

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander
Easter 3 (C) ~ May 4, 2025
St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Bethesda
Acts 9:1-6
Psalm 30:1-6, 12-13
John 21:1-19

Grace Beyond Boundaries

Yesterday morning, an article ran in the *New York Times* under the headline, "Warren Buffett Says He Plans to Step Down as Head of Berkshire."¹ Imagine being so wealthy, so powerful, that word of your impending retirement was worthy of the lead story in the Global Economy section of one of the world's most influential newspapers!

It boggles the mind.

Oddly, I already was planning to tell you my Warren Buffett story this morning when I happened to see that piece in the *Times*.

God's timing, perhaps? Or just a coincidence?

I don't know. Anyway, here goes:

I met Warren Buffett fifteen years ago, in prison.

Now that I have your attention...

It's true: In June 2010, I found myself behind razor wire at Sing Sing, the New York State Maximum Security prison "up the river" – up the Hudson River, that is – in Ossining. This was not the first time I was there. While we were serving parishes in the Diocese of New York, my husband and I become involved with a

¹ ["Warren Buffett Says He Plans to Step Down as Head of Berkshire"](#)

transformational program called “Hudson Link for Higher Education,”² which provides a college education to incarcerated individuals in a number of correctional facilities in New York State. We were blessed to attend graduation ceremonies at Sing Sing several years in a row.

As we well-know, achieving an education is no small task under the most optimal of circumstances, so you can imagine the adversities that Hudson Link participants have to overcome in order to do so while in prison. They are motivated: They want to make better lives for themselves (even if they will never again see life outside those walls), and they want to set an example for those at home. Without question, Sing Sing graduation is one of the most moving and inspirational things I have ever experienced. It’s an example of Resurrection in our own time.

After wending our way through the long and thorough security check-in process, Randy and I were led through a heavy, barred door. If you’ve ever visited a prison, you know that one door has to be slammed and locked behind before the next can be opened. (It’s more than a little intimidating.) Once the second door opened, we crossed the threshold into a spacious dining room, where graduation was about to take place. And who should be standing there amidst a group of inmates, families, and assorted Hudson Link supporters, but one of the world’s wealthiest and most powerful men. Warren Buffett, in the flesh.

Mr. Buffett wasn’t there as Commencement Speaker or to award a prize or make a financial contribution to the program. He simply was attending as a “regular guy,” to cheer on the men who had earned their degrees while behind bars. His sister, Doris, had been a longtime Hudson Link supporter, and he wanted to experience it for himself.

I, for one, found that remarkable, because with all the things he could have been doing with his time (and his money), he chose to spend his evening with those who – for good reason in most cases – were on the margins of society.

² <https://hudsonlink.org>

It was quite the collision of worlds.

Warren Buffett made the *New York Times* that week, too. The next day a reporter commented,

*If graduation season is about hope and new horizons, if all of us have a shot at redemption, if a college degree is about more than the decal on the rear window, it was one heck of a graduation Wednesday night at the maximum security prison 35 miles north of Midtown Manhattan.*³

Commencement takes place every June at Sing Sing, but *this* commencement was newsworthy because of who was in attendance.

To my mind, this is what the Kingdom of God must look like: rich and poor, powerful and disenfranchised, successful and troubled, all mixing it up together. And behind razor wire, overlooking a glorious Hudson River sunset, no less.

Here was the Gospel of Christ in action: love and mercy and second chances. The barriers dividing people dismantled – if only for an evening.

Grace beyond boundaries.

I'd love for you to join me in a moment of reflection, if you will. I invite you to close your eyes for a few seconds and call to mind something in your past, something of which you are ashamed – deeply. Have you ever done something that hurt someone else, intentionally or un-, that caused you to be separated from them – if only temporarily? (God willing, not by razor wire.)

If you tell me no, then blessed are you, indeed.

But if you can recall a moment, an incident, maybe even a period of your life, then you are not alone.

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/07/nyregion/07towns.html>

Acknowledge the shame that you felt. I don't want you to relive it; just acknowledge it. Notice it.

