

A Community of Unstoppable Grace

Acts 4:32-35

Introduction

About 10 years ago, I attended a Small Business Conference in New Orleans, LA. The conference was held just a few months after Hurricane Katrina tore through the city. We were told the location was chosen to encourage the city in the aftermath. Our hotel was just a few blocks off of Bourbon Street. And though I have very little interest in anything that street had to offer, I thought I ought to at least walk through the area – just to be able to say I had done it.

So one evening I did just that. I have always regretted that decision. I have never been in any situation – before or since – where I was so acutely aware of the presence of evil all around me. The evil just seemed to ooze out of every door. I love jazz, but I will never go back to Bourbon Street and I don't know of any reason I would ever go back to New Orleans.

The city of Caesarea Philippi was probably the New Orleans of Jesus day. It was the single most pagan and evil city in that region. The entire culture was a celebration of the Greek fertility god "Pan." And every imaginable vice and evil activity could be found in that city. At the center of the city was a cave-like opening that spit out fire and Sulphur smells. The locals proudly named it "The Gates of Hell."

A few weeks before His crucifixion, Jesus took His disciples to Caesarea Philippi, and led them up to that very place. Standing there surrounded by all that evil of that city, right there in front of the "Gates of Hell," He asked His disciples one of the foundational questions for every would-be follower of Jesus Christ:

"Who do you say I am?" (Matthew 16:15)

Peter spoke up first:

"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." (Matthew 16:16)

Then ... right there in the presence of all that evil, Jesus announced to the world that a new force was about to be launched into the world. This new force would be more powerful than the evil that dominated that region and would dominate the world. Jesus would call this new force "the church." Listen to His announcement!

I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not overcome it. (Matthew 16:18)

The church. So new was this new force that it required a new word:

Ekklesia (the called out ones)

The word describes a group of people who are “called out” of the general population to become an identifiable community unlike the rest of the people around them. One writer makes this point:

It is important that the church today understand what it means to be *ekklesia*. The church needs to see itself as a people “called out” by God. If the church wants to make a difference in the world, it must be different from the world, just as salt is different from the food it flavors.

Over the next 7 weeks, we are going to talk about this new force, the church. In this last year, Christians all over the world have had to rethink what it means to be the church. Almost everything we knew was disrupted and reshaped. So in these days when we are re-emerging into society, it is good for us to spend time on this topic.

This sermon series is inspired by two realizations. First, the lectionary has us spend the next several weeks in the book of Acts. That is the book that talks about how the early Christians began to live out their faith in a world that was resistant to their message.

And second, specifically we are inspired by this phrase in Jesus' introduction of the new force He was creating:

The gates of Hell will not overcome (the church). (Matthew 16:18)

The Bible clearly teaches that the church of Jesus Christ is the greatest force on earth. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, not even Hell itself stands a chance when the church is fulfilling its God-intended purpose. Because, in a word, the church of Jesus Christ is:

UNSTOPPABLE!

This unstoppable church is marked by several characteristics. In today's text we see that it is a church of unstoppable grace.

God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all. (Acts 4:33b)

In our hymns, we often call grace “amazing.” And indeed it is. Amazingly, God poured out His grace on us by sending Jesus to pay the penalty for our sin – something we would never be able to do ourselves. On the cross we all became recipients of God's grace. And because we have received it, the church overflows with the ability to grant it as well.

God is the instigator of grace, and it is from Him that all other grace flows.

We don't need to die to give it – at least not physically. But grace often requires us to die to our own priorities, our own pride, our own needs. It requires us to see the needs of others and respond to those needs like God responds to our needs.

We received the amazing grace of God when we became part of the family of God, when we became part of the church. Now it is our ongoing role to conveyers of that grace to others as they have need. Grace is not only our name; it is to be one of the defining characteristics of who we are. Through us God's grace is unstoppable.

When that grace flows the world around us sees ...

#1: A COMMUNITY OF UNITY

Look at verse 32:

All the believers were one in heart and mind. (Acts 4:32)

Notice ... all the believers. Every one of them. The word "all" is a key word, for it suggests to us ...

- The whole idea of community. You will see that echo throughout this series of sermons. You cannot read the book of Acts without realizing the unstoppable power of God that flows through the people of God gathered together in community.
- The picture of the Body of Christ. The Apostle Paul would capture that truth as he described the community of believers as the Body of Christ. Body parts don't function independently of each other.
- Community isn't an option. It is the essence of who we are as believers.

The second half of that verse describes how this community thought and lived. They were "one in heart and mind." Which only makes sense. If we are the body of Christ we should automatically function as one heart and mind. No wonder the grace of God was powerfully present.

In my church youth group days we would hold a car wash each summer to help defray the costs of church camp. We would hook up a hose to the spigot on the side of the fellowship hall and rotate the cars through the parking lot. Good times and good money.

One year someone thought it would be a great idea if we bought a couple of splitters for our hoses. The thought was that if we could get four hoses running we could be washing four cars at a time. Nice theory, but the problem was that once we went from one hose to four hoses we lost all of our water pressure. The water just trickled out the end of each hose.

The grace of God flows in an unstoppable only through a community of unity. The church was not created to be a disjointed scattering of individual people with individuals agendas, but a unified community of believers.

When that grace flows the world around us sees ...

#2: THE CURIOSITY OF GENEROSITY

Look at verse 32:

No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. (Acts 4:32)

The world looks at such behavior and says “What?” Then someone will say “that sounds a lot like communism.” No it doesn't. It sounds nothing like communism. In communism:

- You have no possessions. The state owns it all.
- You therefore can't share, because you have nothing to share.

In the unstoppable church, the curiosity behind all that generosity is this simple truth:

You can't out-give God.

You see, when the world looks at resources available, it thinks like this:

I take care of my needs. You take care of your needs.

But in the kingdom of God the thinking is totally different. In the unstoppable church the thinking goes like this:

I will take care of your needs. God will take care of my needs.

And He does! He tells us that over and over again in the Scriptures. One of the classic stories is about a widow woman and her young son who had come to the end of their resources. She told the prophet:

As surely as the Lord your God lives, I don't have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die. (1 Kings 17:12)

The prophet reminded her of the curiosity of generosity, and suggested that she fix that last meal for him – not for herself or her son. Give it away! And she did. She operated under the principle that “If I take care of the needs of others, God will take care of my needs.”

And it worked! Because she did that, this is the word of the Lord that came to her through the prophet:

For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: “The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord sends rain on the land.” ... So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah. (1 Kings 17:14-16)

The world will say "It doesn't work that way." It does in God's kingdom. And unless you know the unity of the community you will never understand the curiosity of generosity.

APPLICATION

When God's people are of one heart and mind, they care less about their own needs and more about the needs of others. And the result is... God's unstoppable grace.

God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all. (Acts 4:33b)

Grace is more than just our church's name. It is to be the descriptor of how we are seen by the world around us. God calls us to be a church that is united in heart and mind and outrageously generous to others.

As we live that out, Grace is more than a word on a church sign at the entrance to this property. It is the attribute of God that flows through every activity that this body of believers does.

Because in a church like that, God's grace is UNSTOPPABLE!

Let's pray ... Amen.