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Jeremiah 31:7-14; John 1:10-18

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GRACE UPON GRACE

We are about sixty hours into what is called 2021. For many, it is a time to consider making resolutions to try to break bad habits or establish new priorities. It can be a time of making adjustments to how we have approached and understood our daily lives. In the Gospel of John, we even get a sense that God came to a point of wanting to change things up. That probably had little to do with moving into a new year and more to do with an assessment that the divine approach toward humanity needed more emphasis on literally approaching us. The law had been given offering guidance. Different leaders and prophets had also been sent to the covenant people. But repeatedly God's people veered away from the good and gracious intent God desired for them. So the new approach would be sending God's own word in human form in the person of Jesus. This opened the opportunity for humanity to relate not just to the commandments of God, but to God's own self. From the fullness of God's plan in the coming of this Jesus, John tells his audience, "we have all received grace upon grace."

I saw a characterization describing various approaches to life recently that described them this way: "Pessimist – glass half empty"; "Optimist – glass half full"; "Psalmist – my cup overflows." We hear such an understanding of life and of the Giver of life not only in the psalms, but throughout the biblical witness. Even if the previous year has been a time of loss and mourning, we are told in our Jeremiah passage that God shows up and that is a source of hope. Even if there are current concerns about health or wellbeing of another kind, our God is One who provides peace as well as what is needed for our overall wellbeing. When there may be a sense of loneliness or emptiness, there is love from above that can fill our hearts to overflowing.

Such expressions of grace upon grace that come to us in Christ, as we come to recognize them, help us to understand that God doesn't just want good behavior called for by the commandments - God wants to be in positive relationship with us.

And the grace God offers opens the way for us to consider a new approach to life that can enable us to explore the wonders God puts around, among, and within us. It is the kind of grace that allows us to experience God not just as someone who tells us what to do, but as Someone who loves us into being fully who we are intended to be. It is grace upon grace that can strengthen us to avoid taking the easy way that doesn't really lead anywhere.

A grace case in point - George Ritchie was a medical doctor who entered Germany as the Second World War was ending in order to get medical help to those who had been in concentration camps during the war. He had seen a lot of different medical conditions before, but seeing the harsh effects of slow starvation, where many had died a little bit at a time over a period of years was quite difficult to see. And many still died in spite of being given the food and medicine their bodies so needed. Dr. Ritchie described how emotionally difficult his medical duties became as he worked with men who had suffered such deprivation.

But then he came upon a former prisoner who happened to be Polish. His name was difficult to pronounce, but he had a long handlebar mustache like an old western hero, so American soldiers referred to him as Wild Bill Cody. He was one of the inmates of the concentration camp, but obviously he hadn't been there long: his posture was erect, his eyes bright, his energy strong. Since he was fluent in English, French, German and Russian, as well as Polish, he became a kind of unofficial camp translator. Dr. Ritchie and others used him as they tried to figure out where former prisoners were from. Wild Bill worked with them fifteen and sixteen hours a day, showing no signs of weariness. While all around him were drooping with fatigue, he seemed to gain strength. His compassion for his fellow-prisoners glowed on his face, and Ritchie was attracted to that glow when his own spirits were low. The doctor was astonished to learn upon examining Wild Bill's papers that he had been in the concentration camp for six years, living on the same starvation diet, sleeping in the same disease-ridden barracks as everyone else, but seemingly without physical or mental deterioration. What's more, every group in the camp looked to him as a friend. He was the one to whom quarrels between inmates were brought for arbitration, which was important work because some of the prisoners hated one other almost as much as they did the Germans.

As for the Germans, feelings against them ran so high that in some of the camps liberated earlier, former prisoners had seized guns, run into the nearest village and simply shot the first Germans they saw. Wild Bill was a great asset in discouraging such retribution, reasoning with the different groups, counseling forgiveness. Dr. Ritchie, with some coaxing, finally got Wild Bill to share some of his life's story. "We lived in the Jewish section of Warsaw," he said, "my wife, our two daughters, and our three little boys. When the Germans reached our street they lined everyone against a wall and opened up with machine guns. I begged to be allowed to die with my family, but because I spoke German they put me in a work group."

He paused, as he thought about his wife and children. Then he continued, "I had to decide right then whether to let myself hate the soldiers who had done this. It was an easy decision, really. I was a lawyer. In my practice I had seen too often what hate could do to people's minds and bodies. Hate had just killed the six people who mattered most to me in the world. I decided then that I would spend the rest of my life, whether it was a few days or many years, loving every person I came in contact with." Ritchie decided that the embrace of grace which enabled such love was what had kept this man doing so well in the face of such deprivation and was a blessing to so many others. ¹

I do not know what 2021 will bring. But I dare say that God's gracious and loving approach to you and me in the person of Jesus Christ can change our approach, our attitudes and our actions going forward. In him we experience grace upon grace. Even in difficult times, there are ways in which our cup overflows. May the echoes of Christmas, the celebration of Christ's coming, stay with us. Let's hold onto the last verse of the carol, Joy to the World:

He rules the world with truth and grace and makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness and wonders of His love and wonders of His love
And wonders and wonders of His love. ²

¹ George G. Ritchie, Return from Tomorrow, Fleming H. Revell, 1978, pp. 113-116.

² Text of "Joy to the World," by Isaac Watts, 1719.