



# EASY GRACE

SUNDAY, MARCH 2 | REV. T. J. FITZGERALD

There are lots of pathways and streets in our service today, Beale Street, Basin Street, wouldn't want to leave out Bourbon Street. There is a rule I know about telling what happens there, right? Okay. In that case, I will skip the story I was thinking of telling you, and instead I will tell you that Mardi Gras is celebrated in many, many of the cities that lie along the Gulf.

But it's special. Mardi Gras is special in New Orleans. I know this. Other places they celebrate this time before Lent, and some countries they even serve pancakes, great, or other rich foods, but they don't do it like they do it in New Orleans. Mardi Gras has its root in fat and flesh, the fun things in life. It's literally what gras means. Mardi Gras is a celebration of the body, the realness and the wonders of our worldly senses and all that those senses enjoy in our lives before entering a time when people focus, I know, on the spirit, on sacrifice, on reflection, on renunciation. You can tell I was Catholic once. Mardi Gras is a celebration of the worldly, yes, before we turn our hearts to the otherworldly.

In our reading, Baldwin tells us hardly about the flesh and the spirit, how they work together. He says, "If you cross the Sahara, and you fall, by and by vultures, circle around you smelling, sensing your death. They circle lower and lower. They wait. They know. They know exactly when the flesh is ready, but the spirit cannot fight back. The poor are always crossing the Sahara." It's a hard image. I know it. These are hard times and all the harder because it's the truth. The body and the spirit, in my way of thinking, are not separable. They're intertwined, and you can affect one with the other. Baldwin sees this trouble, the predatory nature of those who circle the poor, those with power, they seem over their bodies, and he talks about what power like that, what trouble like that can do to a person when they've got that trouble.

He says, "You see like you never saw them before. They shine as bright as a razor. Maybe it's because you see people differently than you saw them before your trouble started. Maybe you wonder about them more but in a different way, and this makes them very strange to you. Maybe you get scared and numb because you don't know if you can depend on people for anything anymore." I know that feeling, friends. I have been there this week. Have any of you been there this week? A little bit?

This year, 2025, started with an attack on Bourbon Street on the boulevard of excess and celebration of the body, an attack on bodies. Fourteen dead including the person who drove their car into them, shot dead by the police, and though his full motives and mental state will never be known because of this, his actions point to a deadly division. Division's growing in this nation. Divisions that start in the mind are sharpened in the media, are tested out on social media and in chat rooms, and loosed with the flashing glint of a razor on the world.

This week's announcement of plans to cut Medicaid threatens the lives of people who have no other way to pay for their care. It's an attack on the poor. The voucher scam here in Texas takes funds from public schools, guts the only programs for students with special needs available to most low and middle income families, an attack on the poor. That's right. And cuts to food assistance in a society that has increased the wealth of the richest people tenfold or more over the past decade while not moving the minimum wage an inch isn't just an attack on the poor. All these attacks are a war on the poor. Hear me?

And the cruelest cut of all the suggestion that it's anybody's fault for needing or wanting these programs and that they should be ashamed for it. Baldwin has something to say to that too. He says, "They are wrong to be ashamed. The people responsible for these jails should be ashamed, and poverty is a jail." Got it? It is the jail for those who've committed no crime. That's how much worse it is. It keeps people in it from organizing, from having the space to build communities of cooperative care by terrorizing the spirit with threats to the body.

And if you are Black or trans or God help you, you are a Black trans woman in this world, you're a lot more likely to be part of that group the world considers poor. If you are a Black trans woman, you're 50% likely to be impoverished in this country because of historic systemic inequality, yes, but also these days because of bald faced racism and transphobia which are rampant now and in plain sight.

Actively targeting the economically vulnerable in our communities is a moral wrong. When you take people's livelihood, when you take people's means of support, when you take the way people need to heal or the way they need to learn in just a few weeks, these acts of terror against a body that is meant to crush the spirit, the war isn't coming friends, it's here.

How? How? How, I ask myself, can someone, can a group of people, can a pretty big part of this country allow this? My friend who studies a sociology of religious practice has a theory. He says, "It's the misogyny, stupid." In the New York Times this week, a guest essay written by three political scientists reported that of those who identify as men as part of a conservative political brand, two years ago, two years ago, 28% believed women should return to traditional gender roles. This year it

has ballooned to 48%. And women in the same political brand went from 23% to 37% in the same time. Two years. And to cut to the chase, traditional gender roles and returning to an era means returning to the 1950s, the post-World War II era. Uh-uh.

But this shift, what's interesting about this shift, it's not playing out in the workforce or in any other measurable way. Twenty percent, one-fifth of all women, didn't just go home all of a sudden. The spirit is willing it seems, but the flesh is weak. Now, I'm not trying to dare anyone into the 1950s, I'm just working up to my discussion of later.

But this lack of change indicates a few things. One, maybe these big shifts will come in the future. Not super likely. Two, social media has moved rapidly to change the views of the spirit in people. Very likely. Three, these traditional roles will be forced on people in our society with less power by any means necessary onto their body unless we figure out a way to resist. That is likely.

Seventy-five years ago, this nation had the greatest economic parity in its history, the lowest wealth gap in recorded history. That ain't the case now, friends. To try to go back to that world and that understanding with the lack of economic support is impossible, and the only people who will suffer are the most vulnerable. And over the last 75 years, thanks to many people in this room, in this faith, and literally in this church, like Louise Roggio, who fought for women to have actual rights in our society, outside the power of men, women have had more power to earn money, more power to affect change in politics, and has grown so much in social power of women that many of the ways used to convince women that they needed a man before are gone. And can I get an amen for that?