When you're ready, please open your eyes.

If you're able, please hold that moment, or incident, or period in your mind's eye just a bit longer.

Rest assured, I am *not* going to ask you to turn to your neighbor and share.

But just know that we've all got our stuff.

Some of you may be familiar with the older, more formal language of the Rite I Service of Holy Eucharist in the *Book of Common Prayer*. In the Confession, you might remember, the congregation says together,

*We do earnestly repent,
and are heartily sorry for these our misdoings;
the remembrance of them is grievous unto us,
the burden of them is intolerable.*⁴

What “intolerable burden” are you carrying?

Does your “misdoing” define you?

I pray not. That certainly isn't what Jesus wants for you.

In his acclaimed memoir, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, author Bryan Stevenson writes of his experience as a public interest lawyer standing with those on the wrong side of the American criminal justice system. Stevenson argues passionately that “Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done.”⁵

⁴ BCP, 331.

⁵ Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (London: One World, 2014).

Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done.

I wonder whether you believe that, deep-down – either about yourself or about someone who has hurt or offended or betrayed you.

If you struggle with this bold claim, you are in good company.

It can be challenging to make peace with, either to accept or to grant, grace.

Grace may be “amazing,” but it also is remarkably controversial.

Some of us may understand words like “grace,” or “forgiveness,” or “redemption” as just too *soft* – not robust, not tough, enough for the “real world” in which we live and move and have our being.

We expect, we may even pray for, “an eye for an eye.” That’s human. I’m not here to judge. (Notice that I say *we*...)

I believe that is why some folks have a problem with Jesus: They think that He is too “soft,” too.

The story we’ve just heard this morning from the Gospel of John narrates yet another post-Resurrection appearance of the Risen Christ to those who were closest to Him on earth. On Easter Sunday, it was Mary Magdalene, who mistook Him for the gardener; last week, it was Thomas, who refused to believe that Jesus was raised until he saw the marks in His side and hands for himself; and now it’s Peter’s turn.

Presumably this is not the first time that Peter has seen Jesus since the Resurrection. It seems safe to assume that he, too, was among those locked up out of fear when Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit onto the disciples in the upper room. But today’s Gospel reading *is* the first time we witness a dialogue between

Peter and his friend, his teacher, and his Lord – the One whom he denied even knowing, out of fear for his own life.

Three times.

If you were in church on Palm Sunday or Good Friday, you will remember that brutal moment. It could be argued that Peter is just as much a traitor as Judas.

Imagine the shame with which Peter lives. Imagine the agony. Peter had promised, “Lord...I will lay down my life for you” (John 13:37), and yet – when asked “You are not also one of this man’s disciples, are you?” – Peter adamantly replies, “I am not.” Three times...all the while warming himself by a charcoal fire, as his friend, his teacher, and his Lord is being arrested and hauled away (John 18).

That’s pretty bad.

Lest we ever think that the saints are more perfect or holy than we...

Through his own actions, Peter has separated himself from grace. He has gone back to his old life of fishing – not for people, as Jesus once promised him, but for fish. It’s almost as though the past three years of mission and ministry, of growth and transformation, never happened.

But Jesus doesn’t leave Peter there on the fishing boat, stewing in his own shame. Notice that the Risen Christ has a bit of unfinished business to do. At the very end of the Gospel, He goes after Peter: “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He asks.

Three times.

And three times Peter replies, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.”

All the while sharing breakfast by a charcoal fire.

Just a coincidence?

Doubtful.

This is the Gospel of Christ in action, in a nutshell: love and mercy and second chances.

Grace beyond the boundaries of shame and guilt and separation.

Peter is redeemed and restored to relationship. He's got work to do.

Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done.

Each of us: Not just you; not just I. But each – all – of us.

The rich and the poor, the powerful and the disenfranchised, the successful and the troubled.

Those whom we have hurt, and those who have hurt us.

What do we do with that?

Grace is controversial, after all.

This is what the Kingdom of God must look like.

And it's newsworthy. *Amen.*