepared for Mark 9:38–50, one of these challenging gospels from beloved Mark, who can't help sticking his finger in our nose one way or another. They're walking along, and John comes to Jesus. It's interesting that it's John here. In these kinds of texts it would usually be Peter, but this time John is taking his turn. "John said to him, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.'"

Here we go. Joshua has his equivalent in John, and John has his equivalent in all kinds of ecclesiastical officers whose goal is to make sure grace doesn't get too frisky, that things don't start running away and people don't start actually enjoying God's goodness. Perish the thought! So here John is trying to contain things.

We could say a little about that. In his eagerness to contain, he doesn't think about the people who have been delivered by this unknown exorcist, the demoniacs who have been freed. It's about like us when we read these stories and say, "Well, that can't be." Our view of the world is offended, and so we start running to protect ourselves, like junior Marcus Borgs, against the

reality of grace breaking out in real healings. We never think of the people who were actually healed and freed. And apparently this exorcist has really done some good. He has enough of a reputation that the disciples have heard about him and want to put him out of business.

So Jesus doesn't think first of the rules and regulations. He thinks of the victims. Isn't that fun? He thinks of the people who have been freed by this unknown exorcist. And so he says, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us."

If you want to see the difference between the old Adam and the new, just listen to what he said. The old Adam says, "If you're not for me, you're against me." The old Adam has enemies lists. The old Adam has people who need to be eliminated, people who need to be contained and redirected, rehabilitated, brought in, and made minions of good order, so they can march in line. And the new Adam, Christ Jesus, is full of faith. He is the person in whom faith is embodied. So he says, "Well, if they're not against me, they must be for me." He just turns it right around. Is that ever beautiful? You have to wonder sometimes. This is flat-out inspiration of Scripture, and it is flat-out Jesus himself, because it is so blessedly contrary to all our own assumptions.

Tom Olson and I have a wonderful friend, whom some of the rest of you know too, Lee Griffin, who always says that the gospel is antithetical to every human tendency. Well, every human tendency, when you discover grace, is to go to the patent office. Every human tendency is to sue those buggers, to go after the people who are making screens with rounded corners, and put them out of business, because this is ours and we don't want anybody interrupting our flow, our income projections. So John is in fact the old Adam on both feet here. Stop it! If we can't control them, put them out of business.

Jesus, in fact, is a harbinger of the new, the first fruits of the new creation, the beginning of a new world in which, when you discover something precious, you don't hide it but give it and bestow it. I think about that sometimes with all these patents on medicine. These big pharmaceutical companies would rather have people die than give up their patents, because of course their patents are their income. Well, here is grace. When you discover something good, what do you do? It's like that woman who lost her coin. You spend a lot more on the party celebrating its recovery than you would have lost if you'd never found that nickel. That's grace itself breaking loose. "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I

tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward." What a lot of fun! That's grace spilling, spilling, spilling, running, running, running, overflowing, so that everything starts to break open and grace begins to flow everywhere.

Grace Protected from the Graced

But now all of a sudden this text turns. It is not a turn in the sense of inconsistency. We have looked at one side of the coin; now Jesus flips it over. He knows as well as we do that grace contains its own temptations.

We know this firsthand from the recent life of our church, where the upper middle class has taken us over, thanks to our work habits. The children of farmers have now become the big shots in the towns, of course, and they've gone to Concordia and Luther and Saint Olaf and been socialized into the upper middle class, and so now they know there is nothing more important than good manners: being well adjusted, accommodating yourself to the culture. And so they have turned grace into something entirely different from grace. If you can imagine making grace ungracious, that is exactly the transformation that has happened, and it has developed by confusing grace with tolerance.

This is a really tricky devil. Anything you can tolerate, I can tolerate better. Because I can tolerate it better, I am better than you, and so I am entitled to accuse you and abuse you and eliminate you for your intolerance, just to show the true value of tolerance. It's nuts. So grace has been turned into an idea, an idea of universal, indiscriminate acceptance of anything and everything. Grace is literally never having to say you're sorry.

But here is the difference. Grace says, "This is wrong, but I love you, and I forgive you." Grace says, "Nothing will separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Tolerance says, "I can accept that. I don't like it, but I won't say anything." Like a bad smell in a grocery store: I'll just hold my nose and walk by, pretending I didn't notice. So grace turns into something else. Grace is the resurrection of the dead breaking loose among us. Tolerance is the decision not to say anything about something that is really troublesome. And when grace becomes denatured in that way, it turns into an enemy.

So the other side of the coin is this: Jesus has to protect grace from us sinners, who want to take it and turn it into what my grandma used to have. We called it Grandma's salve, Rawleigh salve. It smelled like trees, and whenever you got hurt and fell down, Grandma would come

with her jar of salve and smear it on you, and you'd stink for the day. But Grandma was sure it made you feel better. Well, that's how the church has been using grace. We've been smearing it all over everybody, and the people who are most indiscriminate about smearing it are "the gracious," and the rest of us are the old fogeys, puffing and huffing, retrograde conservatives. What's funny about that? It's nasty, because grace becomes ungracious. It has a sharp elbow, and it's sticking that elbow in the face of its opponent even while it celebrates its own tolerance. It doesn't work that way.

So Jesus protects grace from those who have been graced. Listen to him: "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea." Boy, he is not this rough very often. "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell."

This is about as rough as Jesus ever gets. He's ticked now, because he is talking to those who take the grace he won by his death and resurrection and turn it into an idea, to absolve themselves of anything and everything, all responsibility, and let their neighbors pay the bill. That's how it goes. So grace has to be protected, because it is in its nature to overflow.

