

## **Grace Alone**

A Sermon Preached by Anne Keener  
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

June 12, 2016

*11th Sunday in Ordinary Time– Year C*

Galatians 2:15-21



I was reminded this week of the faith community that nurtured me my freshman year of college. It was a non-denominational university church which was very different from Westminster Presbyterian where I had grown up. I admit that I didn't choose this church for its theology or style of worship but simply because it was across the street from my freshman dorm which made it easy for me to roll out of bed and make it to church on time. Another reason I attended was that it was filled with other students like me who had been loved and raised in their home church and were now college students trying to find their way and figure out what they believe.

On one of our retreats, I remember discussing our journeys of faith. Many had conversion experiences in their faith story. They talked about that exact moment when they asked Jesus into their hearts and how they had been saved. I must admit, that language made me a little uncomfortable.

My faith story certainly had and has ups and downs but I didn't have an exact moment to share of when I was saved like many expected me to have. The truth was and is, that I just don't remember a time when I didn't know God loves me. I grew up in a loving family surrounded by a church family who loved and nurtured me from birth and baptism through the challenging youth years where life became more complicated. There may have been doubts and challenges along the way, but I have always known I belong to God. I have always known there is nothing I can do to earn God's love or make God love me more or less, but that was not the belief or the experience of many of the students in this faith community.

In today's text, Paul is responding to learning that Peter had been eating with Gentiles as Christ encouraged but when others arrived in town, Peter separated himself from the Gentiles because the Jewish law says you are not to eat with the uncircumcised. Paul had basically just called Peter out in the verse just prior to our passage saying, "If

you, though a Jew live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?”

In today’s text, Paul is explaining that we are justified by faith in Christ not by our works. He wants the people of Galatia to understand Gentiles are justified by faith in Jesus Christ just like those of Jewish background. The Gentiles should not be expected to follow all the Jewish laws such as being circumcised or eating a kosher diet. Paul is carrying on Christ’s message that all belong at the same table.

According to Paul, if we say justification comes through works, if we have to earn it, then we are nullifying the grace of God and saying Christ died for nothing. Nullifying the grace of God. Now that is a powerful and scary statement.

For me, it all comes down to grace. Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian minister and theologian wrote, “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.”

Grace is a gift. It is something we can never get but only be given. Think for a moment about a time when you received a very special gift from a family member or friend. How did it make you feel? Did it make you want to respond? Did it make you want to thank this person and show them how much you appreciate and love them?

Grace is the best gift we could ever receive. So it makes sense to me that once we have received this amazing gift that we would not just want to respond but feel called to respond; that the good things we do are not to try to earn justification but simply to respond to God’s grace.

I read this week that responding to God’s grace can involve acting and listening. It can involve doing and thinking. There are as many ways to respond to God’s grace as there are people in the world and this congregation certainly responds in a wide variety of ways.

Just yesterday morning, we had people responding to God’s grace while making homemade ice cream in our church kitchen and setting up tables, chairs and signs at FPC Nashville all to help prepare for Miss Martha’s Ice Cream Crankin’ this afternoon. Week after week, we have members who respond through teaching children, youth and adults in our congregation in various ways. So many of you responded by participating in a Growth Group this spring and I hope even more of you will join one in the fall.

I know and appreciate that many of you respond to God's grace by taking home your bulletin prayer list each week or picking up the complete prayer list from the narthex each month and then faithfully praying for each person. Many of you respond by serving on one of our many committees or ministry teams. Just this week, I had the joy of sitting around the table with our Strategic Planning Team as they worked on a purpose statement draft and discussed the focus groups we will be having in July and August.

Every time I turn around, I see people from our congregation responding to God's grace and it is not limited to church related activities. I have witnessed members who are school teachers responding to God's grace as they interact with students. Our children and youth respond when they invite another to play with them on the playground or join them at the lunch table. Simply being patient with family members and co-workers is a response to God's grace. I could go on and on because all we do is in response to God's grace.

