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Ephesians 4:29–32, ESV

²⁹ Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹ Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³² Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Ashes and grace.

I like to talk about grace and forgiveness, and I am going to do it again, but I have something very specific I want to say today. So, please bear with me; I hope my message will be useful. Let me begin with this. On Ash Wednesday, our service was online. It was a joy to produce it and many people viewed the video. But because we weren't having an in-person Ash Wednesday service, it made it all the more important to me to deliver ashes at the hospital. I always volunteer to do this, and the way it works is that the day before Ash Wednesday, an email is sent to the entire hospital staff that says that at noon in the chapel, Buzz will be there to administer ashes if that is something you would like. Normally, ten or so people might come. But this Ash Wednesday, thirty or so people showed up. Then, I casually walked the corridors of all the units in the hospital, quietly asking

if people wanted ashes, and another ten or so people received them. In past years, the people who have gotten ashes have been hard core church goers, people who would have attended their own Ash Wednesday church services if they hadn't been on-shift at the hospital. What's interesting is that this Ash Wednesday I had people tell me that they were raised Christian but had drifted away. I ended doing more than just administering ashes. I talked about grace, forgiveness, regeneration, about how we can reclaim our faith at any time. God has always been patient and will always be patient, and so waiting a couple of decades for someone to find their way back to the path, that's nothing to God. And God forgives instantly when our hearts change. God is not like people. If you blow your trust with people, you can damage your relationship with someone for years, or maybe forever. Many people will never forgive, never trust you again, never believe that you have been regenerated and are changed. Many people have no grace whatsoever to offer to you. That is not the case with God. God can see into your heart, instantly grasp your sincerity, and welcome you back. That's the message I gave many lapsed Christians on Ash Wednesday. I'll get back to giving ashes at the hospital shortly, but first, let me shift gears.

Indeed - one thing that bothers me a lot about our current culture in the U.S. is that we are so extraordinarily post-Christian that we have become cruel,

and it goes well beyond being unforgiving. People in our society today make a point of proudly displaying their unforgiveness, their unwillingness to accept apologies, and their lack of understanding that everyone does things that are wrong, and that all of us, at some point in our lives, need forgiveness. The problem is the lack of grace. People don't feel themselves touched by grace; they don't feel filled with God's grace. And so, they have no grace to offer anyone else.

I am sure that everyone is aware that there has been a lot of focus on racial issues in the media in recent months. One case involved a woman who, I believe, was walking her dog in Central Park in the U.S. She got the wrong idea somehow that an African American man was a threat to her. She threatened to use the cops against him, and apparently, she did get the police involved. But he was videoing her with his phone and his video showed that he never meant her any harm at all. This video went viral. It became a nationally prominent case. The woman was arrested and charged with the crime of filing a false police report. She also lost her job as some sort of high-level financial manager and she was broadly denounced in the news and on social media. With respect to her criminal charges, apparently, she worked out a plea bargain that consisted of her taking part in therapy sessions that I believe she had to pay for. The goal was to get her

to understand that her actions were wrong and to come to grips with what she needed to change within herself. I happen to be a big believer in forgiveness and regeneration, and so this seemed like a great way to solve the problem.

But, after this plea arrangement was reported in the media, I did some poking around and started reading comments from people. Here are five responses that I was able to casually find:

1 "Clearly, she is a racist and she got off easy. I doubt her attitude or beliefs have changed because she was required to have a few therapy sessions."

2 "I would hazard a guess that her "therapy" has had little to no effect on her true thoughts related to race."

3 "She agreed to therapy, only because she was caught in the act and the matter went national and international."

4 "This was no doubt arranged by her attorney. She'll follow the script to achieve the best result. I don't see her doing anything "good" here."

5 "I'm sure the only reason she attended the therapy was to keep from facing the full consequences of her false claim."

These people have a right to their opinions and to post them for others to read. I also understand why people would react this way, given the intense focus

in our news media on racial disparities in our culture. But it's interesting that we really, as a culture, no longer embrace forgiveness. We hold grudges. We stay angry. We do not believe that people can change. We do not believe that people can be genuine, that they can be ingenuous. Everyone seems to have a jaded, brutal view of humanity. We do not offer to others even the tiniest fraction of the grace that God offers us.

