



Glorious Grace Freely Bestowed **Ephesians 1:3-14; John 1:1-18** **Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (January 2, 2022)**

In a 2000 movie titled *Pay It Forward*, reporter Chris Chandler arrives in a neighborhood where members of a family are kept hostage in their home. As he begins to question the police, the hostage-taker crashes through the garage door of the home with a large SUV and rams into Chandler's vintage Mustang, which is parked on the street. The police takes off in hot pursuit, leaving Chandler behind to bemoan his mangled car.

As he laments, a well-groomed lawyer appears besides him. The lawyer asks if Chandler would like his brand-new Jaguar. Chandler thanks the lawyer for the opportunity to borrow his car. "No, you don't understand: the car is yours." He tells Chandler he has had a run of luck lately and he doesn't need it; Chandler can have it.

Chandler, obviously, can't believe what he is hearing. Even as the lawyer walks away in the rain, Chandler shouts after him and calls him a freak for giving him the car. Were there strings attached somehow? Was the car rigged with explosives?

But it wasn't. It was a perfectly beautiful new car, and it was a gift. What would you do in his shoes? How easy is it for you to accept a gift without questioning the motives? Or to say "Thank You" without a sense of obligation and the need to pay the favor back? Does the gift speak of one's worth or does it speak of the generosity of the giver?

Listen in as Lutheran theologian John Caputo imagines a conversation with grace.¹

Grace: Hi, I'm Grace.

Me: I wasn't expecting you. What brings you here today?

Grace: I want you to have this gift.

Me: Thank you, but you really shouldn't have. That's not necessary.

Grace: But I want to. I want you to have this gift.

Me: I'm sorry but I don't have anything for you.

Grace: I don't want anything from you. I'm giving you a gift.

Me: But why? I don't deserve this.

Grace: So. This isn't about what you do or don't deserve. It's a gift.

Me: I don't understand. Why are you doing this?

Grace: It's just what I do. I am Grace gracing. I am Gift gifting.

Me: I will never be able to repay you.

Grace: I don't want you to repay me. I want you to accept the gift.

Me: That's very generous of you.

Grace: I'm not trying to be generous. I'm trying to give you a gift.

Me: I'll never forget this.

¹ Caputo, *Hoping Against Hope*, 49.

Grace: Please, forget it. Just enjoy the gift.

Me: One day I'll return the favor. I promise.

Grace: You don't owe me a thing.

Me: I'll be forever in your debt.

Grace: I don't want you to be in debt to me. Just take the gift.

Me: What's the catch?

Grace: There is no catch. It's free. It's on me.

Me: Surely there's something I can do for you.

Grace: How can I convince you? All I want is for you to have this gift.

“Free doesn't compute in a world in which you are expected to pay for what you get. It doesn't add up in a world in which you are supposed to earn and deserve what you have. Free just doesn't make sense (...) in a world in which you must pay off your debts, and return the favor. This isn't, however, only about money. It's also about the expectations and transactions in the relationships we have with each other. It's also about how we love. It's also about how we perceive our standing with God, our assumptions about how God works, and the way we sometimes pray.”²

The word “grace” appears several times in today's gospel. The biblical and theological meaning of grace is “love freely and generously given without obligation and beyond all expectation.” Grace, in this sense, is the character and activity of God in relation to human beings. The most profound demonstration of God's grace is the birth of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh and the Light of the world. What a gift God has given us by wanting to be closer to us in flesh and blood?

God's participation in our humanity, by sharing our life in the world, testifies to God's desire for deep personal connection with all human beings. God is not only close to us but chooses to be born and live among the least and the last. God's gifts through Jesus and the Spirit provide us with all that we need, consistently and abundantly. We are cleared of all sin and desire to sin and empowered to praise God with our life. To praise God is our glory and our reward. When we are oriented toward God and love God with all our heart, mind, and strength we get to know God more deeply, love God more intimately, and walk with God more closely. This is “grace upon grace”, says the gospel writer John.

