

Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber Gives Thanks to Grace, God and Beyoncé

Bolz-Weber's final sermon at her House for All Sinners and Saints Church

What I won't speak about

Okay, so... I have just this one sermon. Just this one last time to say what is on my heart to you my beloved House for All Sinners and Saints. So what do I say when all I have is approximately 1,500 words to say it?

I could spend this time telling you charming stories about my childhood, but you've heard most of those at least once, but depending on how long you've been around, more than once.

I could speak about love and how important it is to love each other, but you already know that.

I could preach what one of my friends calls a "listen, bitches" sermon – and take this chance to admonish you to come to church more, and to give more money, and for God's sake just sign up for the monthly jobs already. But I can't bear to.

I could write the sermon of a lifetime, a real barn burner that would cause all of you to weep and laugh and repent and rend your clothing and fill in the monthly job board for an entire year— please do, if the spirit moves you.

What I will speak about

But instead, all I want to preach about with my remaining, now 1,320 words is the thing I cannot get over. The thing I forget and then turn around and see the power of every day. The thing that has changed my life and the lives of so many and that thing is, of course, ... Beyoncé.

And grace. Of course. Grace. Oh to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be. So my final sermon here at House is simply eight things I want to say about grace before I go.

A God who scoots over

1. Grace is our origin; it's our source code. In the beginning, all there was, was God. So in order to bring the world into being, God had to kind of scoot over. So God chose to take up less space—you know, to make room. So before God spoke the world into being, God scooted over. God wanted to share. Like the kind-faced woman on the subway who takes her handbag onto her lap so that there's room for you to sit next to her. She didn't have to do it, but that's just who she is . . . the kind-faced subway lady's nature is that she makes room for others.

Then God had an absolute explosion of creativity and made animals. Amoebas. Chickens. Crickets. Bees. Orangutans.

Then God said, "Let us create humans in our own image and likeness." Let us. So, God the community, God the family, God the friend group, God the opposite of isolation, said, "Let us create humanity in our image and likeness. Let there be us and them in one being."

So God created every one of us in the male and female image of God. Then God gave us God's own image—something so holy that it could never be harmed, and never be taken away. A never-aloneness. An origin and destination. A source code of grace.

Why is grace needed?

2. I've got good news and bad news. In order to really speak of grace, we must speak of why grace is needed. Which means we simply must speak of sin—even if liberals tend to think that speaking about sin is the same as celebrating low self-esteem. But friends, how can we ever understand why grace is amazing if we think we don't need it?

I mean, a free lifetime supply of injectable insulin is only good news if you happen to be someone who has diabetes, you know what I'm saying? The problem, of course, is that the word sin is too often used as a synonym for being immoral. But you could live an entirely moral life, never cheat on your spouse or on your taxes...you could never break a law and be a so-called "good person" and still totally be a sinner.

In fact, the word sin has been so misused that I'm grateful that writer Francis Spufford substitutes the word sin for the "HPFTU:" The human propensity to "F" things up. The human propensity to "F" things up cannot be avoided. Do not be fooled into thinking that with enough therapy or meditation retreats, or with enough wokeness or with the right elimination diet or with good enough intentions that you will not still "F" things up. But also, friends, do not despair because...

3. You are indeed a mighty sinner, but shame is optional. Martin Luther in a letter he wrote to Philip Melanchthon told his friend, "If you are a preacher of grace,"—which I have in the last decade tried to be. "If you are a preacher of a grace then preach a true, not a fictitious grace; if grace is true, you must bear a true and not a fictitious sin. God does not save people who are only fictitious sinners," he wrote. So be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly, for he is victorious over sin, death, and the world. As long as we are here, we have to sin. So pray boldly — for you are a mighty sinner," he wrote.

While it can be healthy and useful to have regret about the ways you "F" things up, and to even make amends, you need not have shame about it because on a really basic level if we did not "F" things up, we would not need God. We would not need God's grace, this gift. There wouldn't be any space for her.

Which brings me to...

4. Feel free to name your sins. It's how we scoot over and make room for God. I like to think of grace not as when God is a good enough guy to forgive me for my failings, but as when God is a source of wholeness, redemption, and healing which makes up for my failings, which is more powerful than my failings.

Grace, to me, is God's source code. It is the spirit's renewable resource. And confession of sins or completing a moral inventory and speaking it to another person isn't the way we earn forgiveness—it's just the way to force our egos into a posture where we can receive forgiveness.

5. Grace and gratitude. When I forget about the grace all around me I start to feel entitled to all the good things in my life. But how could I have caused God to scoot over and make room for us? To be a living being on this glorious Earth is itself grace. But what did I do that God would knit me together in my mother's womb? How could I earn the right to eat a perfect peach— that the Creator even thought to make the peach is

grace to me. My friend Jeff Chu was working with wild bees yesterday and said that honey is grace in a jar, a sweetness entirely given that we did absolutely nothing to deserve.

7. When we experience grace, we just become more compassionate. And this world needs more compassion. As Richard Rohr says, "Once you have received real grace...real mercy... you are no longer in the position of deciding who the so-called 'deserving poor' are." When we see how God's source code of grace has redeemed our HPFTU we give other people a break. We stop holding others to a ridiculous standard. We believe God can make beautiful things out of even other people's HPFTU. But to be clear...

8. Faith isn't about self-improvement. For it to really be about grace, it can't be about us and our efforts and our intentions and our goodness. Without grace, there's either pride and temporarily getting things right quickly followed by despair and inevitably getting things wrong again.

We are called to be *new people*

Because God isn't interested in making you a better person. God is interested in making you a new person. Because if this whole thing was only a matter of self-improvement, then trying harder should do the trick, in which case, we basically we don't need Jesus anymore. Being better people – being "good-er" Samaritans is something we can do on our own. But to become new people we need God. To become new people, we need a God who daily drowns our old dying selves in the watery grave of baptism and raises us to new life. To be new people, we need a God who has conquered death by death. A God who offers us a way where there is no way. Becoming new people is what this whole Jesus-following thing is about and it doesn't happen through trying harder to be good. It comes by being robbed— robbed of our old ideas about ourselves, robbed of our self-sufficiency, robbed of our piety.

9. It is grace that I have nine and not eight notes and that I am allowing myself to preach 1,700 and not 1,500 words.

Here are my last 200: It is grace that the sweet Holy Spirit intercedes for us. It is grace that our prayers are welcomed by the Creator. It is grace to hear each other's prayers and to make them our own. Every day that myself or any other alcoholic or addict is

clean and sober—that is grace. The sun rising in the East every day is grace. My virtue could not pull that ball of fire up over the horizon.

Where grace abides

It is grace that God would make her home in the womb of a peasant girl from Palestine. That God would hang out, see what it's like to have a body that aches and a mother that loves, and bread that nourishes, and sunrises that stun, and friends that console and friends that betray — and be under an empire that persecutes. God saw what all of that was like and said now is the time of salvation and opened their arms wide on the cross and welcomed every horrible thing that our human propensity to "F" things up could do and responded with only forgiveness.

It is grace that God would again and again scoot over and make room for our hearts and hurts and prayers and say to us, "You are mine and you are enough."

May grace abide in us

After over a decade as pastor for this congregation I know one thing— that there is only grace, my sweet friends. Everything else is a measure of worthiness. Everything else leads to insiders and outsiders. Everything else can fail us. But oh to grace how great a debtor daily we're constrained to be. I love you. Amen.