

“Grace is Amazing!”

Luke 7:36-8:3

Keith Hernandez is one of baseball's top players. He is a lifetime .300 hitter who has won numerous Golden Glove awards for excellence in fielding. He's won a batting championship for having the highest average, the Most Valuable Player award in his league, and even the World Series. Yet with all his accomplishments, he has missed out on something crucially important to him -- his father's acceptance and recognition that what he has accomplished is valuable. Listen to what he had to say in a very candid interview about his relationship with his father: "One day Keith asked his father, 'Dad, I have a lifetime 300 batting average. What more do you want?' His father replied, 'But someday you're going to look back and say, "I could have done more.'"

Sometimes there are people in our lives who don't care about our .300 batting averages...or other accomplishments. They can never seem to celebrate what is good in us. They have nothing to offer but criticism. Such people suck the joy out of life. Keith Hernandez has experienced one such person in his own father.

I call them "Yes, BUT people." They are the ones who pooh-pooh every milestone. You can tell them: "I'm learning to play the piano." And they will tell you, "Yes, BUT....you still could improve your singing." You could raise two or three beautiful children, and they will tell you: "Yes, BUT.....your sister raised four." You could start your own business and feel a sense of accomplishment, and they will say to you: "Yes, BUT.....most people your age have already made a lot more money." You could go back to school and earn a baccalaureate degree. And they will tell you: "Yes, BUT...don't expect employers to coming knocking at your door."

"Yes, BUT" people can never really seem to celebrate because they find little that is worth celebrating. "Yes, BUT" people don't compliment others because there is so little that they find complimentary. "Yes, BUT" people are wet blankets. They are exhausting to be around.

In the church of Jesus Christ, we are not called to be "Yes, BUT" people. Rather, we are called to be people of **grace**. Illogical grace. Extravagant grace. Counter-cultural grace. Amazing grace.

Most dictionaries define *grace* as "unmerited acceptance or favor." It is giving someone something good even if they may not 100% deserve it. It is, in contemporary usage, "Cutting someone some slack."

That is what is taking place in our story today from Luke's Gospel. Jesus is a dinner guest at the home of a Pharisee, a prominent religious leader in that city. While he is sitting at the table, a woman enters the house and falls down at Jesus' feet. Obviously full of sadness, she bathes Jesus' feet with her tears and then dries them with her hair. Also full of reverence, she anoints Jesus' feet with an expensive ointment.

A woman comes in and essentially what she does, is she approaches the Son of God in an act of worship. And how did the good religious folks respond? Did anyone put a bulletin in her hand and invite her into a pew? Was there any attempt to make her a part of the Christ community?

No. Instead, they talked about her past. They thought of her as "no good." One of the clergymen in attendance said to himself, "This woman is a sinner."

Jesus knew what they were all thinking, and so He says: "Simon, (not Simon Peter) I have something to say to you." And then He told a story about a banker who had a couple of different loans out. One guy carried a debt of 50 denarii and the other guy a debt of 500 denarii. When neither man could repay their debt, the banker cancelled each man's debt. And then Jesus asked: "Which of these two men is likely to love the banker more?" To which the Pharisee replied, "Well, I suppose the one who owed more."

Jesus said, "You got that right! And since I have been here this evening, this woman has shown me a lot more love than what you have. Granted, she may not have lived the upright life that you have lived....and for that reason she loves me more than you do.....and I say that her sins are forgiven."

This woman wanted to turn from her sin and to turn toward Jesus. This is what is known as "repentance." That should have been welcomed by the people gathered around Jesus that evening. It wasn't. Instead, they wanted to "Yes, BUT" her right out of the room.

Several years ago Tony Campolo wrote a book entitled *The Kingdom of God Is a Party*. In it he tells of flying to Hawaii to speak at a conference. He describes checking into his hotel and trying to get some sleep. Unfortunately, his internal clock wakes him at 3:00 AM. The night is dark, the streets are silent, the world is asleep, but Tony is wide awake and his stomach is growling.

He gets up and prowls the streets looking for a place to get some bacon and eggs for an early breakfast. Everything is closed except for a grungy dive in an alley. He goes in and sits down at the counter. The guy behind the counter comes over and asks, "What d'ya want?"

Well, Tony isn't so hungry anymore so eyeing some donuts under a plastic cover he says, "I'll have a donut and black coffee."

