

Uncomplicated Grace

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“Come Holy Spirit and kindle within us the fire of your love. Take our minds and think through them, take our lips and speak through them, take our souls and set them on fire.”

It seems at first glance that there’s nothing more daunting or more complicated than welcoming your first child into this world. Or at least that’s what the authors who dominate the “Parenting” section of the bookstore would like you to think. My wife Faye and I received the two scariest books in the history of parenting during the fourth month of her pregnancy. They were *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* and *What to Expect the First Year*. In fact we received three copies of each of these books that month. In their pages are blow-by-blow narratives of what both a “normal” pregnancy and what the first year of a child’s life should be like. We followed them religiously. And every time we deviated from the “norm” our anxiety went through the roof. In the end it wasn’t these complicated books that taught us the most important pieces of parenting. It was the nurses of the hospital that put our anxiety to rest. They showed us that taking care of our baby wasn’t complicated. It was as easy as feeding, changing, holding, and offering unending and loving patience. Hard work? ...the hardest I’ve ever done. Complicated? ...absolutely not.

It’s human nature to make things more complicated than they need to be. You can hardly blame us though. You need only look around us to find life complicated by all sorts of unnecessary complications. Think about the last time you went to get your driver’s license renewed, or the last time you tried to file your own income taxes. Modern life in America is a complicated web of bureaucracies and agencies that seem to stand between us and living life to its fullest. Though we chafe under life’s complications I wonder if there isn’t something safe about them. There’s something controllable and regulated about complications that brings us solace and takes away our fear.

Is it any wonder then that we tend to expect the same of our religion? Just the other day I picked up a catalogue from a well-known publisher of Christian books on the topics of prayer and Christian practice. I was overwhelmed by the titles and the number of books that had 10 ways to improve your life of prayer or 7 habits to find a deeper sense of God. Now I don’t want to denigrate these books, I’m sure their authors have our best in mind while writing them, but I have to ask if we haven’t made the Christian faith a little too complicated. I wonder if our tendency to complicate and regulate everyday life hasn’t somehow crept into our lives of faith. Have we made the Christian faith into our own likeness instead of letting it form us into the likeness of Christ?

This morning we have before us one of the most interesting stories in the Old Testament. It’s the story of a man who expected God to be as complicated as his life was. And what he found in the process wasn’t a complicated God, but God’s remarkably uncomplicated

grace. Our story begins with a man named Naaman. He's a soldier, maybe even a general in the Syrian army. He's a man of means with access to the highest levels of power and wealth. And yet despite his station there's a problem. Naaman has been diagnosed with an incurable disease. Naaman is a leper. Not only is his disease a death sentence, but it will also mean his gradual estrangement from friends and family. Naaman is on a sad and lonely journey.

But in the course of events Naaman is introduced to the possibility of being healed. A young slave girl tells Naaman that there is a man in Israel who can heal him of his disease. What Naaman does next I think is so human it's remarkable. Naaman seeks out healing in a way that mirrors his own life. Naaman looks for healing in life's complications. He first goes to his king. His king can't help so the king then opens diplomatic channels with the king of Israel. Naaman then takes gold and silver and fine robes to the King of Israel in the hopes of finding healing. According to Naaman's experience you only get places when you talk to the right people or bring the right gifts. He assumes that it must be complicated to find healing because life by definition is complicated.

Eventually Naaman meets the prophet Elisha and he brings with him all of the gold and all of the silver. He brings all of the robes and all of his complicated expectations. And when he finally finds Elisha and asks him for healing the prophet looks at him and says, "Go wash in the Jordan River seven times and you will be healed." Naaman is enraged by this, and the reason is simple. Naaman expects the prophet's God to be complicated. Naaman expects God's healing to come only after Elisha waves his magic hands and speaks some mystical incantation. The Jordan River is filthy by comparison with the rivers of Syria. For Naaman there's no way that it can be this easy. Naaman's complicated and regulated life won't let him believe in simple faith or uncomplicated grace.

I love this line from Naaman, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy!" Naaman expects healing to operate in the way he expects his life to operate, and it doesn't. And that makes Naaman angry. But somehow his servants convince him to listen to Elisha, and eventually Naaman swallows his pride and washes in the Jordan seven times and is healed, not through complicated incantations or well-worn diplomatic channels. Naaman's healed by simple faith and God's remarkably uncomplicated grace.

Within all of us there is a desire to know God more deeply. I don't think we'd be here today if that wasn't the case. And if we're honest with ourselves we've each come with our own set of complicated expectations about God's grace and the healing of spirit we all seek. But what I'm here to tell you today is that God's grace isn't complicated. There are no magic incantations that we'll say today that will guarantee spiritual healing. Instead God is asking through the scriptures we've heard and the hymns we sing to put aside our experience and our expectation and open ourselves to the possibility that grace is all around us. And we can't engage it in the same complicated ways we engage our

lives. That's because God's uncomplicated grace is God's gift to us. It's free. It's unearned, and it's radically uncomplicated.

Throughout the ages God's story has been told and retold. In it it's never the proud or the complicated that truly participate in it. It's the humble and the meek who see it for what it truly is. God's grace comes to Davids and never Goliaths. God's grace comes to fishermen and tax collectors, while always eluding Pharisees and the proud. God's grace comes to the wealthy Syrian general Naaman only after he bathes in the lowly and dirty Jordan River. And God's grace will come to us too when we put away our complicated notions of God, and exchange them for God's uncomplicated grace.

When I finally gave up my complicated notions of early parenting I found something I hadn't expected. With the parenting books deposited safely in the attic I began to ponder the love of parents for their children. For the first time I began to comprehend the incomprehensible love of my mother and father for me in the love I felt for my daughter. And in those moments I caught a glimpse of God's love for us; the love Jesus' stories and preaching calls to our attention. The love of the father for the prodigal son, the love Jesus preached and felt from his heavenly father, the love and anguish of heart God must have felt when Jesus left God's presence to walk beside us in human flesh. God's is a love too deep to fathom, a love of infinite patience a love of uncomplicated grace.

Thanks Be to God.