

## Just Grace

The Rev. John Weicher  
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22  
Sunday, January 13, 2019  
© John Weicher

I don't remember a word of it. I wish I did. I wish I had a paper copy stashed somewhere, an old print out, printed out on computer before Microsoft Windows existed, back when the paper had perforated holes on the sides to keep it on track and then neatly folded and torn off afterwards. When the time comes to clean out my parents' home, hopefully years and years from now, maybe I'll stumble across an elusive copy, stashed somewhere in the basement, where the computer used to sit next to the typewriter, or maybe in my leftover things put up in the attic when I moved out for good during the fall after college. I wrote my confirmation statement of faith in the spring of 1992, as I was finishing 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and I can almost see it on the ancient screen in my mind's eye, but alas, not even a phrase comes into focus.

It was borne out of questions. You may not be surprised to find out that I was the kind of youth who was at church most every week, Sunday morning or Sunday evening, or more likely, both. We were Weichers, and that's what Weichers did. And I liked it, in general, even if my best friends weren't my church friends. I especially liked – loved, even – my associate pastor for youth and Christian education, Paul. I had a million questions for Paul over the years. Factual questions. Contrafactual questions. Why questions. So what questions. All sorts of questions in the way that a certain type of young person has all sorts of questions. All sorts of questions in the way, that if we're honest, I suspect we all have for anyone, like my pastor Paul, who has enough religious authority to differentiate themselves. Isn't that the way we are? Whether it's Beyoncé or Ellen DeGeneres, or Walter Brueggemann or Brene Brown, or Nadia Bolz-Weber or Michelle Obama, whenever we sense someone who seems to have it figured out, we are filled with expectation. Whether it's just a hint of spirituality or a full-blown faith, our hearts overflow with questions for them. That's why we watch the shows and buy the books and download the podcasts and stream the songs. What do you know? Who is God? Why are things like this? Do you know God personally? Like, for real, personally?

They are the same questions that the people then had for John – what? Who? Why? Do you? It turns out that this is a very old human response that we're talking about – the need to cling onto anyone with an extra touch of the Divine on them. I bet John the Baptist would have had the highest rated podcast in ancient Israel, after making the switch from an afternoon radio show. And John is all too happy to answer all the questions, prophet, professional talker, intimate friend of Jesus, that he is. John is distinctive in scripture, because he's one of the very few people whose sins and limitations are not revealed alongside of their goodness. Think about it. For all of David's greatness, he's a philanderer and a political manipulator. The king-making prophet Samuel isn't a great father. Esther can be a bit of a scaredy cat. Peter lacks faith sometimes and never learned to swim. Job. Won't. Stop. Talking. But John? John is pretty good – bold, honest, and he won't be defined by the system or kowtow to the Man. John knows right from the start who Jesus is. So, he's the right person to ask. Their faith in him is well placed. He is genuinely humble about who he is and just as genuinely deferential to God,

pointing to Jesus instead of himself. He speaks with power and ferocity. He speaks of separating the good from the bad and farm implements and fire, lots of fire, more fire than all the baptismal water he's standing in, it seems.

John has so very much to say, and as we'll get to in a few moments, it seems he's wrong. Or at least not 100% right. Or something. John would have us believe that God is about dominance and worthiness, judgment and unquenchable fire. God is dynamic and extreme, powerful beyond measure. And God is using that power to separate good wheat from bad chaff. If you're not up to speed on how that process works, winnowing forks were used to toss harvested wheat in the air. The good wheat, which is heavier, settles back on the ground, but the lighter chaff, which includes the non-edible bits of the plant and other impurities, is then blown away by the wind, leaving the good wheat. That makes a lot of sense. But then John adds fire, unquenchable fire, which reminds me of the wildfires we've seen out west in recent months. God isn't just blowing the bad people away, but burning them down like so many homes and trees and cars and lives. God is about the great evening out. God is about flipping things upside down. The powerful will be burned up. The weak will be exalted. There are going to be winners and losers. The losers look a lot like those religious leaders and politicians who have let us get so far away from what's right. The losers are the ones standing for themselves and standing in the way of God. The losers are John's enemies. But beware, my friends. Beware when anyone tells you that God is going to burn up their enemies, even when it's John the Baptist talking. There's a fine line between identifying those who work against God and identifying those who also work against you as working against God. It's a key distinction. That's where disasters and crises come from. Power and separation and unquenchable fire.

For all his baptizing, John should know a little better. Baptism isn't about what we say. Confirmation, yes, but baptism, no. Instead, baptism is about what God says. You've heard John's words a bunch, so let's listen to God again. "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." It's like night and day. God speaks words of love, pleasure, approval, contentment. There is no fire to be seen here, no wheat to be winnowed. Indeed, what grander blessing could there be? "You are my child, the beloved; with you I am well pleased." In a world where even our best leaders and most faithful authorities, religious or otherwise, speak of power, disconnection and fire, we hear God instead express approval, satisfaction and love. It's worth noticing that it's not just words, either. The Holy Spirit descends on Jesus looking like a dove. Just like the dove that Noah sent out from the ark, once upon a time. Just like the dove that is the symbol for peace, for hope, for the covenant, the promise that God will no longer overwhelm the world in divine anger but instead provide dry ground that everyone can walk upon together. The only way it could be clearer is if a Genesis-style rainbow was referenced, too. Maybe the dove is rainbow colored and Matthew just omits that detail.

Baptism is just grace. Just God's expression of contentment and pleasure. Just divine love. Just the promise that no one's getting burned up or drowned out. Just blessing. There will be other days that go beyond grace, spurring us to action, to be doers and servants and prophets like dear, old John. But those days are not today. Today it's just beloved children with whom our God is well pleased. It's startling for its simplicity. We are all well trained in suspicion and nuance and snark. They are the currency of our time, and we are quite rich. It is easy to keep looking and listening until we find some of suspicion, nuance or snark in what God is saying.

But there is none. It has all been washed off like we're standing in a river, blown away like unusable, impure chaff, leaving the heavier, better, essential baptism. Baptism is just grace.

Perhaps we need some of that. Perhaps our love reserves are running low or no one is well pleased with you or me these days. Perhaps we are picking our way through a field of shattered promises or we have not seen a rainbow-colored dove in ages. Perhaps the new year is a lot like the old one, hard and broken and shut down. Just grace and love and approval – perhaps we are in need of these. Just grace and love and approval at the table, around which we will gather to take and eat and drink in remembrance. Just grace and love and approval from the font, with divine promises made when most of us were still too young to defend ourselves. Just grace and love and approval from your congregation for you confirmands, whether you are loving every minute of confirmation or holding on by your fingertips to the possibility of maybe having a little faith. What John the Baptist misses, and I miss, and we all miss, is that it doesn't matter what's on our computer screen. It doesn't matter if we can remember it. It doesn't matter if we have a statement of faith stashed somewhere in our folks' place or a resume of good deeds a mile long and three feet wide. God approves of your existence. God loves you deeply. God is so well pleased with you. It's just grace. Amen.