

Fred Craddock, a preaching professor at Duke Divinity School, tells of being in an unfamiliar city, and since he was there over the weekend, he was looking for a church where he could worship. He asked at the hotel desk if there was a church near enough that he could walk. After a little huddle behind the counter they said, “Well, there's one 3 or four blocks down that way,” pointing in one direction. So he walked to a small, modestly built church where the people warmly welcomed him. By the time the service it started the entire sanctuary was full. At the appointed hour, the choir came down, followed by the minister. Craddock said he was completely shocked. He was very tall, almost 6’4”, and very large. But the most noticeable feature was his stumbling, lumbering gait. He was awkward, almost falling, with his large arms at his sides barely moving. His head was misshapen, his hair was askew. He stumbled up the three or four steps to get to the pulpit, and when he turned to face us, I saw the thick glasses. So when he read, he held the book near his nose. And speaking seemed to come with great struggle. But as soon as he started to speak, Craddock lost all sense of that. He read 1 Corinthians 13 and spoke on the subject in the bulletin, “But the greatest of these is love.” And while he wasn't a great preacher, it was so warm and full of love and affection, with the conviction that what he was preaching he had experienced deeply in his own life. For all his lack of attractiveness on the outside, that became almost invisible when you witnessed the beauty that shone forth from his spirit.

Craddock waited until after the service talk with him, which gave him an opportunity to listen to people as they left the sanctuary. Again, there was such love and affection between the pastor and his people. One of the women as she went by said, “I wish I could know your mother.” He said, “My mother's name was grace.”

When it was just the two of them, Craddock said to him, "That was an unusual response you gave to that woman: my mother's name is Grace." And the preacher explained why it was the best answer to her comment. "When I was born, I was put up for adoption. But as you can see, nobody wanted to adopt me. So I went from foster home to foster home; and when I was 16 or 17, I saw some young people going into a church. I wanted to be with young people, so I went in too, and there in that church I met Grace -- the grace of God. That's when my life really began."

This sounds like something that happened in the synagogue where Jesus was teaching, and of course in every encounter one has with Jesus. But in this case it was a woman – not named – all we know about her is that a spirit had “crippled” her causing her to be bent over and unable to stand up straight. She comes to the synagogue, wanting to be where it seemed the entire community was. That's when Jesus sees her. He sees her brokenness, her misshapen body, but he also sees her beauty, her value as a child of God.

And when he sees her, he calls to her, gently lays his hands on her and a surge of healing grace immediately enables her to stand up straight. In that moment, she was physically healed, but more than that – she was set free, set free from the spirit that kept her bound and bent over. She was free from being known as the “bent over woman,” free from being known only by what was "wrong" with her. Jesus refers to her as a daughter of Abraham, a valued member of the community, a precious child of God. She truly was set free, no long “crippled” by either her physical brokenness, or her spiritual brokenness. For so long -- 18 years -- some kind of spirit, some unexplainable

power had held her body and spirit captive, but through grace, she was free from whatever it was, whatever burdened her or weighed her down and was free to stand up straight and strong.

How can she do anything else but praise God!! She stood and faced Jesus, and knew that in Him, in his treatment of her, in his touch, in the freedom he gave her, she had met grace – the grace of God.

But not everyone celebrated this healing, this restoring, this powerful expression of grace in the hands and words of Jesus. The religious leader took offense. It was after all the Sabbath, and Jesus was once again breaking that commandment by “working” on this holy day! But while keeping the Sabbath is important, Jesus points out what seems to be obvious -- whatever the day or time, it is always the appropriate time to respond to a need. It is always the right time to offer compassion, to reach out to one who is hurting, to lift up one whose burdens -- burdens of fear or grief or discouragement, illness or addiction, or whatever that they are – whatever has kept them bent over for far too long. It is always the right time to pray for and pray with those who are bound by a lack of faith, anger at God, even emotional or spiritual brokenness. It is always the right time to set our minds, align our attitudes, and surrender our agenda to Jesus’ agenda.

When we in our own brokenness and weakness, in our own bent over condition – our sin and separation, struggle and uncertainty -- have been set free and lifted up by His grace, what else can we do but praise God?! To know that in him our lives have been changed forever, or restored and revived once again, what else can we do but to

be filled with gratitude and love for him. What else can we do? We can be faithful to his will and his way, by becoming messengers, and instruments of that grace.

But to be honest, sometimes we don't feel so bold. We want to be faithful to God's call. To be God's messengers, but sometimes it's hard to forget our shortcomings, and we have all kinds of excuses. Just praise and thank God quietly. And sometimes that's sufficient. But when God calls us to speak or act, no excuse is acceptable. Take Jeremiah: When the Lord commissioned him to be a prophet to the nations, Jeremiah felt pretty overwhelmed, like most of us would be. He was feeling pretty inadequate, perhaps even feeling bent over under the weight of the responsibility, and risk of what God was calling him to.

Jeremiah says, "I am only a boy!" Most of us fit into the "I am only" category. But "only" is enough with God's help -- "only" is enough when we offer whatever and whoever we are to God. So when Jeremiah was caught up and overwhelmed by his "onlyness" God says, "Do not say, I am only." Now maybe I'm just reading into it, but God almost seems offended that Jeremiah would say, "I am only." Remember, God has just said, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." And now, I have decided, is the right time to send you.

So who is Jeremiah to say back to God, "I am only..."

God knows what his capabilities and limitations are.

His strengths and his weaknesses.

His gifts and his growing edges.

And considering all of this, and what God has prepared him to be and do, God is confident that Jeremiah is ready.

How Jeremiah needs to get his mind around it. He could easily have become crippled by his fears and insecurities, consumed by the size of the task God has called him to, paralyzed by that voice within him telling him he wasn't good enough, smart enough, articulate enough, strong enough -- just not enough for what God was calling him to do. But he is assured that "the will of God will never take you where the grace of God will not protect you." And not only that, that God would equip him, filling Jeremiah's mouth with God's own words, and the power that those words will be when spoken to the people. Jeremiah's "onlyness" would be more than enough when he was faithful to God and God's call in his life.

The preacher, the woman who stands tall and strong, and Jeremiah all learned in life changing ways that

instead of focusing on our weaknesses, trust in God's empowering grace.

instead of focusing on our failures, trust in God's transforming grace.

instead of focusing on our sinfulness, trust in God's justifying grace.

instead of focusing on our fears, trust in God's protecting grace.

instead of focusing on our insecurities, trust in God's sanctifying grace.

Instead of focusing on our pain and brokenness, trust in God's healing grace.

instead of focusing on our burdens, trust in God's freeing grace.

instead of focus on our onlyness, trust in God's amazing grace.

Hopefully, in experiencing the fullness of this grace in Jesus, we will learn, and our lives will be continually changed and lifted up by this too.