

November 19, 2017
Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Grace Alone”

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Pastoral Prayer
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Isaiah 43:18–21

¹⁸Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. ¹⁹I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. ²⁰The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, ²¹the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

1 Corinthians 15:1–10

¹⁵Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, ²through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you — unless you have come to believe in vain. ³For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ⁴and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them — though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

“Grace Alone”
Isaiah 43:18–21; 1 Corinthians 15:1–10

A boy was born to a couple after eleven years of marriage. They were a loving couple and the boy was the apple of their eye. One morning when the boy was around two years old, the husband saw a medicine bottle open on the counter. He was running late for work so he asked his wife to put the cap on the bottle and put it in the cupboard. His wife, preoccupied in the kitchen, said yes, but then forgot the request. The boy saw the bottle, and was fascinated by its brightly colored markings. He picked it up and drank from it. It contained a medicine meant for adults in small doses; the amount he drank was poisonous to a toddler. Within moments, the child collapsed. His mother rushed him to the hospital, where he died. The mother was in shock and she was terrified to face her husband. How would she ever explain what she had done – or failed to do? How could he ever forgive her? When the distraught father arrived at the hospital and saw the dead child, he looked at his wife and uttered just four words. What do you think those words were? What four words might you have said in that situation?

From its earliest days the church has been tempted to fashion a formula that could describe and predict God’s mercy and forgiveness. For many centuries, that formula was this: Certain behaviors counted against you – these were called sins – and certain acts of repentance could earn God’s forgiveness. This temptation to create and perpetuate such formulas became especially strong after the Emperor Constantine made Christianity the established religion of the Roman Empire early in the fourth century.

As Richard Rohr reminds us, “Empires cannot afford too much mercy or forgiveness.” So the church “created equations: this much sin results in this many years in purgatory or hell; this much penance results in this much time released from purgatory.” In the hands of a church that became increasingly institutionalized and politicized, “grace and forgiveness became *juridical* and *distant* concepts instead of *deep spiritual realizations*.”¹

By Martin Luther’s time, these theological concepts were so deeply entrenched that Luther felt only a total overhaul would clarify, once and for all, that good works do not earn God’s love and mercy. Hence Luther’s demand that Christians return to the biblical formula that *we are saved by grace through*

¹ Ricard Rohr, “A Santa Claus God,” evotional, January 27, 2016.

faith. As we heard last week, Luther argued that it is our faith alone, not any good works that we do, that makes us right with God. And faith is a deep mystery that we cannot fully understand or explain. But we know it is not something we can manufacture for ourselves. Faith is a gift from God, a gift that comes to us, not because of anything we do, but because of God's grace alone.

In her poem, "The Avowal," Denise Levertov offers us vivid images of this grace:

*As swimmers dare to lie face to the sky and water bears them,
as hawks rest upon air and air sustains them,
so would I learn to attain freefall,
and float into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,
knowing no effort earns that all-surrounding grace.*

In our passage from 1 Corinthians, Paul reminds us just how impossible it is to earn grace: *I am the least of these*, he writes, *unfit to be called an apostle...but by the grace of God.* To understand what Paul is saying in this passage, it helps to remember that before he was Paul, he was Saul, a devout Jew, who was infuriated by a new movement of Jesus followers who called themselves The Way, so much so he was doing everything he could to stop them. In fact, a murderous Saul was heading to Damascus to find those who belonged to the Way and throw them into prison when he had a vivid encounter with Jesus, the risen Christ. In this encounter, Jesus does not scold or judge Saul, he simply asks him, "Why are you persecuting me?"

The now-blind Saul returns to Jerusalem, where a faithful follower of The Way is nudged by the Holy Spirit to bring him into the fold of the disciples. Saul, who soon changes his name to Paul, did not just join the disciples, he becomes the most zealous among them, risking death to defy the religious and civil authorities by sharing the gospel far and wide and establishing churches throughout the region. Paul knew first-hand the power of God's grace, because grace is what transformed him and inspired him to spend the rest of his life working for the transformation of others.

