

BIBLE STUDY on TITUS 2:11-15

Willis Elliott

Once there was a man who told his wife there was a unicorn grazing in the back yard. She said, "You must be crazy." When he persisted, she called for the white jackets to come and straight-jacket him and take him away. When they came, they asked him whether there was a unicorn in the back yard. "A unicorn?" he snorted. "One would have to be crazy even to think of such a thing!" So they straight-jacketed her and took her away. For the rest of his life, the husband contentedly looked to the needs of the unicorn in the back yard.

My telling, but you will recognize this as a story spun out of the whimsical mind of James Thurber. A psychosocioliterary analysis would be fun, but for our present purpose I point out just two details, neither of them stated and the more powerful only being implied:

1. The duplicitous husband never inwardly wavered on the experienced fact of the unicorn, and
2. Neither his wife nor the "white jackets" checked the back yard: they were into reality-assuming, not reality-checking.

The husband was single-mindedly into confessing Christ the Unicorn as an action not just counter-cultural (a negative) but alternative-cultural (a positive). Singlemindedly: that neat pre-feminist ploy of getting rid of his wife. "The grace of God appeared....." "The unicorn has appeared.....," has been seen, experienced, as present!

Of course, if the unicorn wandered into the back yard and neither husband nor wife saw it, it would not have appeared: to appear, it would have to be seen by somebody and confessed to be there. Without the seeing, the life of the household would have proceeded unaware that a great new thing had happened, and right there in their own back yard! What would have happened in the house if one of the occupants had seen the unicorn and said nothing? The seer might have some roiling going on inside, but the couple's assumed world and life together would have been virtually undisturbed — as is the life of the church and of the world when Christ the Unicorn is present but not confessed, openly affirmed.

I

Over the phone (recently) I read our passage, Titus 2:11-15 to an atheist in Princeton, New Jersey. He's not yet ready to check out the back yard for the Unicorn. Three days ago I quoted the passage to two late-twenty-somethings on an Amtrak train

between Sacramento and Walnut Creek, California. There were polishing off a six-pack, and I said to them "How is it between you and God?" Their round eyes looked at me and said what that Thurber wife said to her husband, "You must be crazy!" They held on to their opened beers but for the 1 and ½ hours of the run didn't take another sip. First it had to come clear to them that I wasn't talking about some girl named Grace. Then, when they got the idea I was telling them there was something wrong with them that they couldn't fix, they protested and presented me with a short list of their righteousness. One said "I'm good enough to go to heaven if there is one." And the other said "I'm good enough to choose, but I'd rather go to hell, because there are more good people there." I kept the conversation tethered, though with a long leash, to the Story of God's making and in Christ fixing the world, (and) us when we confess we cannot fix ourselves and the world. After about an hour, one of them said "I wish this weren't our second six-pack: I'd like to think more clearly about all this." At conversation's end they were in a mood to check out the back yard.

II

It's the first week in Advent, 1993, and our Titus passage is a ringer for it: Advent is appearance, and "the grace of God has appeared." The incarnation occurred, but grace did not appear till God's saving purpose and presence in Jesus Christ was recognized and confessed. Our passage states the recognition and is itself an instance of confessing Christ and declaring grace's implications for life.

A just-received Advent-Christmas letter begins with this passage. When I told the sender about the Amtrak use of the passage, he reminded me that fifty-six years ago, in the first session of our Systematic Theology course, Professor Frank Wright assigned us to memorize Titus 2:11-15 for the second session. Two observations: One, that old professor, whom I used to converse with evenings as he milked his cow, thought that when it comes to theology, this passage from the New Testament's third pastoral letter just about says it all. Second, memorized texts are easy to access; my longtime good friend accessed the passage for his Advent-Christmas letter, and I accessed it when asked to lead this Bible study.

The author of the Pastoral Letters aims to guide Christian leaders whose ministries were endangered by cultural captivity, by accommodationism, by conformity to the spirit, categories, and goals of the world, and by neglect of "the scriptures." He could have written much of the *Confessing Christ* letter you all received and to which your presence today is a response. From that letter, the *Christian Century* (December 1, 1993) quotes this: "We view this indifference to Scripture and debilitating amnesia as a threat to the gospel."

III

To bring out the corrective force of our text, I've given it this dynamic-equivalence translation: "In Jesus Christ, the grace of God eager to save all humanity has dawned. God's gift, it calls us from gloomy reflections on what the world has come to,.....to joyful gratitude for what has come to the world. It is an ever-present tutor, stimulating us to renounce secularism, selfish passions, and current conventional enthusiasms and to live resolutely, justly, and devoutly in this present age while waiting to welcome the consummation of the blessed hope, the dawning of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and purify for himself a people belonging only to himself, who are eager to do good. Let this be your message, these your themes....."

The little letter we call "Titus" is eager to do a specific good, viz to demonstrate and inculcate a sane, sound, steady hold on Christian theological and ethical essentials with their built-in motivations for Christian believing and living. Built into the indicative of the once-for-all event of grace, i.e. the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of our Lord, are the imperatives of working and waiting, action and anticipation. Ethics is rooted in redemption and flowers in the victories of grace over sin, the principalities and powers, and death itself.

"Grace" is Christianity in one word, a monosyllable signaling the Christian Story as no other word can (certainly, not "love"). "Grace" more than any other word is the hot-button freeing our hearts to praise and joy.

"Grace".....the Christian Story that God came as Jesus, died to save us, rose, and will rule "all things." Because "grace" is the most comprehensive word of describing the Christian Faith, Christian hymnody abounds with it.

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!" (In the Presbyterian Hymnal 1990, it's also in five Amerind languages.)

"Come, Thou fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing Thy grace..... O to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be!"

In New Haven about a week ago, Sally Bailey of Hospice Connecticut handed me a program on which this grace-saying of mine was printed:

"Grace, God's caring Presence, supervenes over and interpenetrates the common day.

It is the food within all food, the comfort and the strength within all assurance, the song that sings itself within all our moods.

To know this light, to live it is life eternal. The love that will not let us go will not let us down."

Where here is wholeness? In God's caring for "the common day." In all food, all assurance, all moods. In the Love that will not let us go while we want it to hold us, and will not let us down when we want it to hold us up. Here is grace as comfort and strength, comfort in sorrow and strength in weakness..... in the two-player world of the strong and the weak, grace weighs in on the side of the weak... That, for us Christians, is both fact and assignment.

As almost all early Christians were Greek-speaking, and their main word for "joy" was "chara," which is on the same root-stem as their word for "grace" (charis), they could not think grace without feeling joy!

"Joy to the world, the Lord has come!"

Those joy-bringing, grace-announcing Christmas angels must have astonished those shepherds as much as,..... as,..... that unicorn in the back yard astonished and delighted Thurber's crazy husband. He was crazy, wasn't he? Or did a New Reality break in on him? Had a New World gotten through to him? I think he must have sung for joy, or at least hummed, while seeing to the needs of that unicorn,..... the Unicorn.

(Willis Elliott is a Biblical scholar who has taught at New York Theological Seminary.)

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