

Dipped in Grace

[John 3:19-20]

K Karpen, Sunday, March 26, 2006
Fourth Sunday in Lent

[John 13:19–20, “Dipped in Grace,” K Karpen, Sunday, March 26, 2006]

“The light has come into the world and the people loved darkness...All who do evil hate the light and do not come into the light so their deeds may not be exposed.”

Oh that John! You gotta love John. The other 3 gospels—they’re sort of subtle. They are nicely nuanced. Not John! John is light or darkness; black or white; good or evil; in or out; you’re with us, or you’re against us. Not for John the ambiguities of life. Not for John the agonizing over choices, none of which seem exactly right, exactly good.

The gospel of John gives us the crystal-clear Jesus, the black & white image of Jesus. Biblical scholars tell us why. The early church existed for a couple of generations with no written gospel, just the stories and sayings of Jesus passed down, told from ear to ear. Told in ways that made sense to those first bands of believers in their contexts.

John’s gospel arose in a context of conflict. John’s community was struggling to figure out who they were, where they belonged at a time when they were being thrown out of their local synagogue. At a time when the political & social fabric of their world was coming unraveled. So it is hardly surprising that John gives us an image of Jesus that is so stark, so clear, so dualistic, so with us or against us, so black & white.

The thing is, I need some shades of gray. When I look around, at my life, in my context, in our world, things are too complicated, too murky for that. Black & white doesn’t do it for me. When I was first learning photography in high school and later in college, I learned, of course, in black & white. Black & white is easier than color, technically at least. But most real photographers prefer it anyway for reasons of tradition and artistic expression.

But even black & white photography isn’t about black & white. It’s all about the shades of gray. My teachers taught me that a well-balanced photograph ought to have some small part that’s black and some small part that’s really white, just to make sure you have the full scale of gray present in the picture. But black & white photography is really gray. There are all sorts of things a photographer does to bring out the right contrast, the right shades of gray. Choice of film, how you expose that film, how you develop that film, how you print the negative.

The great photographer Ansel Adams would spend all his energy making perfect negatives, big negatives, negatives that had all the shades of gray. Once he had these

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beautifully exposed and developed negatives, he didn't care who printed them. The work was done. The nuance was present.

I was no Ansel Adams. I needed luck. I needed grace. I needed to work at it. I worked hard with the negatives I made to make sure to print them with the right contrast, the right shades of gray. I'd try to choose the paper with the right contrast level. I'd expose the paper carefully through the enlarger, burning in places that needed to be darker, dodging places that needed to be lighter, playing with darkness & light to get the right shades of gray.

I'd slip the paper into a developer, usually diluted so the image could develop slowly, bringing out its richness. As I watched in the amber safelight, I'd throw it in the stop bath at just the right time. Then into the tray with the fixer for 5 minutes, but as soon as the fixer was on the photo and the image was fixed, I'd flick on the regular lights so I could admire my handiwork. Or I'd just dip it quick in the fixer, then run out in the full light of the classroom.

At least once, early on, I was so excited about this great image I made, I flicked on the lights, saw the beautiful shades of gray, then watched as the whole image went dark. “What's going on!?!” I screamed. My teacher ran in. He said, “It's still in the stop bath. You needed the fixer.”

This isn't a subtle sermon. You know where I'm going with this. I love photography. I could talk all day about photography. But I'm not talking about photography. I'm talking about grace. I'm talking about grace. Grace.

Paul puts it this way, writing to the small, struggling, conflicted Christians in the town of Ephesus, “But God, rich in mercy, out of great love even when we were dead, made us alive together with Christ—here he gets so excited he interrupts himself—by grace you have been saved. And then he goes and repeats himself, as Carla read, “By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, so no one should boast about it.”

Grace. Without grace there's no such thing as salvation. Fundamentalist friends (and I have some) sometimes get worked up about my salvation, and I wish I could be saved like them. But I'm not worried. I may not do like they do. I may not talk like they do. I may not pray the way they do, but there are days I can feel waves of grace wash over me, fixing me in my complicated life. Fixing me in my ambiguities and

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struggles in faith. Fixing me in my shades of gray, so that the things I do and the things I say and the thoughts I think, imperfect though they are, flawed, though they are, can stand exposure to the light of God.

I make so many decisions every day, little decisions as I’m walking down the street, as I’m picking up the phone, as I’m visiting at the hospital or not, as I’m working at the food pantry or not, as I’m talking to my family, or not. And I’m afraid none of them—none of them!—could really stand the light of day. Could really stand the light of God, if it weren’t for grace. God’s grace.

I spent 14 years in graduate school studying Christian ethics. I should be so ethical by now! All I can say is, thank God for grace. By now life should be so clear. Faith should be so clear. But most days, try as I might, what I mostly see are shades of gray. Thank God for grace.

Our lives are so complicated. We’re all surrounded by all these shades of gray. Thank God we’ve been dipped in the fixer. Thank God we’ve been saved by grace. And boy do we need saving. I know we’re all nice liberal Christians here. And you better believe we need saving. The gospel, at its root, is a rescue story. It’s a recovery manual. If you don’t feel like you need rescue from anything, if you don’t feel like you’re recovering from anything, you’re probably not going to get the story. Yet. You’re probably not gonna get the gospel. Yet. It’s not for you. Yet. Yet.

The gospel is about rescue. It’s not subtle. Don’t look surprised. What do you suppose the name Jesus means? God saves. It’s what God does. And God does it with grace.

Save us! And save us with grace.

Carrie Brunken and I were looking through the hymnal the other day, looking for hymns about grace. You know, there are 200 pages of hymns about grace. Biggest section of the hymn book. Out of all those grace hymns, the ones I love best are the bloody hymns. Those 19th Century washed in the blood of the lamb hymns. Not because that’s exactly my take on the atonement, but because the images square so well with my experience of being dipped in the fixer. Dipped in grace. Dripping with grace. Grace greater than my subtle and not subtle failures and shortcomings. Grace that makes the best of my shades of gray. My favorite of all—confession time—is that wonderful hymn of bloody grace, “Nothing but the Blood.”

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Thank God for the blood of the lamb. Thank God we've been dipped in the fixer. Thank God, God loves us so much that God sent to us a fixer. Someone to fix us—even us. Amen? Hallelujah.

Fix me, Jesus, fix me.