

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 6, 2011**

BREAKING THE CYCLE OF UNGRACE

Ephesians 4:25-32

I'm not going to preach as long as usual today, because we have a not-to-be-missed date to meet with the Lord Jesus at the Lord's table to receive the tokens of His grace in the sacrament of communion. But I do want to tell you a story. It is a true story. It is a sad story, a story which shows the heart-breaking and heart-hardening legacy of ungrace in the life of a family. It is from Philip Yancey's book *What's So Amazing About Grace?*

At the center of the story is a woman named Daisy, born over a century ago, in 1898, one of ten children in a working class family in Chicago. Daisy's father was a mean, abusive alcoholic who barely provided for his family. Daisy remembered the day her father demanded that her mother leave the house – for good. The children all pleaded with her not to go, but their father refused to back down. Daisy and her siblings watched through the bay window as their mother walked down the sidewalk, shoulders drooping, a suitcase in each hand, growing smaller and smaller until she completely disappeared from view.

Though some of the children eventually rejoined their mother and some went to live with other relatives, Daisy stayed with her father. But she grew up, as Yancey says, “with a hard knot of bitterness inside her, a tumor of hatred over what he had done to the family.” It is the kind of malignancy that can kill you, if the cancer is not excised.

After the children had all entered adulthood, the father disappeared. No one knew where. And no one cared. Years later, to everyone's surprise, the father resurfaced. Cold and hungry, he had responded to an invitation to receive Jesus as his Savior and Lord one night at a Salvation Army rescue mission. In Yancey's words, “he was more surprised than anybody when the ‘sinner's prayer’ actually worked.” He felt like a different person. He sobered up. He began studying the Bible. For the first time in his life he felt loved and accepted. He felt clean. Now he was looking up his children, one by one, to ask their forgiveness. He couldn't defend what he had done or the way he had been. He couldn't undo the past or make it right. But he was sorry, more sorry than they could possibly imagine.

His children, now middle-aged with families of their own, were naturally skeptical. They doubted his sincerity. They were wary of his motives. But eventually they all reconciled with him. All except Daisy, who had long ago vowed she would never again speak to “that man.” As painful memories of her father's drunken rages came flooding back, Daisy said, “he can't undo all that just by saying ‘I'm sorry.’” She wanted nothing to do with him.

Though the father had given up drinking, his liver had been damaged beyond repair. The law of sowing and reaping had caught up with him. For the last five years of his life, he lived with one of his daughters, one of Daisy's sisters, just eight houses down the street from Daisy. True to her vow, Daisy never stopped in to see her dying father. Not even once. Forgiveness, for Daisy, was never an option.

All her life, she was determined not to be like her father. Consequently, she never touched a drop of alcohol. Yet she ruled her own family with a form of the same tyranny she had experienced as a child. She would yell at her six children, telling them, “You’ve ruined my life!” Some nights she gave all six of them whippings just to make a point. She knew they had done something wrong even if she hadn’t caught them. Contrary to her name, she was hard as steel. She never apologized and never forgave. Ungrace was a way of life for her.

Just as Daisy had resolved not to be like her father, so Daisy’s daughter Margaret was determined to be different from her mother. But she, too, ended up in the grip of ungrace, unable to break free of its chains. One day, in total exasperation with her teenage son Michael, she screamed at him in a fit of anger: “I never want to see you again as long as I live!” Twenty-six years later, when Philip Yancey told the story in his book, Margaret still had not seen her son. And the same bitter root of ungrace showed up and grew up to cause trouble in Michael’s life, too. No surprise there.

Yancey writes: “Like a spiritual defect encoded in the family DNA, ungrace gets passed on in an unbroken chain. Ungrace does its work quietly and lethally, like a poisonous, undetectable gas. A father dies unforgiven. A mother who once carried a child in her own body does not speak to that child for half (the child’s) life. The toxin steals on, from generation to generation.”

Not everything in the story makes sense. Margaret, so consumed with bitterness and unforgiveness toward her son after all these years, is, according to Yancey, “a devout Christian who studies the Bible every day.” Just goes to show that we don’t always live consistently as Christians, do we? On one occasion, Yancey spoke with Margaret about the parable we looked at last Sunday, the parable of the prodigal son (or, the parable of the loving father). “Do you hear its message of forgiveness?” Yancey asked. If you ask me, it is a story that shows God’s prodigal grace which comes free of charge to people who don’t deserve it – like both the younger son who had gone off and wasted his inheritance, *and* the older son who never left home, but needed grace just as much.

