



ALL SAINTS CHURCH
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

GRACE TRUMPS AND GLORY ATTACKS

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Edwin Bacon, Jr.

May 1, 2005

Thank you all for coming and thank you for enduring the heat. It's better than enduring the rain and I'm thrilled that the Lord has cooperated with us. I called the Pasadena Tournament of Roses and found out what their connection to God was because they never have had it rain on a parade and I didn't want rain on our parade here today. [laughter]

I learned early in my priesthood that a congregation cannot get with the preacher in the preaching of the sermon if the preacher isn't first with the people. So in order to connect with you this morning I have to make a confession here at the beginning of the sermon. My confession is that I have had a very tough time whenever this weekend (the party Friday night and this morning's eucharist) was focused on me. Comments like, "It's your day, Ed" have made me squirm inside. But when I thought about this morning being a celebration of ten years of you and me together, and even more importantly of you and me together with God for another ten years—now that has gotten my spirits lifted, my blood flowing, my heart beating fast and the experience of a "glory attack!" [applause] So, can you and I make this day not so much about me but about us and our future with one another and with God? Let the Church say Amen....Amen! [congregation]

We are gathered here this morning because ten years ago yesterday on April 30, 1995, my brother George Regas preached a fantastic sermon on the steps of City Hall on his last day as rector. And the next day I was rector. For two months I flew back and forth from Jackson, Mississippi, to meet with the staff and the vestry. And in July my wife, our two children, several cats and dogs drove cross-country to move into the rectory. At one point in that journey when we crossed over into Colorado there were literally in front of us a pillar of clouds one day and that evening as we kept driving the sunset played its orange hues onto those clouds so that we had a pillar of fire before us leading us westward. I am grateful beyond words for my beloved, my wife, my life-partner, my best friend, Hope, who set out with me not knowing what we were getting into. I am also grateful to our children, Alice and Peter, who have been affectionate companions along the way. And now Alice's wonderful husband Heath and their brilliant, beautiful, intelligent, magnificent daughter, the holy child of Birmingham, Sarah Hope, and Peter's wonderful love-of-his-life Jessica Perkins are all here this morning in the front row. Thank you very much. [applause]

All Saints is blessed with a great congregation. It is what is known in church circles as a **plum** of a church not a **pit**. [laughter] All Saints is also blessed with great friends without whom we could not do our mission with anything approaching what Rabbi Heschel called "moral grandeur and spiritual audacity." We often don't know with precision what we mean when we All Saints people say "us." We don't know exactly who is a member and who is not and how many people we have as members. When we say "we" we are the folks

who worship and labor at and from this place to be sure, and All Saints couldn't be what it is without our Rabbi-in-residence Leonard Beerman, our other rabbi friends, Rabbi Steven Jacobs and Rabbi Joshua Levine Grater and Rabbi Sharon Brous (who couldn't be with us today). My great friend, Daniel Sokatch and the executive director of the Progressive Jewish Alliance who is this weekend starting the first branch office of PJA in San Francisco (also could not be with us in body but in spirit he is here.) Our Muslim friends make us who we are: Dr. Nazir Khaja, a great international Muslim leader and advisor of my heart and my mind. My friend from Damascus, Dr. Saleh Kholaki who gave the Muslim call to prayer so beautifully this morning, and the brothers Hathout – Hassan and Maher, and Salam and Layla Al-Marayati, who couldn't be with us this morning. My dear friend Frank Alton and his son Jonathan are here. Frank is the dean of multicultural urban ministry of Los Angeles and is senior pastor at Emmanuel Presbyterian Church in Mid Wilshire, and is my dear and trusted friend. To all of you—All Saints members, All Saints supporters, All Saints friends and especially to those who are visiting with us for the first time this morning—I express to each of you heartfelt gratitude and affection.

If I had to say one word and sit down, which, of course, there is no way in hell I'm going to do, [laughter] but if I had one word to say, that word would be "**Grace.**" I believe that grace is the most important thing in life. It is the power I felt in my first mystical experience as a child at age 5. Grace is what brought me into the Episcopal Church and it is what led me to every discernment on my journey. Grace is what led me to All Saints Church ten years ago today. It is what has sustained me every moment; it is what is pounding in my heart this very instant.

Once upon a time there was a man who lived above the Mason-Dixon Line who made a business trip to the South. It was his first visit to the southern part of the United States and he happened to visit my Aunt Carobeth's café in South Georgia for breakfast. She said to him, "Honey, what can I get for you?" The great thing about people who serve you in cafes in the South is that they call you "honey" or "baby". The man ordered two scrambled eggs, a side of bacon, toast, orange juice and coffee. In five minutes here came his order: on the plate were the eggs, bacon, toast and a mysterious looking serving of white goo. The man asked what this white stuff was and my Aunt Carobeth said, "Honey, them's grits." The man said, "Lady, I didn't order grits." Aunt Carobeth said, "Oh, honey you don't order grits, grits just comes." [laughter] My brothers and sisters, grace is like grits—grace just comes.

