

SERMON: Full of Grace and Truth
TEXT: John 1:1-14

1-3-21

Undercover Boss is the name of a reality TV show I used to enjoy watching. In each episode an executive - usually a CEO and sometimes an owner or founder - of a large corporation would get an elaborate disguise and a fake ID. Then he would get hired for an entry-level position at one of the branch offices or franchises of his business. The purpose was to discover not only *what* was working, but *who* was working, and who wasn't.

Sometimes the boss would discover that the franchisee wasn't providing the right equipment, a manager was doing a poor job of holding on to employees, the computer system was cumbersome and outdated, or the hardest working people weren't getting rewarded adequately. Quite often the boss would also hear the personal stories of the employees. Those who were single parents trying to support their family while also going to school. Those who had to quit a better paying job in order to care for an elderly parent. Those who were struggling to recover from years of addiction.

At the end of each episode, the boss would arrange a meeting with one or several of the managers and employees he or she met. No longer in disguise, the

employees were shocked at how they'd been duped. Then the boss would reveal plans to improve their working conditions: update computer systems, fire a manager and promote someone else to take the position, or improve the training programs. Often, the boss would also provide one exceptional employee with a generous gift, such as paying off their college debt, providing a vehicle to help them get to work, or sending the employee to get additional training that would lead to a promotion. Disbelief, tears, laughter, and hugs would close out the episode because, after all, this is what makes reality TV successful!

It is a limited metaphor, to be sure, but it came to mind as something that could help explain how and why “the Word became flesh and lived among us.” God came down in the person of Jesus - not to fix everything, not to make our jobs easier, and not to get rid of the people who are difficult to work with - but to meet us face to face. The *Word* becoming *flesh* establishes direct communication and a closer relationship between God and God's people.

One commentary I read explains, “The Word becoming flesh is the decisive event in human history - indeed, in the history of creation - because the incarnation changes God's relationship to humanity and humanity's relationship to God.... With the words *the word became flesh and lived among us*, the community

recognized the bond that had been established between them and God as revealed in Jesus. God did not stay distant from them, remote and isolated; rather, in Jesus, God chose to live with humanity in the midst of human weakness, confusion, and pain... To become flesh is to know joy, pain, suffering, and loss. It is to love, to grieve, and someday to die.” (The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX, Luke; John, 1995, Abingdon Press)

The Boss, if you will, - with a capital B - comes on the scene to work and to walk beside us, to communicate and connect with us, to see for himself what life is like down here.

We could also liken it to the experience of meeting someone for the first time, making a new friend - perhaps, a friend that will become a life partner. We might describe that first meeting by saying, “We really connected.” Or “she totally gets me.” Or “it’s like we’ve known each other all our lives.” This is what happens when the Word becomes flesh in Jesus. When we can see him, hear him, and touch him, we know him. We can know God, and we realize that God knows us.

Of course, this passage also tells us that “the world did not know him,” and “his own people did not accept him.” But “the Word became flesh and lived among us... full of grace and truth.”

Grace. Truth. Both words are difficult to define. Both concepts become more and more elusive every day, it seems. And, let's face it, Jesus embodies a grace that we crave in abundance for ourselves but prefer that it be strictly rationed for others.

Contemporary theologian Frederick Buechner wrote this beautiful definition of grace.

"Grace is something you can never get but only be given. There's no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth.

A good sleep is grace and so are good dreams. Most tears are grace. The smell of rain is grace. Somebody loving you is grace. Loving somebody is grace. Have you ever *tried* to love somebody?...

The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you *are* because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you.

There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it.

Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift, too.”

(Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, 1973 Harper & Row)

I think the fact that God chose to become flesh is perhaps the greatest act of grace. If you've ever read through the Old Testament you've noticed that God's chosen people of Israel fail to live by God's commands time and time again. They turn their backs on God. They go their own way. They depend on their own power and their own knowledge rather than depending on the word of God spoken by countless prophets. And I often wonder why God doesn't throw up his arms in frustration and impatience and turn his back on them. Instead, God comes. In the flesh. Not to punish or destroy or heap vengeance upon them. But to be with them. To look into their eyes. To teach them. To heal them. To know them. To love them. And to die for them.

Jesus embodies truth, as well. So often when I hear the word *truth* my first thought is, “Whose truth?” It seems that we all have our own version, our own perspective, our own information, our own definition of truth. It depends on which news station you watch or which systems support your comfort and values the most.

But we all know the old adage, “the truth hurts.” Truth can be challenging. Like having to wear a mask to help reduce the spread of a pandemic. Truth can turn our world upside down. Like shuttering schools and businesses, limiting travel and isolating at home because too many people didn’t want to wear a mask.

“In the beginning,” Jesus came to give us a new beginning.

Jesus is God’s Word made flesh who comes to live among us.

Jesus is Life and Light that enlightens all people and which the darkness will never overcome.

Jesus is FULL OF GRACE AND TRUTH. The grace which never turns its back on us. The truth that sets us free. Free to love God. Free to love our neighbors. Free to love ourselves.

As we begin a new year, may we seek to live as Jesus lived among us, full of grace and truth. To the glory of God!

AMEN.