

Danged Jesus

Grace was the child of an African-American streetcar conductor and his wife. She was born in Alabama.

Grace got married in the 1930s. She moved with her family to Atlanta and developed an interest in the law.

She enrolled in night classes in the local law school, and after years of part-time study, became a lawyer.

Her family wondered what she would do with her law degree, and she shocked them by announcing her intention to run for the office of governor of Georgia in 1954; which she did.

There were 9 people running: 8 white men and Grace, but there was only one issue in that political contest.

You see, the U.S. Supreme Court had just handed down the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*. The court held that so-called "separate but equal" schools were unconstitutional, paving the way for schools to be integrated.

The eight men spoke out angrily against that decision. Only Grace thought the decision was fair and just and ought to be supported by the citizens.

Her campaign slogan was: "Say Grace at the polls."

Not many did. She finished dead last.

Her relieved family hoped she'd gotten the political bug out of her system.

She did not.

In 1962, she ran again. By then, the civil rights movement was gaining traction and any talk of people of different races getting along with each other was hotly controversial.

She finished dead last again.

But during that 1962 campaign, Grace made a stop in the small town of Louisville, Georgia.

Right in the middle of the town square, preserved with pride by the townsfolk, was an old slave market, a tragic and evil place where human beings had once been bought and sold.

Grace, standing at the exact spot where slaves had once been auctioned off, and in the midst of a hostile crowd, said this: "The old has passed away, and the new has come. This place," she said, pointing to the slave market, "represents all about our past over which we must repent. A new day is here, a day when all people, of all races, can join hands and work together."

This was provocative talk in 1962 Georgia.

Someone yelled: "Are you a communist?!"

"No," said Grace softly, "I am not."

"Then," demanded another heckler, "where did you get those danged ideas?!"

Grace thought for a minute, then pointed to the steeple of the nearby church: "I got them over there," she said, "in Sunday school." Adapted from T. Long, *Preaching From Memory to Hope*, Pp 19-20.

Sunday school is where Grace learned about Jesus, and Jesus, you see, is just full of danged ideas.

He has one today.

There he is, talking story with a good for nothing Samaritan, and a woman to boot. Where did Jesus get that danged idea?

We know.

We often don't like it, but, we know.

He got it from the heart of God.

A God who says that we human beings are all one. That there is no preferred person. That God calls each and every one of us to a place at God's table.

And something else too.

That God has an especially soft spot for the losers, the outcasts, the poor, the stupid, the confused, and the lost.

St. John, in his Gospel, does everything short of a drum roll to help us to hear, to see, what is in the heart of God.

Just last week, well educated, smart, wealthy, respected, and recently showered Nicodemus shows up at midnight to speak with Jesus.

Jesus is abrupt with him, cuts him off, and dismisses him.

Nicodemus moves from arrogance to confusion.

Know-it-alls, who think they know God, often get this treatment from God.

Today, Jesus greets a sweaty, probably smelly, uneducated Samaritan woman in the heat of the day.

Married 5 times, she's now just shacking up.

Jesus gets talking to her, and talks to her longer than with anyone else in any of the four gospels.

And she moves from ignorance to belief, from confusion to understanding.

Instead of being brusque, Jesus gently coaxes her to see, to hear, until she becomes the first evangelist in John's gospel.

She goes into her town and invites everyone to come and see the Messiah. The whole town does come, and sees, and believes!

All this missionary work by a foreigner, and a woman to boot!

That danged Jesus!

Where did he get those ideas from: ideas about community and welcoming the different and the stranger, the smelly and the crazy?

Where did he get those ideas from: his danged insistence that that if *we are his*, then *everyone is ours*?

Yet, in that reality is our salvation.

Because you see, those on the margins of any group, those who are excluded, it is they who always hold within themselves the secret for the conversion, for the salvation, of the larger group.

The excluded, the ones at the margins, they hold the fears, the rejection, the denial, that exists in the very soul of the larger group.

It's why the church always goes to the least of the brothers and sisters. It's why the church always goes even to the enemy.

That danged Jesus was on to something.

He was a genius about God, about us, about our communities.

Jesus knows, and Jesus teaches, that when any church defines itself by excluding, it is always wrong.

A church that excludes avoids its only job, which is to be Christ in the world.

Only when the church welcomes the stranger, the sinner, the immigrant, those who don't play the game our way, only then, can you and I discover, not only what is hidden, afraid or hated in our own souls, but only then can we meet the fullness of Jesus himself.

The insiders need the outsiders so the insiders can be made whole.
Adapted from Daily Grace, Daily Meditations, p. 28.

Otherwise, what we become is a sect.

A sect looks inward and strives to maintain a group who loves the same foods, who worship the same idols, who play the same games, who have a tough time with outsiders.

A sect reduces the community, eliminates the different, removes what offends, whether ideas or people.

Sects create religious clubs rather than resurrection communities.

That danged Jesus means it when he says he will have us all.

He means it when he tells the woman today that the true worship of God depends not on class or race or theology or gender but on Spirit, on Truth.

In Jesus, the old has passed away. Something new is coming, indeed, it is already here: a day when all people work together, play together, and pray together.

Opening doors, and opening hearts, can rub against the grain.

There will be suffering to be sure, but "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint, because God's love has been poured into us through the Holy Spirit." Rom. 5:4-6.

It is in that hope that perhaps we can say, all together, and every one of us:

"Thank God for that danged Jesus!"

Amen+