Margaret had obviously thought about the parable, Yancey says. She knew it came right after the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin in Luke 15. Margaret said the whole point of the parable of the prodigal is to show how people are different from both inanimate objects (coins) and from animals (sheep). “People have free will,” she said. “They have to be morally responsible. That boy [the younger son] had to come crawling back on his knees. He had to repent. That was Jesus’ point.”

But that was *not* Jesus’ point. It is true, the son returned home of his own free will, after he came to his senses. The main focus of the story, though, is the extravagant love of the father, the love expressed in his compassion for his son, the love which prompted the father to run to meet his son, to throw his arms around him and kiss him. The son tried to confess his wrongdoing. He had a speech all prepared. But the father interrupted his speech to get the party started. Sadly, Margaret couldn’t (or wouldn’t) see it.

Can you imagine what a world without forgiveness would be like? A world in which every child held onto grudges against his or her parents, and every family bequeathed this legacy of ungrace to future generations? I've shared with you the story of the stranglehold ungrace had on just one family. "I never want to see you again as long as I live!" Margaret yelled at her son. She got her wish, as Yancey points out, and now she suffers from it every day. That is what ungrace does. That is what a world without forgiveness would be like. It is a tragedy, a terrible tragedy, played out in a million different places in a million different families, marriages and other relationships, and even in churches where the roots of bitterness and resentment, pride and unforgiveness have been permitted to grow.

The Bible says: "There is a way that seems right to a man" (Proverbs 14:12; 16:25). Too often, that way leads right to the heart-attitudes and actions we are told to "get rid of" in Ephesians 4:31, things such as bitterness, rage, ungodly anger, quarreling, slander, and malice. We are to make room for none of these in our lives. There is no place for any of them in the lives of Christ's followers. Instead, as verse 32 says, we are to treat one another with kindness and compassion, with hearts that are tender, not hard. We are to forgive each other – whatever offenses or grievances we may have (Colossians 3:13) – just as God Himself has forgiven us in Christ. The word used for *forgive* in verse 32 is the word *charizomai*, which literally means "to act in grace toward" another person. So, we are to act in grace toward each other, just as God in Christ has acted in grace toward us. It is a grace thing.

It takes forgiveness – acting in grace toward those who have wronged us – to break the cycle, to shatter the chains, to begin to heal the wounds, of ungrace. I don't know what or whom you may need to forgive in your life, or if you need to seek forgiveness from someone. I don't know if there is a legacy of unforgiveness in your family which has been passed down from one generation to the next, which needs the healing power of God's grace. I don't know if you have allowed the seeds of bitterness or anger or hostility to take root and bear the fruit of ungrace in your life. I don't know if you're holding onto bitterness toward someone who is no longer living. You can still forgive that person. It is not too late.

I don't know if there is someone to whom you need to go and ask forgiveness right now – even before you take part in communion today. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that if you come to worship, and there remember that a brother or sister in Christ has something against you, you should *stop* what you're doing – even in worship, *go and seek to be reconciled* to your sister or brother, and *then come back* to offer your worship to God (see Matthew 5:23-24). Maybe some of us need to do this. If the Holy Spirit is speaking to your heart today, don't neglect the prompting of the Spirit. Don't put it off.

I know forgiveness is not an easy thing. Elizabeth O'Connor wrote that "forgiveness is always harder than the sermons make it out to be" (From *Cry Pain, Cry Hope*). I accept that. Forgiving may be a lot harder than preachers make it sound sometimes, but it is still possible. It is necessary, too, as essential to our spiritual well being as oxygen is to our physical life. It is God's gift to us. It is the gift of His grace, which He has freely given us in His Son Jesus Christ. And forgiveness is God's provision to break the chains of ungrace which too often holds us – and our families – captive.

Do not let what happened to Daisy, Margaret, Michael and their family happen to you or your family. If there is a pattern of ungrace in your family, do not perpetuate it. Do not allow it to continue. If you have allowed the bitter root of ungrace to grow up in your heart, ask the Lord Jesus to pull it out and cast it away. Act with grace toward one another. Choose the way of forgiveness. Show kindness and compassion to one another, forgiving each other, just as God has forgiven you in Christ (Ephesians 4:32). Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.

(Acknowledgement: Much of this message is adapted from Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, pp. 73-114).