

**Living Biblically:
LIVING GRACIOUSLY**

John 1:14-18

*Because God has given us grace,
we can live graciously with others.*

A sermon preached by
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We are talking in November about “Living Biblically.” The idea came from a book called *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*.¹ The author, A. J. Jacobs, found it impossible to follow all 700-plus commandments in the Bible in a literal fashion; that’s not the point anyway. But he did find that trying to live Biblically made a tremendous impact on his life.

We love the Bible. The Bible is God’s Word. Scripture contains the plan of salvation and all the elements of a wonderful life. It would be a good thing for us to live Biblically—if we could just figure out what that really meant.

Last week we talked about “Living Historically.” We are connected to a long story—the story of the Bible, two millennia of Christian history, the Methodist story, the American saga, and even our personal stories. Our connection to the communion of the saints, the cloud of witnesses, strengthens our faith today and gives us hope for tomorrow.

Since we are remembering today the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I, let me share with you a story that came out of that conflict. There were four American soldiers who were fighting across the countryside in France. They had become very close, like brothers, because they had endured so much hardship and danger together. One day a bullet found one of them, and he was killed. His friends wanted to give him a proper burial, so they took his body to a little Catholic church out in the French countryside. The priest spoke English, and they asked him if they could bury their friend in the church’s cemetery. The priest asked, “Was he Catholic?”

They said, “No.”

The priest shook his head and told them only Catholics could be buried in the cemetery. But he told them they could bury their friend just outside the fence if they wanted to. So that is what they did.

The next morning, before moving on to the next battle, the three friends came back to pay their last respects to their fallen brother. But they couldn’t find his grave. They looked all around the cemetery fence, and there was no grave. They found the priest and asked what

had happened. The priest said, “My conscience bothered me so much, I could not sleep last night. So I got up in the night and moved the fence to include your comrade who died for France.”²

This is called grace. The story of the Bible is the story of God moving the fence to include those who had formerly been left out. God moves the fence in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the embodiment of grace. The prologue to the Gospel of John tells the story: “*And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. ...From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*”³

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are God’s gracious way of including us, even when we don’t deserve it. Paul says, “*For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.*”⁴

Early on the Church found that it had to move the fence to accommodate what the Holy Spirit was doing with the Gospel of Jesus. Jesus was Jewish; all his disciples were Jewish; the leaders of the early church were Jewish. But the word was reaching a Gentile audience, and they were coming to believe in Jesus. The Holy Spirit was manifest in their lives, too. “Fine,” some of the Jewish Christians said, “we have a fence here, and it’s called circumcision. Let these Gentiles be circumcised, and they can become Christians.” Others, like Paul, said, “No, you make these people be circumcised, and you are nullifying the grace of God, and you will turn people away.”

So they had a big conference in Jerusalem (Acts 15) and they decided that apart from some practices associated with idol worship, the Gentile Christians were free from the Jewish law. No circumcision was required. The fence was moved. The church decided that living Biblically meant living graciously, and the Gospel exploded across the Mediterranean.

One of the keys to living Biblically, and one of the keys to making disciples of Jesus Christ, is to live graciously. But we do not live in a gracious age. Our divisions dominate the conversation. The fences are high. The walls are thick. People cling to their hostility and fear for dear life, despite the fact that Paul said, *“Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”*⁵ Jesus broke down the walls, and we keep putting them back up.

One of the constant refrains we hear from those who have turned away from the church is that Christians are too judgmental. But that’s so easy to do, isn’t it? I understand. We’re right. They’re wrong. If they want to get right, they need to be like us. We need to divide ourselves from those people. The problem is, it’s hard to touch someone through a fence. It’s hard to love someone on the other side of a wall.

So Jesus says, *“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.”*⁶

Paul upholds the teaching of Jesus in Romans 14: *“Who are you to pass judgment...? It is before their own Lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.”*⁷ God moves the fence. We forget that so many of the judgments that we like to make are judgments only God can make. These are management-level decisions. Our job is sales and customer service.

Living graciously is part of our Methodist DNA. We are the church that advertises “open hearts, open minds, open doors.” We value inclusiveness and tolerance. We like to think we hold a big umbrella,

and people from different backgrounds, with different ideas, across the spectrum, can take shelter under our cover.

This gracious DNA goes all the way back to John Wesley. One of his most famous sermons was “The Catholic Spirit.” By “catholic” he meant universal, like in the Apostles’ Creed—“the holy catholic church.” The basic point of the sermon is that if we agree on the essentials of the faith, we can allow for differences on the smaller matters. Our main command from Jesus is to love one another: “*love your neighbor as yourself,*” “*love your enemies,*” “*love one another as I have loved you.*”⁸ If we love one another, we are able to live with our differences. One of Wesley’s great statements that we have on our church T-shirts comes from this sermon: “Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences. These remaining as they are, they may [encourage] one another in love and good works.”⁹

Wesley’s text for the “Catholic Spirit” sermon is a rather obscure Old Testament story in which a military commander says to his enemy, “*If your heart is as my heart, give me your hand.*”¹⁰ That’s the description of gracious living: If your heart is with my heart, give me your hand. Even if we disagree on some things, we can still serve God together, and I can accept you as my brother or my sister in Christ. Another quote that has been attributed to Wesley, although Wesley scholars say that if Wesley said it, it was not original with him, is “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.”¹¹ Whether or not Wesley said it, it is a good description of gracious living.