From Paul's experience we learn that grace is recognized and identified by its effects. And the result of a genuine experience of grace is always transformation, the kind of transformation that turns Saul, a murderous persecutor of the followers of Jesus, to Paul, the most enthusiastic and effective evangelist of the gospel before or since. This good news that Paul so

enthusiastically and effectively shared is what he summarizes at the beginning of our passage: that Christ died, was buried, and was raised – so that we might finally learn, once and for all, that sin does not, cannot, and will not ever have the last word. The last word always belongs to God, and that word is grace. Throughout the centuries, theologians have argued about what grace really is. For many grace is part of the sin and repentance formula; it is the attribute of God that enables God to save sinful humanity by sending Jesus to pay the debt for our sin. But while this is one important way of understanding grace, it has never been the **only** way.

In the 13th century, a couple of hundred years before Luther, Franciscan theologian John Duns Scotus, argued that Jesus did not come to change the mind of God about humanity so that God save us in spite of our sin – according to Scotus, God’s mind did not need changing! Instead, Jesus came to change the mind of humanity about God, so that we would better understand that at the heart of God is all-encompassing, unconditional love we call grace. What happened on the cross was not a necessary transaction to change God, but a tangible demonstration of the depth and breadth of God’s love for us, love expansive enough to join us even in our suffering. And God does not love us *because* we are good or *when* we are good or *when* we improve our behavior or *when* we confess our sin. **God loves us because God is good.**² When we truly receive that gracious gift, that good news, we cannot help but be transformed.

While we were in seminary at Princeton, my husband worked at a church in New York City. We moved from Princeton to Denver just a month before the planes flew into the twin towers on Nine-Eleven. It was fifteen years before we went back to New York together. During our visit we went to the site of the twin towers and saw the 9-11 memorial, which is basically a hole in the ground, filled in by a waterfall. There is water in an upper pool, and the pool is surrounded by low walls on which are etched all the victims’ names. The water in the upper pool goes down into a lower pool whose bottom you cannot see – you can only see darkness. It is mesmerizing and deeply moving to stand there and watch the water pouring down into the darkness of that hole.

Not long after we returned from that trip, I came across a reflection on the memorial that described it as a metaphor for God: mercy pouring into darkness, eternally filling empty space. “Grace fills all the gaps of universe,” it said.

² Richard Rohr, “Love, Not Atonement,” *evotional*, March 20, 2017.

“Counting and measuring can only increase the space between things. [But] water always falls and pools up in the lowest and darkest places, just like mercy does. And mercy is just grace in action.”³

Back to the couple who meet in the hospital over the body of their dead son. Upon seeing his wife, the husband says just four words. *“I am with you.”* No blame or judgment. No shifting responsibility. No false comfort or easy platitudes. Simply, “I am with you.”⁴ Grace fully sees and acknowledges all the ways we have and will fall short. Grace does not let us off the hook but asks us to acknowledge how we have failed to be who God has called us to be. Grace is God’s gift and God’s promise that there is nothing we can do that could ever make God love us any more – or any less – than God already does.

The theologian Henri Nouwen once confessed that he was plagued many nights by a terrible dream. He dreamed that he was traveling in a distant city, where he ran into a high school classmate. In the dream, the person would say, “Henri, Henri, I haven’t seen you in years. What have you done with your life?” This question from his friend always felt like judgment to Henri. He’d done some good things in his life, but there had also been some troubles and struggles. So when the old schoolmate in the dream would ask, “What have you done with your life?” Henri wouldn’t know what to say, how to account for his life.

Then one night he had another dream. He dreamed that he died and went to heaven. He was waiting outside the throne room of God, waiting to stand before God, and he shivered with fear. He just knew that God would be surrounded with fire and smoke and would speak to him in a deep voice saying, “Henri, Henri, what have you done with your life?” Then, the door opened, and Henri found himself in the presence of God, and God spoke and God said, “Henri, Henri, I’m so glad to see you! I hear you’ve had a rough trip, but I can’t wait to see the pictures. Come in, come in.”