One day about forty years ago an atheist asked my friend the great and radical Southern Baptist preacher, Rev. Will Campbell, if he could sum up the Christian religion in ten words or less. Will thought for a few moments and then in pre-inclusive language vocabulary put his understanding of Christianity into nine words. He replied, "All men are bastards but God loves us anyway." In more recent years, Will has pared his understanding of Christianity down to two words. He now summarizes Christianity with these two words, "grace trumps."

Grace is the unearned energy of love given to us so that each moment, not just each day, but each moment can be a new start. It is the fuel by which God does what Leonard Beerman read about in this morning's first lesson—create a new heaven and a new earth and a new person. The way God makes all things new is to make each one of us new by giving each of us a new start, a new chance to make life new every moment. The deepest thing I

wish for each of us in this experience this morning is that we know in the deepest places in our souls, that is the place within us – that is deeper than our wounds, deeper than our fears, deeper than our insecurities, deeper than our neediness, deeper than our resentments, deeper than our addictions – in the deepest place of our being that we know that we are loved so thoroughly and unconditionally that we can have fresh energy to be used by God to create this new heaven and new earth that God is creating while we are sitting here this very moment.

Saint Paul says that nothing can separate us from the love of God. My friends, *grace* trumps everything I know. I believe that grace is what ticks at the heart of this church – Grace’s undeserved and unmerited love. You cannot buy grace, you cannot earn grace, you cannot buy authentic love, you cannot earn God’s love. God loves you just as you are. Grace is the most radical and subversive message we have to offer one another and to the whole world – that every human being is equally loved by God no matter what we do and no matter who we are.

Now I believe that grace has to have skin on. Something or someone needs to be embodying grace for us in order for us to experience it. I knew that All Saints was rooted in embodying grace when I received the following letter from Russ Kully my first week here. Russ was with Elsie Sadler the co-chair of the search committee that brought me here. Russ was the person who called me out of the blue one day when I was minding my own business being the dean of the cathedral in Jackson, Mississippi. Russ was the one who told me that the search committee had some interest in me. After the lengthy discernment and interviews and negotiations that resulted in my being here physically in 1995, Russ wrote me a letter that had this paragraph in it: “Ed, I wanted you to know that the success of your ministry, indeed the attainment of what I expect to be a magnificent ministry, is my highest priority. I make that point to be clear that if in town, I will always make myself available to meet or confer with you. If you feel the need or usefulness to share issues or concerns with someone off staff don’t hesitate to call or arrange breakfast or late afternoon meetings whenever the Spirit moves you.” That, my friends is grace. Grace embodied. And you don’t know what that meant to this simple country redneck preacher from Georgia when I received that letter.

When I read that letter that day I had a *glory attack*. When someone has an experience of amazing grace in the depth of their being – in the organizing center of their personality, then that experience I call a *glory attack*. When any of us has an experience in which another person gives from their depths unmerited, unwarranted love and grace, that is a *glory attack*. When any of us gives generously and magnanimously so that another may flourish in life, that’s a *glory attack*. Our fantastic composer-in-residence, Bill Cunliffe has composed an anthem for this morning’s event which sets to music one of the most important understandings that religion has ever had about what glory is. In the second century Irenaeus wrote the words that you will hear in the anthem, “The glory of God is the human being fully alive.” (Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* c. 175-185 CE) Glory is what happens when God becomes bigger in your heart and life; when love becomes bigger in your heart and life; when compassion becomes bigger in your heart and life; when justice becomes bigger in your heart and life; when resistance on behalf of the vulnerable and marginalized becomes bigger in your heart and life; when peacemaking becomes bigger in your heart and life—that’s a *glory attack*. Can the church say Amen? AMEN! [congregation]

Now, I want to conclude by saying some things about what keeps us at All Saints stirred up. Every faith community knows something about what I've said so far about grace and glory. What I failed to say is that you can have mild *glory attacks* as well as intense *glory attacks*. I think it is impossible to go through life without some grace and some *glory attacks*—that's just how gracious and loving God is. But the key to All Saints is that we believe in having five-stage *glory attacks* from time to time. (Of course, it's dangerous if you get above six or seven stage *glory attacks*—you run the risk of having a fire baptism and that involves the EMT's and ambulances and emergency rooms and things like that.) But the ways that we get up to these four and five stage *glory attacks* is how we understand that grace and glory need to be applied in the world and in our day in the 21st Century.