The bottom line is this: we want people to know Jesus Christ, to be in a saving relationship with him, to be growing as disciples. The bottom line is our mission to bring the Kingdom of God “on earth as it is in heaven.” We have found life that is abundant and eternal; we want to share that life with the world. We have received grace from God;

God moved the fence for us. Because of that, we want to live graciously.

If we want to introduce people to Jesus, we have to meet them where they are, even if that's a place we're not comfortable. That's how God's prevenient grace works. The way to make disciples is not through judgment, criticism, or condemnation. It is through love, acceptance, encouragement, and respect. The divisions of this world—race, gender, politics, poverty, wealth, nationality, sexual orientation, favorite sports teams, brand of toothpaste—should not keep us from loving one another and extending to every child of God the hand of Christian fellowship. God moved the fence for us; we can graciously move the fence for others.

Tom Shipp was the pastor for thirty years at Lover's Lane United Methodist Church in Dallas. As the first full-time pastor of the church, he grew it to over eight thousand members in the 1960's. Tom was called into the ministry as a young man when he attended the uniting conference of the Methodist Church in Kansas City in 1939. This was when the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church South and the Methodist Protestant Church began to heal the wounds of the Civil War and came back together as a denomination. Tom heard a sermon at the conference by the great Methodist layman Thomas R. Mott. At the end of the sermon, Mott gave an invitation for young people to dedicate their lives to ministry in the church, and Tom Shipp, among others, came forward.

After seminary, Tom resolved to build a church at Lover's Lane where there were "no shams, no make-believe, no half-way measures," where people would be "true friends of others and loyal to Jesus." Part of the appeal of Lover's Lane in the early days was their welcome for alcoholics. Today we might call it a recovery church, although it grew far beyond that. The gracious, inclusive DNA of that church grew out of the grace that Tom Shipp had experienced in his life.

Tom began life in New Mexico, but his mother died when he was four. His father worked for the railroad and was gone for extended

periods. So he moved the family back to rural Missouri, and grandparents cared for Tom and his four siblings. Then the grandmother died, and Tom lived with several unrelated families. This was during the Great Depression; there was no foster-care system in place. Tom worked on farms for room and board while he went to school.

One family treated Tom like an outcast. They made him wait until the family had eaten before Tom got the leftovers, then he had to eat alone on the back porch. They didn't have a room or a bed for Tom in the house; he had to sleep in the barn. After a year with that family, Tom found another family that needed help, so he moved. That family took Tom in, gave him a place at the table and a bed inside the house. They bought him new clothes and made him feel like part of the family.

With this new family, the Kuhns, Tom was allowed to go to church. The first Sunday was Communion Sunday, and they gave him some money to put on the altar rail for an offering, because Tom didn't have anything. It so happened that at this little Methodist Church in Missouri, the family that had treated Tom like an outcast were also members. When they went up for communion, the man who had treated Tom like dirt was kneeling on his left, and Mr. Kuhn, who had treated Tom well, was on his right.

When the pastor came by with the elements of Communion, Tom reached for the bread. The man that Tom had worked for reached out and grabbed Tom's hand to prevent him from taking Communion. The preacher froze. Tom froze. Mr. Kuhn got red in the face and leaned over the communion rail and said to the other man, "It's not your table!" A hush fell over the congregation as Mr. Kuhn repeated, "It's not your table!" After a few tense seconds, before they had a fight at the altar rail, the man let go, and Tom took communion.¹²

Our experiences of faith make us who we are. Years later, Tom Shipp would help build a great church where everyone was welcome. I'm sure the words rang in his ears for the rest of his life: "It's not your table!" This is God's Table every time we have communion. This is God's

church every time we open the doors. It is our honor, our duty, our privilege, and our calling to make sure everyone in the world knows that. We are here because we have received the grace of God. It is our mission to live graciously, to welcome the stranger, to include the others, so that we might build a community of faith that honors Scripture and honors God. That's moving the fence. That's living Biblically.

¹ A. J. Jacobs, *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008).

² Stanley R. Copeland and Scott Gilliland, *Together: United Methodists of the Temple, Tabernacle, and Table* (Plano, TX: Colinasway, 2018), 37.

³ John 1:14, 16-17.

⁴ Romans 5:6-8.

⁵ Ephesians 2:13-14.

⁶ Matthew 7:1-5.

⁷ Romans 14:4.

⁸ Matthew 22:39, Matthew 5:44, John 13:35.

⁹ John Wesley, "The Catholic Spirit," *Sermons, Volume 1* (Minneapolis: Baker, 1979), 403.

¹⁰ 2 Kings 10:15.

¹¹ <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/section-2-our-doctrinal-history>.

¹² Copeland, 66-69.