

Salami grace vs cross grace

John 1:1-18

A sermon for the Sunday after Christmas

In this remarkable prologue, the first 18 verses of the Gospel of John, one of the key points is something we call “grace.” What is grace? It can mean many things. “Grace” is a woman’s name. When we watch the diving competition in the Olympics, we are awed by the “graceful” dives. When we say someone is “gracious,” we mean they are kind and thoughtful.

For Christians “grace” is a key word. One of the best-known hymns is “Amazing Grace”: “Amazing grace! how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!” Luther is famous for saying “grace alone,” but “grace alone” can mislead people when there is not clarity about what grace is and isn’t.

Today I want to talk about two kinds of grace. First, there’s salami grace. You can slice it into many pieces. In the Catholic tradition, they divide grace up into natural and supernatural, created or uncreated, congruent and condign, actual and prevenient. Grace becomes like a salami that is sliced into many helping pieces. As a result, grace become a commodity, a thing that we can and are supposed to manage.

The Reformation challenged the idea of grace as a thing and recovered cross grace, that is, grace based on the cross alone. That is what is at stake in the first chapter of the Gospel of John. It is about the grace that comes because something is done. It’s a person. In that striking verse John 1:14, it says: “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.” “Full of grace and truth,” what is this about?

As you probably know, Luther considered the Gospel of John his favorite Gospel. There is something here that really is important. But it is also the second most difficult book in the New Testament, after the Book of Hebrews. The Gospel of John is deceptively simple. We think “grace and truth,” that’s easy. We know what that is. But what really is it?

It is important to see how the Gospel of John works. A few examples: When it starts out: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word as with God, and the Word was God,” that echoes in our ears. It’s like the first verse of the Bible: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” It is obviously an echo, and it’s meant to echo Genesis 1:1. But then in John 1:14 we come to this matter of “grace and truth.” In the Gospel of John “truth” has a very particular meaning. In John 14:6 Jesus says: “I am the way and the truth and the life.” Truth is a person. The same is true going back into these first eighteen verses of John 1 where it talks about life and light, John 1:4: “In him was life, and the life was the light of men.” John 11:25: “I am the resurrection and the life.” Grace is a person.

Then John 1:14 talks about glory: "We beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father." We know about that from the Old Testament, glory as the shining and the glow and the rightness. But in the Gospel of John chapter 12, Jesus is talking about what is ahead for him, the hour that is coming, and he says in verse 28: "Father, glorify thy name." And a voice comes from heaven answers: "I have glorified it and I will glorify it again." Then he talks about his cross. "Glory" in the Gospel of John is the cross. "Grace and truth" are a person.

This Gospel is really difficult. The early church didn't accept it as part of the canon until the last twenty years of the Second Century because it sounded so different, as if it were about "ideas." For example, John 1:18 states: "No one has ever God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known." This sounds as if Jesus is revealing an idea. Another example: In John 1:14: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Properly speaking, it should be "tenting" among us. Did it mean that God didn't truly (he just can't!), he didn't truly become one of us? That's the way some people have tried to do something else, to turn the Gospel into an idea, make grace into a quantity, something that we can manage, because how could God truly, truly become one of us and die?

We have been greatly helped by the Dead Sea scrolls to see what this Book is about, rather than trying to see it in other contexts, as was done in the past.

It makes a world of difference whether grace is salami grace or cross grace. Two examples: The first one has to do with the nature of the ministry. In the Catholic and Anglican traditions there is the idea that those who are ordained (the sacrament of ordination) have more grace. In fact, when one is ordained a deacon, that gives some grace, and then ordained a priest, one is given more grace, but the fullness of grace is only in the bishop. Only the bishop is able to pass grace on to someone else.

Those of us who are not ordained that way, in a sacramental, historic episcopate, may have some grace but not all of it. It makes a world of difference because in this view grace is quantified as something we can manage and manipulate.

More importantly there is this matter of grace in terms of what God does in our own lives. Many discipleship programs and Bible study groups are based on the idea that grace is quantified and can be managed. Such programs are structured as Bible studies in which you are taught that while you were given some grace in Baptism, now you can experience more grace, even the fullness of grace, by following the discipleship program being promoted. Such programs are based on the idea that there is some grace we have but we can and should get more of it, whatever way that is done.

Discipleship programs commonly emphasize certain Bible texts. In Ephesians 5:18 it says: "be filled with the Spirit." That sounds as if you have some of the Spirit but there is more of it to be had. You can "be filled with the Spirit." But it is important to realize that this use of

that text is a mistranslation. The phrase “be filled with the Spirit” is in a section of items all in parallel. There are four participles. When it says “be filled with the Spirit,” it means the same thing as “singing and making melody.” It is important to know that it doesn’t mean that there is another grade or level of grace.

Consider another text, this one in Paul, 2 Cor 3:18, where it says: “We are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another.” Ha! It seems as plain as can be that it’s talking about levels of grace and glory: “from one degree of glory into another.” But, of course, Paul also writes in Romans 8:30 that those “whom he justified he also glorified.” In other words, we have already been glorified. Past tense.

One of the mistakes that is made when people get caught up in the Second Century misunderstanding of the Gospel of John, is to think that when we talk about God, there’s the visible and the invisible. No, the Gospel of John says there is the hidden and there is the revealed. There’s a world of difference in this distinction. When it’s about God, he is hidden, but revealed in Jesus Christ. This is a different kind of thinking than that which comes from Greek thinking about visible and invisible.

To come back to the text in John 1:16, it says: “And from his fulness have we all received grace upon grace.” What?! That looks again like grace is quantitative, that there is grace and then there is more grace. It’s true that in Hebrew thinking there is that sense of using repetition to express fulness.

This is why it’s important to know the Greek behind the English translation because in the Greek what is meant is more evident. The Greek preposition “ἀντί” is like “anti,” meaning “against.” Thus, in the original Greek it’s grace against grace, not grace upon grace. You can tell this by the next verse (verse 17): “The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” The context tells you that it’s not more grace (grace that can be quantified), but that grace is in Jesus Christ, which is an event, a person, above all in the cross, once for all.

Luther writes in the last pages of his commentary on Galatians about what’s at stake in these conflicting views of grace. He talks about the Catholic tradition in which grace can be divided into quantities. He also talks about the Anabaptists of his day, those today we call the Evangelicals. He notes that outwardly they appear to be quite different. Then he uses the striking image of two wolves joined at the tail. He writes that the Catholics and the Evangelicals are like two wolves joined at the tail. Though they outwardly appear to be great opponents, they really teach the same thing. They both view grace as a thing that can be managed and manipulated.

That is the main point: There’s a huge difference between salami grace and cross grace. We have the right message in the first chapter of John, as in Paul. Grace means the person,

what God did for us in Jesus Christ, on the cross. It is all finished. Grace is not a thing, a commodity that can be sliced and manipulated. Rather, Christ has done it all. Amen