

Nothing but Grace!

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ! It's a pleasure to be with you this morning as part of your commemoration of the Reformation. This is, of course, a really big deal in the Lutheran world, but it's nice to see an Episcopal congregation taking special note of this 500th anniversary. It's been a great joy since my retirement as a Lutheran pastor to be actively involved in an Episcopal congregation; but each year at the end of October, I must admit that I miss the annual Lutheran festival of "Reformation Day."

"Grace to you . . ." The words with which I greeted you a moment ago are also St. Paul's words of greeting in our Epistle lesson this morning. "GRACE"—it's an important word—a word that many congregations besides yours have taken as their name. It is not uncommon among Lutherans to say that "grace" is really at the heart of Martin Luther's theology, and at the heart of the event we call the Reformation. Lutherans talk about the *solas*—that's a Latin word meaning alone. Maybe you've heard, for instance, of *sola scriptura*, "Scripture alone"—a Reformation slogan that meant that Christian faith is based solely on Scripture, not on other uninspired writings, however profound they might be. For Luther there were two or three other *solas*—and one was *sola gratia*, "grace alone." We are saved by "grace alone," not by any works of the law.

So, on one level, to say that grace is at the heart of the Reformation is certainly true. When Luther was a young Augustinian friar, his anguished question was "How can I find a gracious God?" He lived in a time when many people viewed God as demanding and punitive, and Luther himself had a strong consciousness of his own sins. He feared that he could never be good enough, and that God would condemn him.

But as he wrestled with the Scriptures and particularly with St. Paul, he came to see that God is in fact gracious—that everything that we have is by God's grace. It was a discovery that changed the world.

And yet I wonder if, when the church talks about grace today, we often mean something rather different from what Luther meant? I was in college in the 1960s and 70s. I used to marvel at the popularity among people in my age group of the hymn "Amazing Grace." It was sung, for heavens' sake, by Joan Baez and Judy Collins—hardly paragons of Christian faith! Eventually I realized that the reason this quintessential Christian hymn was so easily embraced by thoroughly secular people is that there is really very little Christian content to it. It never mentions Jesus, never even refers in a generic way to God. It's all about grace—but grace as a concept completely untethered from the Lord Jesus Christ. It is as if there is this cosmic spiritual reality called grace that's got the whole world in its hands!

That is not grace as Luther proclaimed it, nor as any of the other Reformers understood it. The great 20th century theologian Karl Barth once spoke of the gospel as "grace, nothing but grace, and the whole of grace." It's the "whole of grace" that often seems to be lacking today. For the Reformers, the concept of grace without God would be astonishing—and meaningless. He doesn't do this in our Epistle today, but in nearly all of his other letters St. Paul begins by

saying “Grace to you and peace *from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.*” Grace is a gift, but there is a Giver—and it’s not the universe that is the Giver—it is *God*. That’s “the whole of grace.”

Furthermore, “grace” has a very specific meaning for Christians—and that meaning has several facets. In the first place, “grace” means that everything we are and everything we have comes from God. When Jesus tells the Pharisees to “give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, but to God the things that are God’s,” he’s not suggesting that there is *anything* we have that does not belong to God. For Luther, that was the overwhelming reality of what it means to believe in God. His classic *Small Catechism*—a document that I think every Christian should know, not just Lutherans! —he explains the first article of the Apostles’ Creed, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth” by saying this: “I believe that God created me—and all that exists. He has given me and still preserves my body and soul with all their powers. He provides me with food and clothing, home and family, daily work, and all I need from day to day. God also protects me in time of danger and guards me from every evil. All this he does out of fatherly and divine goodness and mercy, though I do not deserve it. Therefore, I surely ought to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.” For Luther, you see, the fundamental reality of our existence is that everything comes from God—not just our life, but everything in it: relationships, vocation, material goods, health, all from God. And all “out of fatherly and divine goodness and mercy, though I do not deserve it”—which is to say, all by grace, nothing but grace.

But for Luther there’s another facet of grace, one deeper and more profound. It is that God, in his grace, forgives us our sins. We heard the Psalmist say it this morning in wonder: “You were a God who forgave them!” And for Luther, that’s the center of grace—that God could give us sinful human beings the opportunity to repent of our sins, and then forgive us and set us back on the right path.

This year of the 500th anniversary you’ve perhaps heard a bit about the “95 Theses” that Luther allegedly nailed to the door of the church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517, thus sparking what came to be known as the Reformation. But not many people have actually read the “95 Theses.” They think the document was sort of a general call for reform. Actually, the “95 Theses” centered quite specifically on this whole question of sin and repentance and forgiveness.

In the medieval church, it was taught that one’s salvation depended on regular use of the sacrament of penance—that is, on confessing to your parish priest and then fulfilling the penance he assigned you. The church taught that Jesus’ words, “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand,” meant the sacrament of penance. One fulfilled the “satisfaction” (either through some pious act or—sad to say—through buying forgiveness through the purchase of indulgences.

But Luther insisted that this absolutely turned God’s grace on its head. God forgives us freely, without any payment of any kind. The first of the “95 Theses” laid the foundation: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said ‘Repent,’ he intended that the entire life of the believer should be one of repentance.” In other words, the Christian’s life is one that is always aware of sin, always sorry for sin, always striving against sin—and always humbly grateful that God “does not deal with us according to our sins, nor requite us according to our iniquities.” It is

grace, nothing but grace—no matter how far we’ve fallen short, how much we’ve done or left undone, God, in his grace, forgives all those who turn to him.

But the deepest mystery of all for Luther, the almost unfathomable center of God’s grace, is Jesus Christ. This forgiveness that God offers so freely does not come cheap; but it is *God* who pays the price. Let me go back to Luther’s *Small Catechism*. When he explains the second article of the creed, the paragraph about Jesus, he says this: “*At great cost* he has saved and redeemed me, a lost and condemned person. He has freed me from sin, death, and the power of the devil—not with silver or gold, but with his holy and precious blood and his innocent suffering and death. All this he has done that I may be his own, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true.”

So, there you have it. For Luther, and for the other Reformers, the deepest mystery of all is that that this grace of which they speak, this grace which brings us forgiveness, is all because of Christ—the one whom, Paul says in our Epistle lesson, God “raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.” That’s the whole of grace—that God loved the world so much that he sent his Son, to live as one of us, and to suffer and die for us, so that we might be his own. That’s the heart of the Reformation’s proclamation. It’s grace, nothing but grace, and the whole of grace.

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