

The Scandal of God's Grace

Hespeler, 15 May, 2022 © Scott McAndless

[Acts 11:1-18](#), Psalm 148, Revelation 21:1-6, John 13:31-35

In 1985 there was a movie that swept the awards of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. It won eight Oscars including best picture, best director, best actor and best writer. So, I am pretty sure that you have heard of this movie. And I wanted to remind you of it today because I think that it contains a perfect illustration of the scandal behind our reading this morning from the Book of Acts.

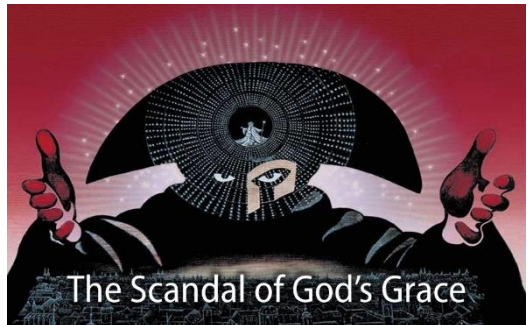
Beloved of God

In fact, the film zeroes in on the central dispute of our reading so perfectly that it is right there in the title. The movie was called, in case you haven't guessed yet, *Amadeus*. *Amadeus* is a Latin word that means beloved of God. And the scandalous nature of the love of God is at the centre of the story. The titular character is, of course, none other than the great composer, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, but the main character in the story is the Italian composer, Antonio Salieri. The plot centres around a kind of obsession.

Salieri is jealous of Mozart because of his musical genius. But it's about more than jealousy. Salieri is angry at Mozart for being so talented, but he is actually even more angry at God. At one point he declares this, speaking directly to Jesus in the form of a crucifix on the wall: *"From now on, we are enemies – you and I. Because you choose for your instrument a boastful, lustful, smutty, infantile boy and give me for reward only the ability to recognize the incarnation. Because you are unjust, unfair, unkind, I will block you, I swear it. I will hinder (and remember that word, hinder) I will hinder and harm your creature as far as I am able. I will ruin your incarnation."*

Salieri's Complaint

He recognizes, and I believe he recognizes correctly, that there is divine inspiration behind what Mozart is able to produce. It is a gift of God. But he is scandalized that God should give such a gift to a person like Mozart. He doesn't work



hard to produce it because he doesn't need to. But, even worse, he does not live a virtuous life as Salieri defines virtue. He is licentious, vulgar and silly. Meanwhile, Salieri has worked and works so hard and lives a life of extreme piety and virtue, and yet the only music that he can produce reeks of mediocrity.

Salieri finds the very idea that God could give such good things to a person so unworthy so objectionable that it drives him to do awful things. It drives him to theft, corruption, attempted murder and ultimately to madness. Now, I think I ought to say in defense of Salieri that the film, though based on historical characters, is mostly fictional. The two composers seem to have actually had a pretty good relationship. But at the same time, there is something that is fundamentally true about the story of the film. There really is something very objectionable about the love of God and the gifts that it gives, something that we need to come to terms with.

Peter Visits the Wrong People

In our reading this morning, the Apostle Peter gets into a lot of trouble with the leaders of the church over this very issue. He has just come back from a visit to the home of a man named Cornelius where he ate and drank with the household, preached the gospel to them and shared with them the gift of the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. When he returns, however, the people in the Church of Jerusalem are very upset with him. The thing that bothers them is not that he has been preaching the gospel or sharing the love of God or even the gift of the Spirit. This is exactly what the church has been doing ever since the beginning and Peter has done no differently.

No, the only thing that is wrong about what Peter has done is who he did it for. He did it for people who everyone in the Jerusalem church agrees are just the wrong kind of people. They eat the wrong kind of food. They don't follow the right laws. They're not even circumcised! They just don't deserve hearing the good news and they certainly do not belong in the community of the church.

