

“Life After Grace”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
3rd Sunday of Easter
April 15, 2018

First Scripture Lesson: Psalm 30

¹I will extol you, O Lord, for You have drawn me up, and did not let my foes rejoice over me. ²O Lord my God, I cried to You for help, and You have healed me. ³O Lord, You brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit. ⁴Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to His holy name. ⁵For His anger is but for a moment; His favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning. ⁶As for me, I said in my prosperity, “I shall never be moved.” ⁷By Your favor, O Lord, You had established me as a strong mountain; You hid your face; I was dismayed. ⁸To You, O Lord, I cried, and to the Lord I made supplication: ⁹“What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise You? Will it tell of Your faithfulness? ¹⁰Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me! O Lord, be my helper!” ¹¹You have turned my mourning into dancing; You have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, ¹²so that my soul may praise You and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to You forever.

Second Scripture Lesson: John 21:1-19

¹After these things Jesus showed Himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and He showed Himself in this way. ²Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples. ³Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will go with you.” They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. ⁴Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” They answered Him, “No.” ⁶He said to them, “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. ⁷That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. ⁸But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. ⁹When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” ¹¹So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹²Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared to ask Him, “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord. ¹³Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after He was raised from the dead.

¹⁵When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” ¹⁶A second time He said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” ¹⁷He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because He said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to Him, “Lord, you know everything; You know that I love You.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. ¹⁸Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” ¹⁹(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this He said to him, “Follow me.”

**Sermon: "Life After Grace"**

Two Sundays ago we gathered in this place to celebrate Easter. We wore our new Easter clothes and sang "Jesus Christ is Risen Today!" We had brass and timpani. We read about Mary and the disciples coming to the tomb and finding it empty. We marveled at the idea of God raising Jesus from the dead and somehow claiming a victory over sin and death that fundamentally changes us and our relationship to God, the world, and one another.

But now we find ourselves two weeks down the road. The Easter lilies have gone away. We have no special guest musicians this week. In many respects it feels like a regular Sunday. And the question arises: have we been changed at all? Is anything different because of Easter two weeks ago?

In the church we tend to get really excited about Easter because of what it represents: a singular historic event the likes of which has never before been seen. Throughout its history, the Church has interpreted the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in different ways. Jesus is the sacrificial lamb who dies for the sins of humanity. Jesus is the warrior who faces death to defeat the powers of evil. Jesus is the righteous man who does not deserve to die, but who takes on the punishment that the rest of sinful humanity has earned.

But no matter how we understand Jesus, the common thread is always God's grace. Whatever was accomplished; whatever we have been given through Jesus, is not because we have earned it. It is a gift of grace. And grace is not so much *a thing* in and of itself as it is the quality of God which makes all of God's gifts available to us. A gift given by grace is one with no strings attached and one which cannot be earned.

Have you ever experienced love without reason or been given help without the expectation of repayment? Have you ever been given a second chance that you probably didn't deserve? If you have, then you know a little bit about what grace is.

We get confused in the church sometimes, thinking that we try to live good lives in order to earn God's favor. But grace works the other way around. Well known Presbyterian theologian and writer Shirlie Guthrie describes grace this way:

*"God does not say 'I will love you if you are good, if you prove yourself worthy, if you do so and so, if you first love me.' God does not even say, 'I will love you if you first have faith in me or if you first humiliate yourself and grovel on the ground before me.' God says simply, 'I love you just as you are...' "That does not mean that God's love is blind. God sees us as we really are."*¹

And God loves, accepts and forgives us anyway. That is definitely worth celebrating! But what comes next?

When Villanova and Notre Dame won the NCAA men's and women's basketball tournaments respectively just a few weeks ago, I'm sure they celebrated. But I'm just as certain that not long afterwards, the coaching staffs were back at the business of recruiting and watching film, and their players were back in the gym and the weight room, preparing for next season. And what John tells us this morning is that in the days and weeks after that first Easter morning, Jesus did not rest on His laurels. He went back to work, too.