Now, we want this overflow. The spillage of grace is one of the great things in the life of the church. People show up from here, there, and everywhere because they have heard this grace, it has happened to them, and they want more of it. That's what we want. What we don't want is this denatured grace, grace that is not gracious but empty, mere tolerance, a universal acceptance that can say anything but "Stop that. That's not good for you. That's not healthy."

In preaching this text, notice that the old Adam, who wants everything else to be spiritual, wants this text to be literal. You can just bet on that. When Christ's presence in the sacrament is being discussed, the old Adam will say, "Well, you surely don't mean that we're eating Jesus' body and blood. You can't mean that. Come on, get serious." But when we read this passage, the old Adam is going to say, "All right, cut it off," and insist on the most literal meaning. I haven't seen very many one-handed fundamentalists, for all that they want to take everything so literally. But I have seen people who have been damaged by an inappropriate interpretation of this text.

Bob Dolan, one of my all-time favorite students, a dear, dear friend whom I think the world of, used to tell about a woman out in western North Dakota who came to her grandpa's funeral with one hand dangling, all maimed. She had taken a seven-and-a-quarter-inch Skilsaw to her wrist because her hand had offended her. That is not what Jesus is saying. Even though he speaks as emphatically as we ever hear him, he is speaking emphatically not to damage us but to control the misinterpretation of grace, which uses it as a weapon against the allegedly ungracious, and uses it to absolve behavior that is actually damaging and out of control, which forgives the sin and leaves the sinner flat on his back.

I have a dear friend who is coming to stay with us again tonight. He was here a couple of weeks ago. He has been drinking for as long as I've known him. When I overlook his sins, I'm not doing him any favors. When I say, "Well, grace is grace," and don't say anything at all, I'm just encouraging him to continue in behavior that is finally going to kill somebody on the highway. He has had his third DUI; next time it's a year in prison. This is serious business. Grace at that point does not say, "Well, go in peace; your sins are forgiven." Grace at that point says, "Your sins are forgiven. Let's see if I can take you to an AA meeting. We're going to the meeting together." That's got to be it. Cheap grace, as Bonhoeffer called it, in a phrase he regretted, says, "Well, things will be fine," and goes home. Real grace says, "This is terrible," and stays and helps and encourages and blesses.

So Jesus, who was crucified and is risen for us, is of course the source of all grace. He is the gracious one who graces us beyond all expectation. When he finds some half-nutty exorcist out there he has never met, doing miracles in his name, he says, "Let's see what more we can do. Whoever is not against me must be for me." Talk about optimism! It's not optimism at all. It's faith. And because he deals with this man in faith, he can honor the work that has been done. Just magnificent.

But the one who is the source of grace also knows how a sinner takes hold of grace to turn it into a weapon. And when a sinner takes grace and turns it into a weapon, then we have trouble. This is the devil, who mimics God, who says, "I love grace," and licks his chops and looks for more victims, gracing them in an inappropriate way.

The distinction of law and gospel is critically important here. In our churches and in our culture we're right at the edge of it, because somehow we have bought the mythology that the law is done. It's not. The law is at work in the human heart and in the community. Only one thing will stop it, and that's grace. And so Jesus has to protect grace from the sinner's illicit use

of it as a weapon against the neighbor. He makes us accountable for the little ones. He makes us accountable for the neighbor. And he does so in this graphic language because he wants us to hear the promise he makes, and also the limits that are necessary until the new age dawns completely.

So both sides of the coin. Free-flowing grace: grace moving everywhere, grace that brings people into a relationship of faith, grace that raises the dead, that sustains, that blesses. But not grace that becomes an idea and turns back and says, "Well, I can accept that." That's not grace at all. That is just the calculation of the self-protecting self that doesn't want to be bothered: do your thing. That's putrid. It's awful.

Well, that's kind of tough business, isn't it? Jesus doesn't usually use this kind of harsh language, but you can see why he is exercised: he sees the underside of a graceless grace that isn't gracious at all. I suppose I've turned a corner with you today, and maybe that left somebody behind.

Questions and Answers

A comment on Psalm 104: "When you send forth your spirit, they are created."

Oh, I love that. Golly, it is the word that creates us and the word that re-creates us. As Gustaf Wingren says, our humanity comes of God's word. Until the word comes, we are just so much protoplasm. But when the word comes, it creates us anew. And so to hear the absolution, to hear the words at the table, "This is my body, given for you; this is my blood, shed for you," to overhear the words spoken at baptism, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," to hear such blessed words is literally to be taken into the new age. There is grace itself, breaking out in you. Life would not be possible otherwise. We couldn't live. That word is life and breath and every good thing. "You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing." It doesn't get better. Nice to hear from you, Steve.

A comment from Matt that it was the Pelagians who wanted James.

That's exactly right. Grace always makes them nervous, and so they try to eliminate it, and little Jim is their principal weapon. I don't know how many thousand times I've given a Bible study and somebody has stood up and said, "But doesn't James say ...?" That is in fact what James is for: to give the legalists a basis to stand up and object. That's the wrong way to

control or contain or protect grace. But here, in this lesson, James has the right way: encouraging prayer and the laying on of hands on the sick.

A comment recalling Robert Barnes.

Robert Barnes, you bet. He was great.

Well, I'm going to sign off on you. See you next week. God's peace to you. My prayers are with you as you go into the pulpit on Sunday, and I give thanks to God for you, so faithfully eager to hear these texts.

SOURCE

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