

How dare you speak of grace?

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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A while back I spent a good chunk of a week at a denominational pastors' retreat in the Alberta foothills just north of Calgary. One of the things we did during our worship times each day was spend some time “dwelling in the Word.” The specific text we focused on each session was [Luke 7:36-50](#), the story where Jesus is anointed by a “sinful woman” at the home of Simon the Pharisee. It’s a scandalous story—a woman of ill repute showing up a bunch of religious elites, crashing their party with her sensuous, inappropriate display of penitence, love, and devotion. Even more scandalously, Jesus praises her as an example to emulate, claims to forgive her sin, and sends her away in peace. One can only imagine what must have been going on in the minds of the esteemed, religious host and his respectable dinner guests!

During one session, we were invited to creatively re-imagine and re-present the text to others. How might this story have played out today? Who would the characters have been? Where did we see ourselves in the story? Now I am, it must be said, an incorrigible rationalist and about as creative as mud... And I enjoy role-playing about as much as a root canal... But it was good and necessary for me to (painfully, awkwardly) enter into this story. *Personally*. It’s one thing to affirm that this woman recognized her need for mercy, grace, and forgiveness and that I should do the same. It’s quite another to imagine *myself* exhibiting that kind of vulnerability, social disinhibition, and desperate need.

(Conversely, it’s not at all hard to imagine myself as a religious “expert” hosting a bunch of guests to [respectably] discuss matters of theology. Why, oh why, are the people Jesus praises in the gospels so rarely smarty-pants types who have spent a lot of time studying, analyzing, and parsing the ways of God?)

The story is, of course, a story about grace. About recognizing one’s *need* for grace. About *receiving* grace. And, well, we Mennonites haven’t always been very good at grace. We’re relatively good at knuckling down and following Jesus out of duty or obligation. We’re good at recognizing the importance of discipleship as

opposed to mere belief. We're good at taking the commands of Jesus seriously (even the really, *really* hard ones that everyone else ignores!). But grace? Well, we're kind of suspicious about grace. Isn't that what Lutherans talk about? Isn't it kind of like a crutch or excuse for other less committed Christians who don't want to do what Jesus said? It's too easy, too cheap, as Bonhoeffer so famously said. And discipleship is hard (and magnificently virtuous!) work. We're supposed to take up our crosses and *follow*, not just trust and believe and assume that grace covers everything.

On the drive home from that trip I listened to Mumford and Sons' new album [Babel](#). One of my favourite songs on this album is "[Broken Crown](#)." It is a haunting song that speaks of guilt and longing, of doubt and pain, of weakness and rage. One of the lyrics that stood out to me the first time I heard it was, "in this twilight how dare you speak of grace." I have often wondered about the nature of the "twilight" in this line. Is it the twilight of a dying faith? Of (post)modernity? Of a specific transgression? Something else? What, I have often wondered, is the story behind this line, behind this angry refusal to speak of grace?

Whatever the case may be, I do know that Marcus Mumford is not the only one who has a hard time with grace. *I* have a hard time with grace. I don't dare speak of it often—at least not in connection to myself. I know all about grace as a *doctrine*, as a theological necessity, as an expression of God's truest nature. Grace is fine and appropriate—necessary, even!—for others, but when it comes to myself? Well, I seem to assume that God's just fresh out of grace. There are different categories for me. When it comes to me, God is interested in performance, competence, discipline, and strength. I'm a Mennonite, after all, and a religious expert, to boot!

No, actually. Not at all. I am *exactly* like that woman in Luke's gospel. Vulnerable. Poor. Desperately needy. Confused. Full of sorrow. Sinful. My debt is too great to pay. I don't know nearly as much or perform nearly as well as I'd like to think. I am in desperate need of grace. *Real* grace. Not an imagined grace that says we're all basically ok and that God is a pretty decent chap in picking up the deficit left by our limitations, but a sturdy biblical, Christocentric grace that looks my sin squarely in its ugly face, pays a brutal price, forgives, and sends me away in peace. *This* grace, *this* is what I need.

Grace is not just something that makes theological sense; it's not just a doctrine to affirm. It's not just something nice to tell others because we want them to feel

better about God and about themselves. It's a desperate, personal, existential need that we must speak of often. In the twilight of a flickering faith or in the broad daylight of the life of committed discipleship. Wherever, whenever. We *need* this. All of us. We dare not pretend otherwise.

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