According to the Census Bureau in 1950, twice as many adults were married as were single. Today, only slightly more adults are married than are single. The gap closed from a hundred percent difference to almost nothing in 75 years. But in the corners of the internet where my friend thankfully tread, so I don't have to and where you should not tread, experts say that the anger, the resentment, the story that's being told about this change is stoking a rage that is plentiful among men who feel they're missing out.

There is a particular and base rage and desperation from young men who can't get a date, can't get any interest from women, and that is very real and very dangerous. I do not mean to be shaming. I'm telling you some of the motivation that is coming out of them, the shame that is piled onto them, yes, by their own peers, maybe by the women that they are trying to meet, and I confess more times by me than I am proud to admit, but mostly by social media and those who want to stoke and use that anger. It is toxic. It's deadly. That shame is toxic and deadly.

These men claim to long for a time when they could exert more power over others' bodies simply because of who they are and how they look, a time when they think they imagine it was just easier then. Because they imagine that controlling others' bodies, their flesh through policies and through terror is a way to get their spirit too. The violence and control is inseparable from and is always the tool of the oppressor. The oppressors who committed the genocide of Native Americans in these lands, enslavement of persons in the Atlantic Trade of persons, the horrors of reconstruction, of

sharecropping, of the Fugitive Slave Act, of Jim Crow. Controlling people is just easier when you use violence and terror, and no one's trying to hide it now. The masks are off, the treatment of a leader and a war hero in the Oval Office who has the deaths of hundreds of thousands of his people in his heart, in his soul being scolded by a draft dodger with the talking points of their invader was a bridge too far.

And all week we heard it. It was met by these words, "Shame on him. Disgusting. This isn't my country. Disgraceful, disgraceful, disgraceful." Which means, lacking grace or abhorrent to the divine attribute of grace. Grace is something unbidden, unasked for, unknowable. Its root, gratia, means free or unfettered, and some call it a divine blessing, granted that was unearned or unmerited. And so I think disgraceful is the word because we watch the dangers and the perverseness of the rabid conviction gripping this nation that authority is earned, is merited, is divine, I dare say solely by one's whiteness, one's unspeakable wealth, and by allegiance to an ideology that holds these as the sole requirements for ruling the bodies of others.

Uh-huh. That is where we are, friends. I know it's wrong, it's wrong, it's wrong. We need to get used to saying it out loud when we see it's wrong. And as awful, I know, as awful as it feels to see the values we hold at the center of our faith attacked in public institutions and in our very lives, I promise you, I swear on my ever-living soul, working together to sustain, grow, and nourish this community and others like it is one of the ways we can find the grace to keep on going. And another is to proclaim our convictions louder and louder and louder more publicly if we can. Not everyone is privileged enough to walk into a state capitol and put their bodies where they want to put their bodies, but for those of you who can, I will see you in Austin with Reverend Walter on March 16th, 17th, and 18th to flood the Capitol with our message of a faith that was here before you, and we shall not, we shall not be moved.

Harry Emerson Fosdick is the author of the hymn that we're fixing to sing. He was run out of Park Avenue Baptist for blasphemy, for proclaiming the worth and dignity of all in his own way. Good for him. So they built him a church. They called it the Riverside Church, and they made him the minister and then he wrote a hymn. He also worked with Sophia Lyon Fos, the parent of our own liberal religious education. His most famous sermon was called, Shall the Fundamentalists Win? In it, he holds to the notion that it is not without honor, and it is not without a moral imperative to hold to the truth that science and learning can exist with faith together. In fact, they must. He is the one who was famous for saying a preacher must preach with the New York Times in one hand and the Bible in the other. He was battling biblical literalists in the 1920s, and we may be battling barely literates in the 2020s. I can't help myself.

But the same idea is true today, a century later that faiths of tolerance, understanding, and love can do, have done tremendous good for their followers and for the world, and they will keep doing it. At least for me. It is when I lose my faith in people, when I don't know if I can believe them any more, like Tish in our reading, it is when my faith in the worldly does dim, it is then when my faith in the unseen, my faith in what I choose to call God deepens. That's when it grows. I have heard the words shame and shameful so many times in the last two days, and I remember the power that those words used to

hold, and I hesitate to use them in this place that is founded on love and mutual respect, but I need you to hear this.

I know what it means to be ashamed, and I bet some of you do too. I know the desperation that it brings with feelings like you're not enough, that you will not be loved, that you will be alone. I know a measure of what those angry young men yelling into the void and slashing at the world are actually feeling. Not exactly, but I know it well enough, and it was only by the grace of something outside of my control, something deeper and unseeable and unknowable, something outside of human aid that lifted me out of my shame. My parents, God loved them, he'd love on me, and they could not do it. My friends, he'd just as much support on me, and they could not do it. The communities I was in and others I loved could not do it. It was in the pews of a Unitarian church, hearing the words of the world's greatest teachers translated and spoken at last with the love and respect we all deserve that started to teach and reach and heal my suffering. You deserve that too and so does the world.

It was the action I saw of that brave group of individuals, of kindred souls just like you doing the work in this world where I saw reflected back at me no longer disgrace but grace, an easy grace, and it is my true and my passionate belief that this faith and its honesty and its bravery and its willingness to see itself plainly in the face of adversity and challenges through the ages could well save or preserve the soul of a nation, a state, and a city for indeed it is the faith that gave birth to them all.

The work is hard, friends, but we have been here before, and we know the way. May this community of care hold each of you. May we strive ever onward to partner with others in the work of equity and justice and may God grant us the easy grace to make it so. Blessed be and amen.