As much as we wish for it, there is no formula for God’s mercy and forgiveness, there is no formula for God’s grace. Grace is the air that we breathe, it is the water in which we swim. When we recognize God’s grace at work in our lives, it will transform us, even though that transformation – unlike the apostle Paul’s – may not happen all at once. It might take most of our lives. But in the meantime, may God’s grace inspire us and enable us to extend that kind

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Shared in the “Stories” group of the Insight Timer application.

of divine, unconditional love and mercy to others – all others, even and especially those we do not understand or those with whom we violently disagree. This kind of grace – *alone* – has always been the force behind genuine theological and ecclesiological reformation. This kind of grace – alone – has the power to create real and lasting transformation in our lives and in our world.

May God's grace continue to transform your life and in mine.

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer
Mindy Stewart

Gracious God, In this season of thanksgiving we come to you with hearts full of gratitude and praise for the grace you show us each new day. From the rising of the sun to its setting, your mercy is new every morning, and as we progress from autumn to winter, we find your grace in every season of our lives. It is you, Lord who calls us to be your own, your beloved sons and daughters. Thank you for calling us, for strengthening us, and for using us to bring your love and compassion to a hurting and broken world.

Jesus, the life and love you brought to those who followed you, you bring to us today. You welcome us by extending your gentle touch, speaking your compassionate words, and inviting us into your healing, transformative presence. Your Word promises us that you are gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love.

Holy Spirit, help us to be rich in your love as we enter the holiday season – beginning with giving thanks for all you have done in our lives throughout this year, and for all you will continue to do. As we prepare for your birth and all that comes with heaven coming to earth in the form of a baby lying in a manger, let us not become ungrateful or ungracious. Help us to be vessels of your love, voices of your peace, hands of your hope, and songs of your joy as we welcome the familiar and stranger around our tables. As we feast on traditional foods with our friends and family, help us to remember those who don't have food to satisfy their hunger as well as those whose spirits are hungry for more connection with you. As we gather with those we love, help us to remember those who have been marginalized, detained, imprisoned, the grieving and the lonely. While we gather in warm homes, remind us that others may not have a place to call their own or a safe space to share their stories. God, thank you for providing this community with opportunities to serve others as

an expression of serving you. As we go about our daily lives, help us continue to be the church outside of these walls, spreading the freedom and love of the Good News, and reveal to us new ways we can be a beacon of light in the University Circle community and beyond.

Lord, as we gather here today, we think of our brothers and sisters who are among or not with us – those who are physically ill, emotionally hurting, mentally weary, and spiritually downtrodden – you know each one by name, and their concerns are close to your heart. We call them friends and family, but you call them your beloved. We hear what they choose to share, but you know their innermost thoughts and desires. God, would your love and compassion bring comfort and healing to Randy, Judy, Andrew, Akeya, Rich, Tori, Thelma, Gabe, Eliseo, Greg, Elizabeth, Patrick, Don, Olitana, Robert, Tommy, Tom, Rory, Liam, Doug, for all of the families and loved ones who are walking with them on their journeys, and for those whose names we did not mention but whose hearts you know. Holy Spirit, be present with those who are grieving, fulfilling your promise of comforting those who mourn. Bring hope and healing through the caregivers and staff at the surrounding hospitals as well as those who find refuge in this place throughout the week, placing requests in the carpenter's box. Lord, grant knowledge and understanding to the students of all ages as they prepare for final exams and travel home to their families and loved ones. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayers.

Jesus, as you graciously walked these earthly roads, forgiving sins, setting captives free, healing the broken-hearted, and restoring life to those you encountered, we ask your resurrected spirit to dwell among our current world – bringing justice, peace, and reconciliation – to all the corners of the earth wrought with natural disasters, famine and poverty, war and injustice. Holy Spirit, come and make all things new.

As those who are loved by you without condition, and who can find a place at your ever-expanding banqueting table, we come to you open to receive the nourishment you have for our souls that we may give to others. Out of our love and desire to be more like you, do we pray the prayer you taught your followers to pray saying: **Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**