

We are becoming a people of the immediate. We grow impatient with slow lines in fast food places. A local popular burger joint in New York City has cameras pointed at its lines so that patrons can go on line and see via the web how long the wait is! They can time their visit to when the lines are smaller! We want almost instant contact. If you don't believe me try delaying your answer to some emails. I remember my cousin wondering how long it would take a message from his home in Bangor, Maine, to reach us in Iloilo City, Philippines. We tested it: 4 - 5 seconds!

I also remember how my grandmother reacted when "quick cooking oats" came on the market. She would not believe that you could cook good oats in just minutes. In fact, I don't think she ever bought the quick cooking kind. I wonder what she would think of the fast paced world we live in today. Remember the prayer: Lord, give me patience and give it right now!

Even in our prayers we seek immediate answers. Solomon has just finished the dedication of the Temple. Chapter 8 of I Kings contains his powerful prayer prayed at the dedication service. Solomon is calling for his people to be the people God has called into being. His prayer is one of grace for when (not if) the people fail (8:46). It is a prayer for a people called. It is a call to renew the Covenant they have with God much like Joshua's Covenant renewal in Joshua 24. The conclusion: "*But your hearts must be fully committed to the Lord our God, to live by his decrees and obey his commands, as at this time*" (8:61 NIV).

Almost immediately God responds to Solomon and his prayer, "*I have heard the prayer and plea you have made before me*" (9:3 NIV). God has heard the prayer of dedication and immediately informs Solomon. God will honor Solomon's prayer. Solomon has not just been praying to a wall or into the air, there is one who has heard and who now responds. But...don't you just love/hate that word and the "if" that sometimes accompanies it? They express a condition, one that we may not always want. Note the next verse, "*But if you or your sons turn away from me and do not observe the commands and decrees I have given you and go off to serve other gods and worship them*" (9:6 NIV). In essence God is reminding Solomon that he has stood before God and made promises on behalf of the people. They have renewed their covenantal relationship with God and there are responsibilities that come with being a member of the community.

As we move on to Matthew we are reaffirmed that we serve a God who hears our prayers. Jesus has begun his ministry. John the Baptist has been put in jail and has sent his followers to see if Jesus is the One or should they be looking for another (Matthew 11:2-6). Jesus responds not with a verbal "yes" but asks them to tell John what Jesus is doing: The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the dead come to life and the world is being forever changed. Go and tell John what you have seen. Jesus asks that his actions speak for him.

However the elite of the day, the religious leaders, do not or cannot comprehend the ministry of Christ. John and Jesus have two entirely different styles and they are both criticized for their actions. John comes neither eating (at least a conventional diet) nor does he drink and they say he has a demon. Jesus comes being a normal person, eating and drinking, and they accuse him of being a drunkard and a glutton. How can you possibly please people like this? How do you counter such thinking?

Jesus then prays the prayer we read this morning. The people are seeing what their leaders refuse to see. The leaders are so caught up with their expectations of the Messiah that they cannot see the One who is in their midst. They are not willing to open their minds to God moving outside their expectations. They are still seeing God from a worldly perspective, one of power and prestige. Jesus does not fit into their mold.

If in Jesus we see God – What do we see? One who places a heavy burden on people or one who lifts the burdens they bear? You know that I have been reading the book, Unchristian. The author has interviewed thousands of 18 – 30 year-olds and gives us their view of us Christians. Their view is that we are ones who place burdens, restrictions on people. We are not the ones who lift the burdens as Jesus does but ones who like to make their lives more difficult. It's hard to see ourselves as others see us but this is how we are seen – those who like to place heavy burdens – which is contrary to the words Jesus uses as he ends this prayer, *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (11:28 NIV)*.

Philip Yancey in his book, What's So Amazing About Grace, tells the story of a friend who was working with a young mother addicted to drugs. This young mother could raise more money selling her young daughter than she could selling her own body. The friend asked if the woman had thought about the church. Her response was something to the effect, “Why would I go there? I already have enough problems.”

Yes, this is a terrible story and I in no way want to say it isn't. But...what if this woman has a transforming experience with Christ? When I was doing continuing education for pastors in the Philippines I would share this story and pose this question: What would you do if this woman came to your congregation? I would divide them up into groups, one representing pastors, one the governing board of the church and the other to be lay people of the congregation who would know her story. They had about an hour and a half to struggle with this woman and her situation. Then we would gather back and report.

I was amazed at their responses. Almost all thought that she should be punished in some way. Some wanted to put her on probation in the church. Others wanted nothing to do with her at all. Many would turn her over to the authorities and when and if she got out of jail then think about letting her join the congregation. Almost all the responses were judgmental. I could begin to understand her response about having enough problems without dealing with the church.

Now as I said before, I in no way want to dismiss the horror of this story and I made that clear as I asked the final question: What would Jesus do with this woman? We probably don't like the answer. I mean we like the answer as far as it deals with us and our sins but not when it deals with the sin of others, whose sins we don't approve of. I am confident that Jesus' answer is: GRACE, an easy burden. We want to see some type of punishment, some type of action taken to make this woman pay for her sins. Jesus extends the burden of grace. So, the question comes back to us, “How does Jesus react to our sins?” God gives grace. Jesus came because of God's grace. It is the answer of God's grace that we have a hard time handling, especially when it is applied to other people. However, it is because of God's grace that we are here.

Solomon and the people renew their covenant with God. It will not be long before they break it. Jesus comes giving us God's answer – forgiveness and grace – a burden that is light. How do we respond when God answers and God's answer is grace?