



May 13, 2007

Acts 20:17-24  
**Staying the Course**  
M. Craig Barnes

The last words that someone tells you are important words. You tend to hang on to them. They are important because they are ways of keeping the person with you long after he or she is gone. And they are important because usually last words are measured carefully. No doubt, that is why Luke preserved Paul's last words before he left the Church at Ephesus. They provide an abiding testimony of Paul's vision not only for his life, but also for the Christian Church. *If only I may finish my course. . . to testify to the good news of God's grace.*

This word "grace" comes up often around the church. When we baptize our children, we identify with them with this grace. When young people pass through Confirmation with a declaration of faith, what their faith is confirming is the grace they received in baptism. And when the elders of this church make decisions, they work at figuring out what is the most grace-filled choice. What we have been trying to do here, for long before I arrived, is to proclaim grace.

It is such a wonderful word, but I find that grace is not always understood. It is easy for us to assume a very sentimental idea about this great doctrine of the faith. Many believe that grace is a cheap out for our sins—that it only means God lets us off the hook. When we say someone is gracious, we typically think that it means he or she is polite and would never mention something unpleasant. But that is not the Biblical understanding.

Grace, as defined by our Lord and the great apostle Paul, means that God gives us what we need and not what we deserve. Maybe that is the real reason we have a hard time understanding grace. How can we not get what we deserve? Even the idea seems, well, offensive to us.

We live in a world of deal-making. That's what we understand. If you study, you graduate from school, and if you study hard, you graduate with honors. That's the deal. If you work, you get a paycheck, and if you work hard, you get a promotion. If you obey the law, you stay free, and if you break the law, you go to jail. If you pay the price, you can take the new sofa home, and if you don't like it, you can return the sofa and get your money back. That's the deal. All of these deals at least imply a contract. You fulfill your responsibility, and the other persons will have to fulfill their responsibilities. That all makes sense to us. You can improve the deal, renegotiate the deal, and you can even try to break the deal. But we cannot imagine how to conduct life without a deal.

By the time we are adults, deal-making has become pretty much foundational to life. We assume that not only the teacher, employer, and the guy who sold the sofa are obligated to their side of the deal, but we also apply this assumption to our relationships. However, it is then that we find the limits of our deal-making arrangements. How are you going to factor love into the deal? No relationship grows through people saying, "You fulfill your responsibilities to me, and I will fulfill mine to you; you give me what I deserve, and I'll give you what you deserve. That's the deal." It's a deal no one can keep. It is only a matter of time before someone fails at his or her responsibilities. We hurt each other all of the time by saying "You don't deserve my love." But no one deserves love. Love is a commitment. It is an ordering of one's life around the other. Deserving has nothing to do with it.

When it comes to the pure expressions of love, whether it is the love of spouses or the love of friends, deal-making is meaningless. Love is given only as grace—what we need, not what we deserve.

On Mother's Day we honor the most primal illustration we have of such grace-oriented love. When I ask young mothers to describe their experiences, they often speak of surprises. Two things surprise them. The first is the power of the love they feel for their babies, which is so strong that it breaks their hearts wide open with more compassion than they knew they had. That's a good thing because the second surprise they describe is how much this kid costs. Their whole lives have been reoriented around the baby.

It is meaningless to speak of what a small, crying, pooping, demanding child who keeps you up all night deserves. And as the child grows, frankly, so do the demands. The work is never done, the hours are terrible, and the huge needs of the child always jump in front of everything else. The giving and sacrificing just continue until the children are teenagers, and you are again staying up all night—only this time it is the mother who is crying. But along the way you play, cuddle, laugh, and say everyday, "I love you." It was never deserved. It was always a needed grace.

Even if your mother was not good at loving so graciously, even if she was too hurt to love well, still the absence reveals the longing. In our souls we all know that love is always and only a grace.

Now let us consider the love of God who, according to Isaiah, loves us as a mother comforts her child (66:13). What kind of deal would any of us dare make with God to get his love? Who really wants what he or she deserves from God? The blessing is that God gives us grace—a decision, a commitment to love no matter what. Is this not what the cross of Jesus proclaims? Is it not God's act of stretching out his arms to say, "I will always love you"? No sacrifice is too great. He has even gone to the cross to love you.

To what end, though, has God been dying to love you? Not to make you a self-indulgent, spoiled, spiritual brat who thinks you deserve to be doted on. No loving mother would let her child think that. Instead, she disciplines the child to realize that it is not all about you—and that is also love. So let us remember that God's grace does not mean he gives us what we want. It means he gives us what we need, and sometimes what we need is to hear, "No." Sometimes grace arrives as an interruption, as discipline, but it is always love. And the purpose of this love is to get us outside of ourselves. From the time of Abraham, we were told that we were blessed to be a blessing. We were loved to be loving. We received grace in order to give grace.

We live in a society that is far from gracious. There are so many demands and deals to keep. If you don't do well at all these deals, it is easy to think you are a failure. If you do well, it is easy to think you are a success. Either way, your heart gets confused thinking that life is about getting what you deserve. From there it's a very small step to think that the poor are getting what they deserve. Does a crack cocaine baby deserve to be born addicted? Does any child deserve to grow up on violent streets? Does a mother deserve to sleep in a car with her children?

Stay the course, the Apostle Paul tells us. Finish your course in life as it began, testifying to the grace you have received. You were born by grace (no one deserves to be born), and hopefully there was a woman in your life who raised you by grace. Stay the course of being gracious.

Someone in your workplace better know how to think beyond deal-making because a day will come when a colleague is in trouble and in need of grace. When a job is lost, or there is trouble at home, the skills with making deals are meaningless. Someone in your neighborhood better know how to have a cup of coffee with someone who is lonely. Someone in your school better know how to think about more than grades. Someone in your family better know how to return love for hurt. And someone in the city better know how to demonstrate grace to the poor.

Let us pray that it is this church. Let us join others in this community who are devoted to giving people what they need. Let us give at work and at home to those like us and to those who are not, to those who know they need to receive and even to those who make giving difficult. Let us stay the course the people of faith have been on since the days of Abraham, Jesus, the Apostle Paul, and our mothers. Let us be a people known for our grace.

The alternative is to end life very successful and all alone. And that is a lousy deal. Amen.