

Values and Rip-offs

Ephesians 2:1-10

The Reverend Erica Wimber Avena

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Prayer: *May your word reassure us, O God, when we feel so isolated that even you seem far away; when judgment comes and we are reluctant to face all that your light reveals. In your rich mercy remind us of the depth of your love, and the reach of your call on our lives...*



Grace came down! This image is of the WR Grace Building in Manhattan built in 1974. On this foggy day, it looks like "Grace" literally has slid down the building to street level. You can read the word, but the building behind it is lost in fog – from this perspective it is a joyous message for those who have imagination and eyes to see. Grace came down...and greets you...if you are standing on the street.

In this season of Lent we have been working with the theme of the world upside down, or spiritual reversals. The Bible is full of spiritual reversals. The sick are made well, those in power find they have nothing, faith like a tiny mustard seed. Last week Amie talked about foolish wisdom; we began the series with a focus on the story of Noah's flood and the symbol of a rainbow: visible only with water and light and perspective. For a moment.

Ephesians 2:8 says: *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God...*

So we begin with a gift. Perhaps appearing out of the fog like this message on a building. It's a gift of grace. It's pretty important to begin here. I had been using this expression "God's grace" for years before I realized that people hear it differently. To speak plainly, "God's grace" is God's love for humanity. And this grace or love includes, God's full and total loving forgiveness – of all our sins and shortcomings. We begin with the reality that God is love, that God loves each human. It's a gift. As any gift you don't have to accept it, you don't have to unwrap it, you don't have to keep it or value it. It is a gift. You can pass it on for someone else to enjoy...but you could also unwrap it and let it grow, not unlike a mustard seed, growing in your own home, in your own life, in your own heart.

Gifts come in lots of ways. There are plenty of things that arrive unasked for in our lives. The Coronavirus has been with us here in North America for a year now – exactly none of us asked for this. The news is full of stories about how people are faring with it. It ranges from heartbreaking hardship to silver linings in some unexpected places. Those who grieve and those who are healing. I received my first vaccination a few days ago and my arm is aching...a reminder to me of the body's healing and the work we all need to do together to bring down the menace of this disease. Personally.

When the pandemic began you may remember how the world seemed to flip upside down. Ready or not we were sheltering where we were, with whatever we had, and whoever was with us. Two of our children came home from college – not an easy transition. While some people in health care like my sister who is a PA were not allowed to stop working, others lost jobs. Toilet paper, of all things, couldn't be found. Hand sanitizer ran out, (and it isn't hard to produce) rubber gloves, tissues, and paper towels – short supply. The world seemed to have stopped traveling and gone home to clean. We wondered as grocery store shelves were bare and restaurants had to close, how stable is our food supply? Where I shop they limited how many items I could buy in some cases, such as chicken and cleaning supplies. Here at the church I told the staff that now they needed to take what they have been doing, and do it online. I had been here almost 3 weeks, and of course, I had no idea how to do that, only that it needed to be done. A lot of people said it wouldn't last long.

In that upside down moment, values shifted. If you were healthy you were lucky. The opportunity to gather safely with loved ones was a cause worth quarantining for if you could pull it off. Real estate sales of single family suburban homes soared as people moved out of apartments and urban areas.

We have had a yearlong collective meditation on what is valuable and what is not. And if we can come out of the pandemic with clearer commitments, knowing what is worth struggling for, and what is worthless, we will have made good use of this time. It isn't toilet paper, as much as that is a basic necessity.

There was an article in *The New Yorker* magazine a few years ago entitled: *Why People Mistake Good Deals for Rip-Offs*¹. It described how an elderly man set up a stall near Central Park and sold eight spray-painted canvases for less than one five-hundredth of their true value. The art works were worth more than two hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars, but the man walked away with just four hundred and twenty dollars. Each canvas was an original by the British artist who goes by Banksy. For several hours, hundreds of oblivious locals and tourists ignored the quiet salesman, along with the treasure he was hiding in plain sight. The day ended with thirty paintings left unsold. One Banksy aficionado, certain she could distinguish a fake from the real thing, scolded the man for knocking off the artist's work.



¹ <https://www.newyorker.com/business/currency/why-people-mistake-good-deals-for-rip-offs>

The article goes on to say that art is “*inherently inevaluable*.” New vocabulary word there: “*inevaluable*.” Some concepts are easy to evaluate without a reference standard. You don’t need external help to evaluate whether, for example, you’re well-rested or exhausted, or too hot or too cold, or hungry or full, because those states are “inherently evaluable”—they’re easy to measure, and you accurately measure them all the time.

Banksy knew this when he asked the elderly man to sell his works in Central Park. The sale was itself a form of performance art. Revealing human nature. And all its flaws for not valuing the valuable.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God...

The theologian Karl Barth said in his church dogmatics (which takes up an entire shelf): *Why is it that John Calvin could not speak of the life of the new (hu)man in terms no less radical and categorical –indeed more so –than those which he used in relation to the death of the old?*² Barth goes on for pages about the gift of God’s love. He complains that Calvin and Calvinists, have drawn everyone’s attention the wrong way for hundreds of years with a theology of how far we fall short, but that isn’t where God’s focus is. God’s focus is on the redemptive work going on all around us, within us, in our community and in our world. This is work that God can do without us, but it is also work that we are invited to participate in. It’s a gift of God.

Don’t let your head be turned by a lesser gift. This is a gift of value.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God...

It’s almost as if it slid down the side of a building and greeted you on the street, right where you are. A gift. God’s abiding love.

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² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation* iv, 2, pp. 576