Archbishop William Temple famously said that the church is the only society that exists for the benefit of non-members. The church exists for the world. Authentic Christianity consists in this: that we believe and work fiercely to make sure God's grace is not just for us but that grace is embodied for everyone. That is what makes our work prophetic; that is what makes our work radical; that is what makes our work Christ-like. God is not just for Christians; God is not just for Americans; God is not just for the Western mind. The Bible is not a Western document and Jesus was not a blue-eyed, blond European and Jesus did not come for the entitled alone.

The Roman Empire, like all empires, was based on entitlement. And Jesus expanded his understanding of God's Reign or Kingdom to be based in grace not in entitlement as God's alternative to Rome's Empire. Those who uncritically bless the power of empire cannot know the profundity and the glory of grace. The grace I know about in the lives of the prophets and the life of Jesus is incompatible with empire. The grace of which I am speaking, brothers and sisters, is the antithesis of empire. Because the cornerstone of grace, the very cornerstone of grace is a little package of dynamite called "the democracy of souls." All are equally loved by God. The cornerstone of grace is that no human being is more valuable to God than another human being. No child is more valuable to God than another child. The minds and bodies of children south of the 210 freeway in Pasadena are no more valuable than the minds and bodies of children in northwest Pasadena. The life and breath of Iraqi children are no less precious than the life and breath of U.S. children. And elected officials and religious leaders alike are accountable for any policies that institutionalize dehumanization – be it the dehumanization that is found in poverty, dehumanization found in war, dehumanization found in officially sanctioned torture, and the dehumanization of racial, ethnic or religious profiling. Elected officials are accountable because they are authorized to make life humane and just for all. Religious leaders like you and me – everyone here this morning is a religious leader – are accountable because authentic religion demands that religious leaders never be complacent, never be indifferent, never be silent when any of God's children are undefended, systematically underserved or oppressed by institutionalized oppression or racism or any form of bigotry including sexism and homophobia.

My brothers and sisters, the next ten years will be the most challenging that any of us has ever lived. There is a growing movement within Christianity itself called "Dominionism." Read the chilling articles in May's Harpers magazine, please. Dominionism calls for the military-backed domination of the world by fundamentalist American Christian-ism. These brothers and sisters of ours don't believe Jesus' words in John's gospel this morning that the Spirit is leading us into the fullness of truth. They

believe that truth in its fullness has already been totally revealed, packaged and thoroughly understood by them and that we all must kowtow to their interpretation of what is and what is not Orthodoxy. Rooted in a power-hungry exclusivist reading of the apocalyptic portions of the writings of Saint Paul and the Book of Revelation, and ignoring the social gospel **justice-for-all** message of compassion of the Prince of Peace described in the gospels—they, the Dominionists are first coming for anyone including judges in the American jurisprudence system that they brand secular humanists and then they are coming for the rest of us who do not goose-step in line.

Pastor Martin Niemoeller, after he was released from Dachau at the end of World War II used to end all his sermons with this statement. It is poignantly relevant this morning. In our next ten years it is very relevant. He ended his sermon this way: “First they came for the communists and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a communist; then they came for the Jews and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Jew; then they came for the trade unionists and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a trade unionist; then they came for the Catholics and I didn’t speak up because I was a Protestant; and then they came for me but by that time no one was left to speak up.”

My sisters and brothers, we do not have to be afraid and we do not have to have troubled hearts. I am not afraid this morning. The spirit of Christ, the spirit of the prophets, the spirit of Mohammad, the spirit of Gandhi, the spirit of Heschel, the spirit of all who love God’s radically universal grace – that Spirit is here this morning with us in these seats and in our hearts. To the degree that we will allow the Spirit to speak to our deepest selves of God’s grace and glory then you and I will be led into all truth and into God’s ongoing revelation. And you and I will be given the energy to resist whatever demeans life so that we can be partners and instruments of God in making the whole world new.

And now I close with reminding you of something that I learned in Rome two weeks ago. At the end of my clergy support group conference meeting in Italy, a friend preaching the closing eucharist said there had been a survey conducted about the things people most want to hear. Thousands of people were interviewed and asked, “As you go through your daily life what do you most want to hear?” The survey takers were astounded that there were three sentences at the top of the list and every other statement fell toward the bottom. Here they are: The first thing we all want to hear is “I love you.” The second thing we want to hear is “I forgive you.” And the third thing everybody wants to hear is “Supper’s ready.”

My brothers and sisters, God loves you, God forgives you, God wants you to be an instrument in telling the whole world that God loves them and that God forgives them—and now, supper’s ready! [applause]

Amen.