



VILLAGE  
CHURCH

Presbyterian (USA)

# This is What Grace Looks Like

SCRIPTURE:  
Luke 22:31-33,  
54-62

March 26, 2023 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

It was the day before my first day as pastor of the Seven Oaks Church in South Carolina. I was moving boxes into what would become my office. Leonard was a man in his mid-70s and a faithful elder of that church. He saw me carrying boxes into the building. I was dressed for unpacking, not for pastoring. He asked, “Do you know when our new pastor will arrive?” I said, “I sure do. Hi, I’m Tom Are.” He responded, “Good God. You’re a kid.”

Over the years, Leonard would become a trusted friend and mentor. He taught me some things about church that I didn’t even know I needed to know. And we would often laugh about that first meeting when he assumed I was with the moving company.

It happens from time to time: We fail to see who is right in front of us. We spoke to that last Sunday, as Peter sees Jesus, but his vision is incomplete. Sometimes we fail to see the person right in front of us—at least see them as they are.

The reverse is true as well. Sometimes the world fails to see us. In Wendell Berry’s novel, “Jayber Crow,” Jayber is the local barber and resident theologian of the small town of Port William, Kentucky. It’s a town like a lot of towns—defined in large part by its size or lack thereof.

He describes it this way: “You would need to draw a very big map of the world in order to make Port William visible upon it. In the actual scale of a state highway map, Port William would be smaller than the dot that locates it. In the eyes of the powers that be, we Port Williamites live and move and have our being within a black period about the size of the one that ends a sentence. It would be a considerable overstatement to say that before making their decisions the leaders of the world do not consult the citizens of Port William... And how many such invisible, name-

less, powerless little places are there in this world? All the world, as a matter of fact, is a mosaic of little places invisible to the powers that be. And in the eyes of the powers that be, all these invisible places do not add up to a visible place.”<sup>1</sup>

To live in an invisible fashion can be painful. There is a spiritual desire to be seen. To be invisible in the world is dehumanizing. You have probably experienced a circumstance like that.

Ashley Bartholomew is an ICU nurse in El Paso, Texas. She was taking care of COVID patients in an overflowing ward. These were the days before vaccines, when we were still hunkered down in our homes, wiping down our groceries and seeing others only on Zoom. She was clad in PPE, exhausted, caring for 25 patients—some of them dying every day. She had performed CPR more times in two weeks than she had during the past ten years. She felt that she was risking her life every time she stepped into a patient’s room. Already at the end of her rope, she walked into the room of a patient who was watching the local news on TV, which reported that El Paso was in need of refrigerated trucks for temporary morgues to keep up with the dead. From his COVID bed, this patient said, “Fake news. I don’t know why everyone is making such a big deal about this.” Ashley looked at this man, sick from COVID himself and refusing to see what was right in front of him, and said she couldn’t help herself, she began to sob.<sup>2</sup>

I think it was in part because she felt invisible. She was exhausted from caring for people she too often couldn’t keep alive and her work was dismissed as ‘fake news.’ It’s like being invisible.

To be seen is a basic spiritual desire—to be recognized as you are for who you are. I’m not talking about the little kid in us who grew up saying, “Hey,

<sup>1</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (2000) p. 139.

<sup>2</sup> George Packer, *Last Best Hope: America in Crisis and Renewal* (2021) p. 30.

Mom, watch me! Hey, Dad, watch me!” No, I’m talking about the basic need to be seen as a human being with a story that matters.

I think this is at the root of much of the conversation about race these days. We are fighting over whose stories can be told and whose stories are legitimate. Several years ago, a group of us met together to read and talk through Robin DiAngelo’s book, “White Fragility.” She talks about the reality of invisibility in our culture.

She wrote, “... consider the writers we are all expected to read [in school]; the list usually includes Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, Charles Dickens, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Mark Twain, Jane Austen, and William Shakespeare. These writers are seen as representing the universal human experience, and we read them precisely because they are presumed to be able to speak to us all. [But when seeking writers of diversity we read different authors.] These writers usually include Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Amy Tan, and Sandra Cisneros. We go to these writers for the Black or Asian perspective; Toni Morrison is always seen as a Black writer, not just a writer. But when we are not looking for the Black or Asian perspective, we return to white writers, reinforcing the idea of whites are just human, and people of color as particular kinds (racialized) of humans. This also allows white (male) writers to be seen as not having an agenda or any particular perspective, while racialized (and gendered) writers do.”<sup>3</sup>

If I understand her point, she is saying that to equate the universal human experience with the experience of a particular group, then the experience of all others remains, well, a bit invisible.