A Personal Question

And I know that we often think of this as a one-time, very special controversy in the life of the early church. It was this important question about whether Gentiles and people who did not follow the Jewish law could have a place in the church. But, as this particular story makes very clear, at the level where this actually touched and affected people's lives, this was not a theological question. This was a very personal question. It was all about God's love and grace being lavished on a group of people

who simply did not deserve it because of who they were and how they lived their lives. The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were upset with God for the very same reason that Salieri was upset concerning Mozart. God was just loving the wrong sort of people.

And, given that this is a controversy that arises again and again throughout the history of the church, I think it is worth taking a good look at how Simon Peter responds to the objections of the church in Jerusalem. He responds to them by telling the story. He tells the story that illustrates that God, despite their limited understanding of what God can do, has clearly decided to love these people anyways by giving to them one of God's greatest gifts, the gift of the Spirit. And then he ends his story with a statement that I believe should be engraved upon the heart of every believer, should be posted as a sign upon every one of our churches. He says, **"If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?"**

Who is Peter?

Think of that. Here we have the man who is generally thought to be the first great leader of the church, the one that Jesus called The Rock and perhaps the man who knew Jesus best, and yet he is saying, "who am I to hinder God?" And, given the context, what he is especially saying is, "Who am I to hinder God giving God's love, gifts or grace to anyone?" And yet I see all the time people who seem to believe that they are exactly the kind of people who can hinder God in that way. That's why I think that we need to learn, with Peter, to ask ourselves that question: who am I to hinder?

How we Hinder

I do believe that that kind of hindering happens all the time in the church. You know, every time we look at somebody who comes into contact with the church and we decide that they don't really belong and so don't make them feel particularly welcome, we are hindering God doing God's work in their life. If you decide that somebody isn't dressed well enough and communicate that to them even in a subtle way, are you not hindering them from being recipients of the grace and gifts that God is giving through the church? And it's the same if you decide that based on race, on class or wealth or age or orientation or gender identity or whatever other criterion you can come up with.

I'm not saying that we do it intentionally, because sometimes we're often not aware of the subtle ways in which we make people feel like they do not belong. Sometimes it's just a matter of not taking their ideas or opinions seriously. Sometimes it's not even considering including them in

our little circle of friends. But, make no mistake, we all do it sometimes. And we need to ask, who am I to hinder what God wants to do in their life through the church?

Other Ways of Excluding

But do not only think of this in terms of the kind of grace that usually comes to mind in the life of the church. This is something that we do in many other circumstances as well. How often do we write somebody off – do not consider them for a job, or we write off their thoughts and ideas or any potential contribution they could make – for reasons that simply do not matter? You just never know what God might have in mind to do for that person or through that person and yet because of some prejudgment on your part you can hinder that from happening.

Who Can be Saved?

This also applies to our talk and thought about salvation. Christians have a long history of having a very narrow understanding of who is worthy of being saved by God. We confess, of course, that salvation is by grace through faith, but we often have a very narrow understanding of what that faith has to look like. In particular, we expect it to look like the faith that we have professed. So, if someone believes differently or puts more emphasis on how they live out their faith than on believing all the same things that we believe, we might easily come to the conclusion that they are not worthy of being saved. I don't think we realize how, when we do that, what we are really doing is putting limits on the love of God. We are deciding that we are the ones who can hinder what God wants to do in people's lives.

Who Does it Hurt?

When, in the movie at least, Salieri decides to hinder God's decision to be gracious to someone that he did not think deserved it, he did not hurt God. The message of the movie, in the end, is that he really only hurt himself – ultimately driving himself to madness. And that is the true tragedy that comes when we seek to hinder the grace of God from being shown in somebody else's life. We will not stop God from being gracious. Thank heavens that we do not have that power. We will only hurt ourselves. For know this above all, God loves those who love *amadeus*, who loves those who, however unworthy in our eyes, are beloved of God. And, what's more, I honestly believe that the more we embrace this truth, the more that we will understand for ourselves how truly beloved we are to God.