

Teaching moments: Signs of grace

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [February 22, 2005](#) issue

As part of a course on preaching that I took in my middler year at divinity school, I preached, and then submitted as a written text, what I thought was a good sermon. My professor thought my delivery was fine, and that the sermon showed potential. But his written comment stung: “Your stories and images are all of sin and its effects. Search for ways to convey signs of grace.”

Why did it sting? Not so much because it lowered my grade, although that bugged me. Not even because it was the professor’s primary comment on the sermon, although I did wonder whether he had liked the sermon much at all. Was he telling me I wasn’t a good preacher?

Most of all, the comment stung because it offered a pointed judgment on more than just that sermon. Whether the teacher had intended it as such or not, I heard it as a judgment on my life, and especially how I envisioned and understood Christian life.

Time itself wouldn’t heal this wound, because it penetrated deeper than a surface wound. It worked on my soul, until I slowly began to see God, the world and my own life differently. Where, in life as well as in literature, did I see signs of grace appearing, working, sustaining people and drawing us to communion with God and with one another?

Prior to that class, I had standardized the “Jesus arrives to fix what’s broken” sermon. I would describe the predicament we find ourselves in, draw out an image—for example, from Walker Percy—showing that “the center didn’t hold,” and then conclude by affirming that Jesus Christ is “the center that holds” and that we should try harder to be faithful to Jesus. It was, I thought, a nifty move.

Perhaps it was itself a sign of grace that my professor, Richard Lischer, was a Lutheran. His theological perspective tended to counterbalance my perfectionistic Wesleyanism, which was always looking for places we had fallen short. I hadn’t yet learned the theology of grace that undergirded and pervaded Wesley’s sense of holiness. As a young seminarian, I fear, I was more interested in sanctimony than

sanctity. But a straightforward pair of sentences on a preaching assignment struck me as a revelation from God and has been working on me ever since.

I have discovered I am not alone in this struggle. How easy it is for all of us to focus on what is sinful in the world, in other people's lives, in our own lives. How easy it is to pick ourselves up by knocking others down. We even enshrine this approach in our educational system, where we learn to write "critical" essays about others' ideas primarily by finding the gaps and flaws in their argument.

My seminary education helped to challenge that approach. I was blessed by teachers and mentors who insisted that a "critical" essay could be constructive as well. Specifically, I learned by watching and listening to Richard Lischer as both teacher and preacher—finding out that he practiced what he preached in his comments, and marveling at how his sermons wove images of grace into tapestries of faithful witness to God.

Over the years, I have learned that grace is often discovered in the practices and friendships of daily life. My writing and my preaching pay more attention to seeing signs of the kingdom in small gestures of faithfulness, in skills that over time are honed to offer a remarkable witness. I have developed habits of reading and of seeing that cultivate my imagination. This has drawn me to patterns of *lectio divina* for pondering scripture as well as to engagement with literature and film, cultivating a graceful attention to God and to the world.

As a preacher, I have become more attentive to the particularities of the biblical text, looking for openings in the narrative rather than using the text as a springboard for a theological point. I have been drawn to stories from ordinary life, to stories that enliven the imagination and stir people to see possibilities for God's faithfulness they hadn't seen before. As I have become a different sort of preacher, so also have I become a different sort of person.

More recently, I have been privileged to see many of my teachers become colleagues and friends. And I have learned that friends are some of our most important teachers and signs of grace in our lives. When those friends are also gifted writers and teachers, we are doubly blessed.

I shouldn't have been surprised that Rick Lischer's *Open Secrets* would be more than a memoir of a pastor's first parish—that it would be permeated by signs of grace, and show a care for words and relationships that continually point to God's

redeeming and reshaping of the world and our lives.

In December I read Marilynne Robinson's extraordinary novel *Gilead*, a story filled with a love of words as witness to the Word, a narrative suffused with a delight in the mysteries and beauty of God's grace. One of the first things I wanted to do after finishing the book was to tell Rick Lischer about it, to urge him to read it. I was sure he would love it, and I wanted to share my discovery with a good friend—a good friend who, whether as a teacher challenging his student or as a colleague sharing good literature, has himself been a sign of grace.