But...do we trust that free gift?

There is darkness in the world, the first chapter of the gospel of John tells us. By darkness here is meant ignorance, oblivion and apathy to the plight of millions, and a disordinate appetite for power and possessions no matter the hurt and suffering it causes to others. That darkness, John tells us, does not know God' Son.

But there are also those among the “called” who have not accepted him. This, in my view, is a harder truth to hear and to swallow.

I can understand darkness as seen as the total opposite to Light. I can also understand that darkness can be, in this case, a metaphor for a total involvement with self, a persistent curving inward as Martin Luther used to say, and not really aware of anything else outside of oneself, a sort of psychological and spiritual black hole.³

² Episcopal priest, Mike Marsh's blog: [Interrupting the Silence](#)

³ [Incurvatus in Se - Mockingbird \(mbird.com\)](#)

This view is obviously incorrect from a woman's perspective. Women in general do not have the self-absorbing tendencies of men but have an essential connectedness to others. The issue for women has been rather the opposite: the necessity to maintain the inter-related nature of society has led to a lack of consideration for the self, and the darkness of the black whole can be considered as operating in reverse, as an expected self-emptying with a grave loss of self. For women, in other words, darkness may be identified as becoming displaced from their centeredness.⁴

What I have a hard time to understand is the rejection of Jesus once one has acknowledged him.

I am not talking about the lack of acknowledgment of him by other religious systems. Jews respect Jesus as a great man but not as the awaited Messiah. Muslims honor Jesus as a great prophet but not as the Son of God. Other religions and philosophical systems highlight his teachings for their benefit to humanity.

What I am certainly saddened by is the lack of acknowledgment of God in Jesus as demonstrated by the practical actions and attitudes of some Christians.

Without even needing to discuss the gross distortions of the faith evident in the ideological merging of Christianity and nationalism,⁵ we Christians have a hard time following even the most basic examples and teachings of Jesus. In so many ways, the hill to Golgotha is so steep.

Jesus has radically dedicated his life to God, his Abba. Born the least among the last, he has embraced simplicity, humility, and weakness as his forming principles. Those principles reveal a total trust in God's providence, faithfulness, and closeness. Jesus recommends following him, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He wants us to learn from him, who is gentle and humble of heart. Only in him we may have power and life in abundance.⁶

But what does he want in return? Where is the catch?

The principles he embraces are hard to follow in a culture shaped in materialism, self-absorption, and an irreverent hunger for power. What our cultural sentiment seems to reveal is a fundamental grip into the fear of death from which people seek respite in so many desperate ways.

No doubt, we cannot sustain a life fixated on the ways of the world and at the same time choosing a disciple's life. In this case, it's an either-or proposal. Either we have a washed out and nominal Christianity or we respond to the call to be transformed in the Spirit of Jesus by which we renounce the former life and embrace Christ, the New Adam.

Yet, Christianity is not easy. Even when we decide to commence the holy journey, our old way of thinking creeps up.

I am aware that when I fall into old egocentric habits, I have lost sight of my election to "beloved child of God." That adoption status tells me that since God is my Creator and Father/Mother I will never lack what I need. It's when I am grounded in God's grace that I am free of fear and capable of compassion for others. May the new year be a time of renewal in appreciation and gratitude to God for all the gifts God showers upon us. Amen.

⁴ [C:\WW Manuscripts\Back Issues\8-4 Feminism\8-4 Hampson.wpd \(luthersem.edu\)](C:\WW Manuscripts\Back Issues\8-4 Feminism\8-4 Hampson.wpd (luthersem.edu)). The self-emptying required of the Christian is directed to the selfishness of the ego.

⁵ [What Is Christian Nationalism? | Christianity Today](#) and [Christians Against Christian Nationalism Statement — Christians Against Christian Nationalism](#)

⁶ [If God is almighty, why do we suffer? | The Christian Century](#)