As he sits there munching on his donut and sipping his coffee at 3:30, in walk eight or nine provocative, loud prostitutes just finished with their night's work. They plop down at the counter and Tony finds himself uncomfortably surrounded by this group of smoking, swearing hookers. He gulps his coffee, planning to make a quick getaway. Then the woman next to him says to her friend, "You know what? Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm gonna be 39."

To which her friend nastily replies, "So what d'ya want from me? A birthday party? Huh? You want me to get a cake, and sing happy birthday to you?"

The first woman says, "Aw, come on, why do you have to be so mean? Why do you have to put me down? I'm just sayin' it's my birthday. I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should I have a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"

Well, when Tony Campolo heard that, he said he made a decision. He sat and waited until the women left, and then he asked the guy at the counter, "Do they come in here every night?"

"Yeah," he answered.

"The one right next to me," he asked, "she comes in every night?"

"Yeah," he said, "that's Agnes. Yeah, she's here every night. She's been comin' here for years. Why do you want to know?"

"Because she just said that tomorrow is her birthday. What do you think? Do you think we could maybe throw a little birthday party for her right here in the diner?"

A kind of smile crept over the man's face. "That's great," he says, "yeah, that's great. I like it." He turns to the kitchen and shouts to his wife, "Hey, come on out here. This guy's got a great idea. Tomorrow is Agnes' birthday and he wants to throw a party for her right here."

His wife comes out. "That's terrific," she says. "You know, Agnes is really nice. She's always trying to help other people and nobody does anything nice for her."

So they make their plans. Tony says he'll be back at 2:30 the next morning with some decorations and the man, whose name turns out to be Harry, says he'll make a cake.

At 2:30 the next morning, Tony is back. He has crepe paper and other decorations and a sign made of big pieces of cardboard that says, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" They decorate the place from one end to the other and get it looking great. Harry had gotten the word out on the streets about the party and by 3:15 it seemed that every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. There were hookers wall to wall.

At 3:30 on the dot, the door swings open and in walks Agnes and her friend. Tony has everybody ready. They all shout and scream "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" Agnes is absolutely flabbergasted. She's stunned, her mouth falls open, her knees started to buckle, and she almost falls over.

And when the birthday cake with all the candles is carried out, that's when she totally loses it. Now she's sobbing and crying. Harry, who's not used to seeing a prostitute cry, gruffly mumbles, "Blow out the candles, Agnes. Cut the cake."

So she pulls herself together and blows them out. Everyone cheers and yells, "Cut the cake, Agnes, cut the cake!"

But Agnes looks down at the cake and, without taking her eyes off it, slowly and softly says, "Look, Harry, is it all right with you if...I mean, if I don't...I mean, what I want to ask, is it OK if I keep the cake a little while? Is it all right if we don't eat it right away?"

Harry doesn't know what to say so he shrugs and says, "Sure, if that's what you want to do. Keep the cake. Take it home if you want."

"Oh, could I?" she asks. Looking at Tony she says, "I live just down the street a couple of doors; I want to take the cake home, is that okay? I'll be right back, honest."

She gets off her stool, picks up the cake, and carries it high in front of her like it was the Holy Grail. Everybody watches in stunned silence and when the door closes behind her, nobody seems to know what to do. They look at each other. They look at Tony.

So Tony gets up on a chair and says, "What do you say that we pray together?" And there they are in a hole-in-the-wall greasy spoon, half the prostitutes in Honolulu, at 3:30 AM listening to Tony Campolo as he prays for Agnes. Tony recalls, "I prayed that her life would be changed, and that God would be good to her."

When he's finished, Harry leans over, and with a trace of hostility in his voice, he says, "Hey, you never told me you was a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to anyway?"

Tony answers him quietly, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning."

Harry thinks for a moment, and in a mocking way says, "No you don't. There ain't no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. Yep, I'd join a church like that."

Friends, that is the church that we are called to be. Please don't take these illustrations too literally -- I'm not preaching about parties. I'm preaching about grace. About choosing to love the unlovable. About welcoming people into the community of Jesus Christ.

The truth is, we all need grace. Scripture tells us that everyone falls short of God's standard. That is why Christ came to this earth....to pick us up and carry us the rest of the way. And as long as Christ has done that for you and for me, let us be an inviting community that welcomes everyone into that journey.

Amen.