



## *Round Hill Community Church*

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**Sermon: May 23, 2010**

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### **The Amazing Spirit of Grace, Robert B. Culp**

Acts 2:1-13; John 5:1-9

Last September, when I attended a conference in Chicago that dealt with the topic of what makes for “a good funeral,” one of the participants shared a story that caused a gentle hush to fall upon that assembly of ministers and other participants. He told us about attending a church one Sunday when he was on vacation in his wife’s hometown. He said that he found the minister a very capable communicator of the good news, a preacher who was able to engage the congregation in a thoughtful and joyful manner. And so, after worship he lingered to express his appreciation for his words and spirit.

In front of him, though, waiting to speak with the minister, was a woman who was visibly upset, as if she had just experienced a loss, which, in fact, is what had happened. She explained to the minister that her father had died a few days earlier, that he hadn’t belonged to a church, and that she was worried about his eternal destiny. She said, “He would have joined the church if he had known he was going to die.”

As the man listened to her speak with the minister, he sensed she was quite disturbed, as did the minister, who drew closer and took her hand to comfort her. The woman began to sob, speaking about her father’s values and common decency, and the profound loss she was feeling. The minister said to her, “Of course, I never met your father, but he sounds like he was a special person,” and she shook her head in agreement.

The minister continued, “You know, in very special circumstances, the church grants membership to persons after they have died. Why don’t we do that for your father.” And so right there, he offered a short prayer for the woman, expressing appreciation and thanksgiving for her father’s life, and giving God praise that the father was now in God’s precious care as a member of the Body of Christ. The woman’s demeanor changed almost immediately, with fear and pain somehow leaving her eyes. She gave the minister a gentle hug and went down the church steps with a grateful smile.

The man telling us this story then paused, and said he was left standing alone with the minister. He expressed his appreciation for the service that day, and then he asked, with a bit of a smile, “Does the church really give membership to those who have died?” “Not that I know of,” the minister replied. “But perhaps every now and then it’s the right thing to do, don’t you think?”

I have to confess that I was touched by this man’s story, and it stands out as a Christ-filled moment that reminded me then, as it still does, not only of our daily need to encourage and accept one another, offering bene-

dictions to others along the way, but also of the primacy of grace in the Christian story.

While my experiences in ministry have been largely positive through the years, encountering some of the brightest and kindest and most generous souls anyone could ever hope to meet, I have encountered a few bumps along the way. And curiously, these have involved individuals whose unbending commitment to rules and doctrine has somehow blinded them to mercy and grace. As I listened to that man in Chicago tell us his tale, I remember being acutely aware that if a lover of the law had been present, that minister would likely have had to answer for his kindness to the woman, and the grace he extended to her.

As I have read the Gospel accounts through the years, I've never sensed that Jesus was an anarchist, wanting to overthrow the established order or jettison the entire Jewish tradition. I suspect he found significant meaning in the religious life of his day, certainly knowing the breadth and depth of the sacred narrative of his faith and attending synagogue regularly. He likely understood the importance of rules and process. But he was able to place them in their proper context, not giving them such weight that he was unable to act charitably when circumstances required it ... responding to the spiritual nudging of God's grace and love.

When you consider the parables of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan and other startling stories Jesus told; when you think about Jesus' surprising associations with those society deemed as unclean or outcasts; when you remember his daring to touch others in healing fashion on the Sabbath Day, such as John's story this morning ... you can see clearly that Jesus chose mercy over right belief.

Indeed, Jesus was willing to suspend a good thing (such as established doctrine or accepted religious customs), so that he could be faithful to a better thing (such as grace and compassion, mercy and justice).

In many respects that is what we are celebrating on this Pentecost Day, the birthday of the church, when God's Spirit was unleashed in such a powerful fashion (tongues of fire, the rushing of wind, ecstatic language through which diverse people somehow understood each other) ... such powerful ways, that the primacy of grace and ardor over law and order was wondrously revealed, and somehow barriers were overcome so that those who were estranged from one another became "one."

Sadly, though, in every generation the church has struggled with the leading and powerful movement of God's "untamed" Spirit, and it has often taken long years for the church to act graciously. Indeed, the church's reluctance to open itself to the new thing God's Spirit seeks to do, especially the church's reluctance to lead the way to a broader loving kindness, has often impeded our society's moral advancement. In some instances, the church has even furthered the cause of bigotry and evil ...

- \* by defending slavery as God's will;
- \* by condemning women to second-rate citizenship;
- \* by labeling those who are gay as abominations;
- \* by defining AIDS as a punishment from God;
- \* by promoting crusades, pogroms, and war as expressions of God's will;
- \* by justifying ill-gotten wealth as a blessing from the Lord;
- \* by suggesting poverty was a sign of divine rejection.

As the Quaker author Philip Gulley has observed, "Too many times the church has been the caboose on the train of moral progress, at times a drag on grace and compassion." He writes, "Fear and seriousness in the church are almost always the enemies of grace. Fear seizes control and demands compliance, while grace shares power and trusts others to make their moral decisions. Fear is somber, stern, and uninspiring; grace is cheerful, joyful, creative. Fear provides no room for error and is always in a hurry to have its way. Grace is expansive and gives us the time and space to learn and grow."

The antidote to such stultifying fear is for us to remember that when Jesus was asked to boil down the law to its essential element, he didn't hesitate for a second: "Love," he said. "Love the Lord your God with everything you are and everything you have. Love your neighbor. Love yourself." "Love."

What we celebrate on Pentecost is the letting loose of this love in our lives, and through our lives into the world. We are called to embody in our lives, individually and together, the creative and fearless love of Jesus, his steadfast and gracious compassion. And that is the love which is seen so clearly as we gather around this table this morning: so different in our circumstances, so varied in our hungers and needs, so distinct in our understandings and hopes and dreams. And yet, as we share in this sacramental meal, we are wondrously made one with our Lord and with one another in the Spirit of his amazing grace.

Let us pray: O Lord our God, remind us that we are not saved by "right beliefs" or "orthodox customs" ... but rather by your grace that envelopes us in a love that transforms our lives, that guides and steadies our steps, that calls us into the community of faith, and that invites us and empowers us to be your very own, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