There are many people who all the time (and all people some of the time) seem invisible in the world. Their humanness is not fully seen. There is a spiritual desire to be seen. But I think, there is something worse than not being seen. And that is being seen when we don’t want to be seen.

When we lived in Florida, we would sometimes go to the Player’s Championship Golf Tournament. It was great fun. One year, my brother Jim was with us. We were on hole number three, a challenging par 3, where the crowd could get pretty close to the green. Vijay Sing was standing over his birdie putt.

The marshals all had their hands in the air asking for quiet. We were all focused when my brother, who had been drinking a bottle of water, finished now, unconsciously (I’m sure) crunched that water bottle. Those plastic bottles can make a lot of noise when crunched. Which meant, in an instant, my brother had the full attention of everyone on hole number 3, including Vijay Sing, who looked less than happy. My brother is not the kind who is shy about being in the spotlight, but in that moment, he felt like he was in one of those old Southwest Airlines commercials, you know: “Wanna get away?”

We all want to be seen, except when we don’t. We all have moments, decisions, feelings that we want to keep hidden.

Jesus had been arrested and most of the disciples had scattered, but Peter was brave enough to keep following. But the text says something noteworthy. Peter wasn’t just following; he was following at a ‘distance.’ If I understand the text, the distance is not a statement of geography. It’s a distance of the heart. The distance is not measured in feet or yards, but in commitment, in trust.

Too often faith is presented as belief or non-belief, in or out, yes or no. But that’s really not the truth of it, is it? I don’t know many people who believe or don’t believe. Mostly, folks struggle to believe. They hold fragile faith, growing faith, withering faith, battered faith, striving faith, searching faith. We follow this gospel life, but often we follow at a distance because our trust of this gospel is almost always less than certain or sure. “We believe; help our unbelief.”

Peter follows at a distance and the distance allows a bit of control over his discipleship, a bit of risk management. They say, “Hey, we recognize you. You are one of his followers.” And Peter responds, “Oh, no, no, no. I don’t even know him.” I imagine even Peter is surprised by his response. Peter knew this moment would come. And he believed he would respond differently. He assumed he would stand up. He said, “Jesus I would die for you.” But when the moment comes, he folds. He discovers that he is not the person he thought he was.

And in that moment, in that moment of denial, in that moment that Peter probably feels is his worst moment, Jesus turns and looks at him. Jesus sees

3 Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility* (2018) p. 56-57.

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the truth of who he is, and it's more than Peter can handle, and he runs out and weeps. We all need to be seen, but at the same time, all of us have those moments we wish we could keep hidden.

But Peter did not have that luxury. In his worst moment, Jesus turns and looks at him. Of course, Jesus could not have been surprised by what he sees. Jesus said it would happen just this way. He said to Peter, "I know you. I know your courage and I know your fear. I know you want to be faithful, but I also know all the things that get in your way." It's easy to assume that the look Jesus gives Peter is a look of disappointment, even shame. But I don't think that's it.

When Jesus turns to look at this stumbling, failing disciple who follows only at a distance, in this look, Jesus bridges the distance. He crosses the gap that

Peter cannot cross. The look of Jesus is not so much a look of judgment, as it is a look of grace. The look of Jesus dissolves the distance. Jesus says to Peter, "I know the worst moment in your life and I still refuse to give up on you. When you cannot come to me, I will come to you. My grace will not leave you behind. There is no failure in you that will cause me to let go of you."

Grace is not some sweet attribute of God. Grace is the tenacious faithfulness of God as God holds on to us in the very moment when we give God reason to let go. In grace, God knows the whole story of us, God sees all of us—the good and the bad—and God holds on. When we can't get to God, God comes to us. That's the whole story of the Gospel. And that is what grace looks like.