Let's look at our brief Bible passage for today. It's from Ephesians, a letter that I love in part because Wendy and I have visited the astonishing remnants of Ephesus that have been unearthed in Turkey. There is a picture of Ephesus on our bulletin; I took this photo when we were there. Unbelievably, all of this was completely covered by layers of earth when the ruins of Ephesus were discovered in about 1860. People had been looking for Ephesus for hundreds of years. Ephesus was a coastal city in biblical times; what they didn't know was that the ocean had receded significantly since the time of Christ, and so the astonishingly preserved, vast ruins of Ephesus were buried a surprising distance inland. In this letter, Paul is lifting up the Christians of Ephesus, telling them to support each other in prayers and songs, and to always be thankful to God, and to offer up their thankfulness in the name of Jesus Christ. There are many scholars who believe that, even though he visited Ephesus multiple times, Paul did not write

this letter, and that it was written by a disciple of his, perhaps decades after his death. The author was trying to be instructional and to closely honor Paul's theology. The letter to the Ephesians was probably addressed to more than just the people of Ephesus; most likely, it was a circular letter that was sent to a number of cities in Asia Minor – what is now more or less Turkey – and one of these cities was Ephesus. The letter wasn't directed toward the needs or problems of any particular church and was intended to provide guidance to Christians as a whole. One of the author's biggest concerns was to prevent people from falling for Gnosticism, something that we have talked about in the past. Our pseudo-Paul is trying to convince people to live according to the Christian principles of love and prayer, and not by the decadent, selfish ways of the wealthy people of the highly prosperous city of Ephesus. Here is our quote from the letter to the Christians of these cities in Asia Minor: ²⁹*Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.* ³⁰*And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.* ³¹*Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.* ³²*Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.*

Notice that we are being asked to speak well of people, to lift them up instead of breaking them down – *“to give grace to those who hear.”* We are to get rid of our bitterness, our anger, our slander, our malice - and be forgiving with one another. This is certainly not what our society does today.

But let me get back to Ash Wednesday at the hospital. I was handing out ashes in the hospital when someone entered the chapel. The idea was to give ashes to the staff, to nurses, doctors, therapists, technicians, the cleaning people, anyone who wanted to receive ashes and happened to work there. But this one man walked in wearing his hospital gown. He was a patient, and apparently, his nurse had come into his room with ashes on her forehead, and when he asked, she told him that she had gotten them from Chaplain Buzz in the chapel. So, he got up and left his room and came to the chapel. He told me that he had had a minor stroke, that they had cleaned up an artery, and that already, the effects of the stroke were going away. This man was a bit younger than me. He told me that he was grateful to God for having “dodged a bullet”. He said that he had grown away from his faith, but in the minutes after realizing that he was having a stroke and his wife was calling 911, he found himself talking to God. Later, when the doctors in the ER told him that they had stopped the stroke before very much damage had been done, he said that he felt like a hypocrite, turning to God when

he was in need, when he had ignored God for so long. I told him that he had nothing to worry about, that God always has open arms. God is not like people. God forgives instantly. God is warmed in the heart when we decide to transform ourselves. God knows that it usually takes a number of tries, that we do not get it right the first time we try to change what we know we need to change within ourselves. I told him to let himself feel the joy of his renewed connection with God and to pay attention to God's voice within him. I told him that one thing is very important: he must always remember to offer the same grace to others that God offers to us.

Consider what you can do in a concrete way to offer grace to others. Don't treat it as some abstract notion that is part of your character as a Christian. Consider it to be an integral part of your everyday life. I truly believe that grace, that ability to be gracious to others, to forget the past, to trust others to truly want to be good people, that this is perhaps the most important thing that our society needs to remember. If we acted with true grace, if we honestly and actively reflected God's grace back on others, there would be so much less bitterness and hatred in our society. Try to be concrete. Think of someone whom you could reach out to – and offer them grace. And if you think they don't

deserve your grace, remember that God's grace is completely unearned. Please pray with me.

God, your grace is indeed amazing. The author of that hymn, Amazing Grace, was the captain of slave ships. He invested heavily in the slave trade, but later he grew to understand his sins. He understood the depth and the power of your grace. He changed himself and you welcomed that change. Please touch each of us; help us find what must be changed within ourselves. We ask that you help us regenerate ourselves. We thank you for your grace. Please fill our hearts with the desire to pass on to others that same grace. May we be true Christians. May we not be hypocrites. May we always be willing to completely leave the past behind, to forgive one another, to never hold the past against someone, and to help them change themselves and to pass on grace to others. Amen.