

Under Grace

I've never met Anna McArthur, but I feel like we would be friends. She's a Presbyterian pastor and a mom, but more than anything she is honest about her life as she tries to do all the things. I recently came back across a blog post she wrote at the end of one of *those* weeks. In a blog post from October of 2016 she writes:

I really thought my son was going to be admitted to the hospital for his pneumonia.

We'd tried two different antibiotics. He was exhausted. Deep breaths hurt. Every time he'd tried to attend dance classes for the previous few weeks, he'd had awful coughing fits. He started wheezing sometime on Sunday. Antibiotics by I.V. seemed to be the next step. We had another follow-up appointment with the pediatrician Monday morning. So, I did what any reasonable mom would do on Sunday night: I baked six pies.

Something is wrong with me.

Thinking that my week was about to get turned upside down, I tackled something on my list. I was preaching on Sunday, but was too flustered to write. I'd been given the 'money Sunday' of stewardship season and was feeling the pressure of the whole church budget. I was hosting the cross-country team on Friday night at our house for dinner. I knew I couldn't get my house ready yet. I knew I couldn't cook the pasta yet or get the salad going. So, I made dessert.

I forgot to add sugar.¹

She goes on to say that the pies were awful and inedible, that she got crankier as the week went on, and that her eye started to twitch, a giveaway that all was not as well as she was pretending it was. She also writes that:

[She was] treating God like an unwelcome guest, sighing and saying, 'Well, I guess you can ride in the car with me to go get the kids. We can catch up then, if you insist.'²

The eye twitch was her cue to take a break and go to a yoga class, even though she did "NO TIME FOR IT."

She headed to yoga because as she says:

¹ <https://annamcarthur.com/showing-upand-remembering-the-sugar/>

² McArthur

I have found grace before at yoga and hoped to find it there again. I was once in a class where the teacher started with, ‘You will not be getting a grade in this class.’ People laughed, but I knew she had my number. I felt relieved and then I felt sad because I’m actually pretty good at yoga and I wanted to get credit for doing something right. I’m a sucker for earning good grades. Most people know they aren’t being graded in a yoga class. I sometimes forget.³

Me, too. But maybe it’s heightened because the grading thing is in the air right now. As the end of the school year rolls around, I hear students and parents and teachers and grandparents worrying about end of grade testing, PSSA’s, SAT’s, and college acceptances. I also hear worried whispers from students who will be in summer school, the ones who need to repeat a grade, the ones who dread having to walk back in the door of that building or facing that one teacher.

And the grading does not end when we graduate. We are evaluated at our jobs. Judged on our parenting. Scrutinized for how we drive or how we look or how our children behave or what we weigh or the number of weeds growing in our yards. And those of us who consider ourselves to be people of faith are measured by the highest of standards. For years we have asked, “What would Jesus do?” and expect ourselves to do the same, and then we berate ourselves when we don’t measure up. You may even know someone who no longer goes to church because he or she felt judged or flat out was judged because they did not measure up to the standard set before them by other church members or a pastor or even themselves. They may have found more grace in a civic club or a bowling team or a yoga class than they have in a place of worship. Maybe you’ve been there, too.

In today’s text, Paul knows full well what it means not to measure up. As we read last week and as we say every week, all fall short. All means all. All miss the mark. And so some might argue that it’s not worth even trying to measure up, that they might as well sin early and often, go big or go home in the whole missing the mark thing so that grace may abound. But Paul argues that to make that move is to forget what it means to be baptized, to forget what it is to be welcomed into the body of Christ. Baptism is a pivotal moment, Paul argues. Baptism is a moment we can point to, a moment when we recognize that the grace of God claims us,

³ McArthur

too. But many of us were infants when that water was sprinkled on our heads. Many of us were wriggling babies or babbling toddlers when our parents made those promises on our behalf. How on earth can we look back on that moment and remember a single thing? And if we can't remember it, how can it possibly be a reference point, a hinge or pivotal moment where we can see a before and after? Maybe if we could just go back and feel that water trickling down our necks or hear it sloshing in the font, maybe then we could hang on tight to the grace that baptism points us to. Maybe then we could fully grasp what our baptism means. Maybe.

The truth is that I'm not sure those who can remember their actual baptism ever fully grasp what that water means. Being aware of the water doesn't necessarily make us any better at remembering its power. And that's where Paul's words come in. He wants to make it clear that baptism makes a difference, not because the water is infused with special power but because the God who claims us in baptism is. In claiming us in baptism, God gives us a tangible reminder of what God is up to in Jesus. Paul makes it clear that in Christ we are made new, that the old life is gone, that a new life has begun. In Christ, Paul insists that God tramples everything else that wants to stake a claim on us, everything that wants to tell us we are not worth much without certain grades or degrees or accomplishments. In Christ, God overrides and overrules anything that dares to claim that our skin color or our grades or our bank account or our nationality or our gender or our age makes us less than. And yet those other voices are still strong. Those other voices are quite insistent and loud. By pointing us back to our baptism and our core identity as God's beloved children, Paul emboldens us to resist those voices and hear God's call to us and God's claim on us again.

And I need to be reminded, which is one of the reasons I love Stepping Stone Sunday. I love that we give third graders new bibles so that as they continue to learn and grow, they have the chance to read for themselves and be reminded of the fierce love God has for all of humanity, for all of us and all of them. I love that we give our high school graduates blankets, tangible reminders of the love found here in this covenant community. As they wrap themselves in these blankets it is our prayer that the blankets will remind them that of the grace God wraps around them not for what they have achieved but because of who they are and whose they are as God's beloved children, always and everywhere. And I love welcoming confirmands who wear stoles representing their gifts and their loves as they offer their whole selves to the Lord of all. Today they

answer the same questions their parents or grandparents answered for them at their baptism. This moment draws them back to the font, back to the place where the church first told them that they are named as God's own forever. This moment blessedly draws us back there, too.

Each of these holy moments provides a touch point for them and for us. With the third graders we are invited to read God's word to and for us with new eyes. With the seniors we are invited to imagine God's love wrapped around us, too. With the confirmands we are called to hear the promises made at our baptism, to make those promises again ourselves. Each of these stepping stones gives us something to reach back to, to grab hold of. And each stepping stone calls us to remember that all of the falling short, all of the not quite measuring up does not have power over us now or ever because we are under grace.

Once in an interview, Bono the lead singer for U2 was asked about his understanding of grace. He replied:

Grace defies reason and logic. [It] interrupts, if you like, the consequences of your actions, which in my case is very good news indeed, because I've done a lot of stupid stuff.⁴

Haven't we all. A lot of stupid stuff and hurtful stuff and half-hearted stuff and hateful stuff. We've spoken when we should have listened. We've been silent when we should have said something. We have lashed out when our feelings have been hurt and fought back when our pride was wounded. We have measured ourselves by someone else's Instagram feed or new car or vacation photos or apparently blissful family reunion stories. We've been written off, turned away, given up, and had eyes rolled at us. We've also done our fair share writing off, turning away, giving up, and rolling our own eyes at others. And yet in Christ Jesus, we are "dead to sin and alive to God." We are under grace, not a free pass to do whatever we want, but an invitation to embrace the new life Jesus brings, an invitation to shape a life of courage, joy, kindness, and integrity, a life that extends grace to others. And when we fall short, grace is the gift that tells us we are worth infinitely more than our worst days and abundantly more treasured than our most shining moments. Under grace. Surrounded by grace. Grounded in grace. Washed and made new by grace. Now and forever.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁴ <https://noapologizing.wordpress.com/2011/02/24/u2s-bono-interview-about-christ/>