I heard someone the other night talk about the danger of being nostalgic. He said it saddens him to hear people say, "I wish we could return to a time when the church was \_\_\_\_ (you can fill in the blank.)" It saddens him because when we are focused on how the church used to be, we are unable to experience and appreciate the present or have eyes for the future. When you are focused on the past, how can you listen for God's plan for today and for tomorrow?

Some of these same thoughts were shared during the Worship and Preaching class I just finished. The last chapter of one book was titled *Vital Worship for the Twenty-First Century* and it discussed practices of churches that are experiencing renewal. I smiled as I read the list because to each one I could say, "Yes! Our congregation does that!"

Yes, we welcome guests with genuine and open worship.

Yes, we practice discernment and ask what God is calling us to do.

Yes, we have had members share their stories of faith and what this community of faith means to them.

And Yes, we engage in theological reflection together, welcoming questions and providing many opportunities to learn and grow.

I am proud to be part of such a vibrant community of faith that is fully engaged in the present and looking to the future, not the past. A congregation that is experiencing renewal.

That word renewal has stayed with me since the class. I realized it was a word we used a lot in the fall to describe what we experienced during the All Things Possible Capital Campaign. As I reflected this week on our congregation's journey and how we have arrived here at our last Sunday in this sanctuary for a couple months, I found myself reading Pastor Chris' sermon from Celebration Sunday on October 11.

He said, "We thought we were planning a capital campaign, a fundraising effort. And we were. But God was planning for us something even more significant, plans for renewal, not just fundraising, but church raising."

In that sermon, he also reflected on the grace filled space between the baptismal font and the communion table. So many important moments happen in that space throughout the year with baptisms, confirmations and various commissionings. Other important moments happen each week as words of welcome, confession, assurance, blessing and benediction are shared from that space.

We also had many moving moments that happened during the All Things Possible Capital Campaign in that grace filled space. This is where members stood sharing their faith story through cardboard testimonies. It is where others held ministry banners that told stories of how we care for one another and those in our community, our nation and our world.

And it is in this same grace filled space between the font and the table that we creatively revealed a number on that Celebration Sunday. It was a number of pledged dollars to date in the campaign which greatly exceeded what many thought was possible, but it was really a sign of so much more. It was a sign of how our community of faith is responding to God's grace in powerful ways.

We are doing exactly what Paul says being a Christian is all about. Paul said we should be at table with all, no matter if they are circumcised or not, no matter if they eat a kosher diet or not. We should welcome all, no matter their background or skin color or age or political belief. We should welcome all.

If we were having communion today like we normally do on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday each month, Pastor Chris would be at the Communion table saying come and dine, all are welcome. Paul goes on in Galatians to say, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

The improvements being made in this sanctuary are saying, come, all are welcome. After the renovations, we will have a greatly improved sound system. This will allow those who have had difficulty hearing in this space to worship more fully; to better hear the Scripture as it is read, to better hear words shared from the pulpit and lectern and to better hear the beautiful music that Michael and the choirs bring each week as their response to God's grace.

Christ says, come, all are welcome. We will also be making this space more welcoming to those who use a walker or a wheelchair by cutting down pews on both sides of the aisle to make our space more accessible for all. So many of the improvements we will be doing as a result of the All Things Possible Capital Campaign will make our facility and grounds more welcoming to all which is the message of Christ and what I believe is the heart of this community of faith.

So, next week as we gather for worship for the first time in our temporary space where we will have moved the baptismal font and Communion table, we will share a meal of Holy Communion remembering that Christ says, come and dine, all are welcome. Whether we worship in a sanctuary or a fellowship hall, at church camp or on a mission trip. Christ says come, all are welcome. Grace is freely given. Receive the gift and then, respond.

If we truly believe that we are saved by faith, that God's grace is freely given, that God loves us so much that God sent his only Son to live with us on earth, that Christ loves us so much that he endured death on a cross for you and for me, that each of us have been crucified with Christ and as a result, we no longer live but it is Christ who lives in us, if we believe all of this, how can we not want to respond? How is God calling you to respond? How is God calling us as a faith community to respond?

May we continue to believe that with God and by the grace of God, All Things are Possible. Amen.