

Lenten Midweek #1 – 2022
The Death of Christ and Grace
Romans 5:1-11
Matthew 27:27-44

Grace – the grace of God; the irony about grace is that it is difficult to understand and easy to abuse. So much of our culture is built on a sense of justice. I'm glad for this sense of justice. The proper functioning of any society is predicated on right and wrong, predicated on our ability to promote righteousness and punish crime. God establishes justice and calls us to embrace it, protect it, teach and promote it. Grace is not only eliminating the punishment you so richly deserve. Grace is receiving something extraordinary that you do not deserve. There is no parallel to grace, Christian grace, anywhere. It is a *real* thing, grace. It is not philosophical, not esoteric, not a religious theory or a pious avenue of escapism.

I was sitting in a relative's church service. I was in my early 20's and profoundly wayward. This was before I met Alise. It was an evangelical service and there was an altar call. A gentleman went forward and he was clearly distraught. He seemed profoundly alone. My memory tells me that the pastor invited anyone forward who might console this man, though that part is a bit fuzzy. I waited. I watched. No one came. What would you do?

The reason that grace is difficult to understand is that it is so astonishing, so pure, so counterintuitive. Have you ever felt ugly and alone? Have you ever felt supremely defeated and banished from hope, a *just* banishment? Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden. How ugly and alone did they feel? A woman stood before justice as stones were held in hands ready to administer punishment for sin. An adulteress, humiliated and full of shame, she is out in public view as one who has merited death. A Canaanite woman is told that it is not right to take the children's bread and give it to her, give it to dogs. Was she excluded? How many degrees of separation are there between you and these people? What do you deserve from a righteous God?

I didn't know what to do, watching that man weep at their altar rail. I was an outsider. No one knew me, except my relative. Why was no one making any gesture at all to befriend this disconsolate fellow? I had nothing to give, but I couldn't just sit there. So, I went up and put my arm around him. Later, my relative said that he did that quite regularly. I gleaned from that that the congregation was somewhat dulled to the exercise – altar call, seemingly repentant man is grieved, others console him with the gospel and it all happens again next week.

My gesture of simple human compassion was taken as some kind of spiritual breakthrough and the pastor led me through the Sinner's Prayer after the service. Whatever the Sinner's Prayer might be it certainly isn't grace. The action in the prayer is what we do: I turn to You, O Lord, I invite you into my heart, O Lord, I open the door of my life to You, O Lord. The inviting, opening, and turning puts all the work of grace back onto to me. We rarely see it this way, but the Sinner's Prayer is a works righteousness view of Christianity. It requires Jesus to wait until I invite Him. The Bible calls us dead (Ephesians 2). Dead things don't make decisions or open doors or make themselves alive.

Grace is love. Grace is the catalyst for a lost and bedraggled sinner to be loved, to be searched for and claimed and drawn and nurtured and saved. Life is something that God has given to humanity. We haven't achieved it. You didn't participate or contribute to yourself being alive. Love, likewise, is His gift. You haven't awakened God's love for you by anything you have done or thought. His love stands above everything in life. Grace is His love in action. Grace is His desire to have you as His own. Grace takes the initiative. Grace is that indescribable wonder that exists in God's heart to love you and love you and love you and love you. Sin and death are real. Sin and death are abominations and a violation of what is holy and the life that exists in God Himself. Abortion and murder and violence and blasphemy and pride and greed and lust and all the lies of man, all the cover-ups that sinners spout in order to evade the truth – it is so wretched, our sinful heart. Because of grace, because of God's love even the most abhorrent realities don't lock us in chains and wrestle us to hell. Love takes action. Grace intervenes.

They mocked Him mercilessly. The King of Glory submitted to the gross insults of the pettiest of men. He reveals who He truly is as He submits to this humiliation. Justice is real. God does indeed keep a record of sins. That astronomical burden was put on Christ. It wasn't generic sins that were put on Jesus. It was the stuff you did last week. The real selfishness that we all produce was put on Him. He took it. Divine justice demands that Jesus take it. Love demands that He suffer. He stood in the place that none of us could stand. His blood, His righteousness is the merit that saves you. His merit is so deep and wide and voluminous that it swamps our sin. That one so holy, so loving, so sacrificial would be willing to take into His person what is so contrary to Him, so vile and wretched – for a people who so callously dismiss His sacrifice – and yet He never tires of loving us, forgiving us, sharing His life with us.

Have you known love? Have you been blessed to know how treasured you are, how every concern of yours has been considered and resolved by our heavenly Father? God's grace invades your soul; God's grace invades us and elevates us and allows us to enjoy what He enjoys – love. You *have* loved and that is God at work in you. God's grace is alive in this place. God's grace is alive in His church, His people, His Word. Each of you has been loved by Christ. You see His sacrifice and you know that it is for you. Peace dwells in your heart; appreciation for who He has made you to be and then you love others as He has first loved you. He took us out of the gutter, out of the sewer of self and unbelief and has given us a new heart and a new Spirit (Ezekiel 36:25-27). It is a joy to reflect His grace. You know that the sweetness of His life is a real commodity and you receive it, you celebrate it every time you come into this holy house.

Can you imagine if you had to earn God's favor? One of our dear departed friends, George Garner, told me how he came to be a member here at Christ the King. He said that he didn't have much use for the church. Not because He didn't respect God but because he knew, deep in his heart, that He could never be good enough. That's what George thought Christianity was – how it was portrayed in the various churches he visited – getting right with God and then staying on His good side. George knew what God's standards were and he knew that he couldn't. And he wandered into this here Lutheran church and Pr. Paulus taught George about grace. George died celebrating God's grace. George never was good enough. Nor am I; nor are you. But Christ died for sinners. Mercy is more comprehensive than sin. We are saved by grace, grace free and boundless.

Jesus sheltered the adulterous woman. He was the only one who could have cast a stone and He refused; grace! Jesus cured the daughter of the Canaanite woman. None us receives crumbs; we receive grace. Adam and Eve were the first to hear the Gospel of grace. The Seed of the Woman would crush the serpent's head and God's Champion would suffer a mortal blow (the serpent would strike His heel). Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, a Pharisee, took Jesus' body down from the cross. Grace was in their hands as they laid the Lord in the tomb. Christ's death is the anchor of grace that will never end. God's grace is a living entity in the crucified and risen flesh of God's Son. That grace has come sweeping into your heart and mind; it has made your life wonderful.