This seems to be the purpose of Chapter 21; the final chapter of John's gospel in which he tells a remarkable tale of Jesus again appearing to the disciples, helping them as they struggle to find fish, feeding them on the shore and challenging Peter with the question "Do you love me more than these?"

But in each of these small parts of the story we see reflections of stories from earlier in Jesus' life. The events of the days *after* the resurrection explicitly recall events from *before* the resurrection and the message seems to be that what Christ was about during His life and ministry, He is still about even now.

John shows us the risen Christ on the shore of the sea of Tiberias, sharing a breakfast of fish and bread and we are reminded that it was here, beside this same Sea of Tiberias that Jesus fed the 5000 with bread and fish.² That connection reminds us that Jesus is still feeding and nurturing; that Christ's love for others and His great generosity is still one of His defining characteristics.³

John also shows us Jesus instructing the disciples to cast their net on the other side of their boat where they haul in an unbelievable catch of fish. William Barclay tells us that it was not unusual for fishermen to be unable to see a shoal of fish from their boat when someone on shore could see the dark mass near them and direct them where to cast. This, argues Barclay, is what Jesus did in this instance.⁴ And when we read John's account of it, we remember that in His life, Jesus taught and guided His disciples and we understand that He is teaching and guiding them still.

John shows us Jesus gathered with the disciples, eating breakfast together around a fire and we remember his last meal with the disciples when he washed their feet and sat together with them at the table on the night of His arrest. We hear this new telling of an older story and we see that after His death and resurrection Jesus is still feeding and nurturing and serving just as He was before.⁵

We hear Jesus ask Peter three times "Do you love me more than these" and three times we hear Peter answer "Yes Lord, You know that I love You" and we recall that on the night of Jesus' arrest, three times Peter denied even knowing who Jesus was.⁶ Here, after His resurrection Jesus gives Peter another chance to proclaim his love and we realize we too are given second, third (and more) chances and that Christ's work of redemption and reconciliation is ongoing.

In this final chapter of John's gospel, we hear the good news that Christ's work is not just a thing of the past but is an ongoing reality into the present and the future.

God's breaking into human history in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, is an act of compassion and steadfast love; it is not something we have earned or deserve; it is an act of grace. And through God's grace we are forgiven and reconciled to God and to one another. This is the good news of Easter. This is grace! But there is also life *after* grace.

At every wedding I've ever officiated, I've told the happy couple that the place where they are standing when they exchange their vows is not a finish line, it is a starting line. Saying "I do" is making a commitment to loving and caring for one another, forever. All the romantic stuff that got you to your wedding day is fun, but there is real work ahead of you.

Likewise, for the disciples, after the celebration, there is work to be done. And that work involves loving and serving God by loving and serving God's people.

When Jesus asks Peter “...do you love me more than these?” Peter responds each time by saying “Lord, You know that I love You.” And each time Jesus replies with some variation of “Feed my sheep.” And in that exchange, Jesus communicates to Peter and to generations of disciples who have come after, that loving God will always be lived out in lives spent loving and serving God’s people, especially the ones Jesus calls “the least of these.”⁷

But there is more. Responding to God’s grace means responding with our whole lives. God doesn’t just want us for a few hours a week or for one or two big acts of charity a year. God wants our lives to be dedicated to the Kingdom.

That means making time for our relationship with God. We need to spend time reading our Bibles and reading the writings of Christian thinkers like Shirlie Guthrie and William Barclay and Barbara Brown Taylor and Kathleen Norris. And then we need to think about what we’re reading; really wrestle with it, and talk about it with others; ask questions, and try to understand what God is saying to us.

We need to pray every day. I’ll admit that it can be hard to find a space and time each day just to settle down and talk to God. Sometimes it’s in my bed at night when I’m already worn out from the day. That means my prayers are often along the lines of “Dear God, thank you so much for ...Zzzz-zzzz ...”

So, we need to make time and space for talking with God about what matters to us; thanking God and drawing on God for support in the things over which we worry. And then listening for God. And that can be in the car or when we have a minute between meetings. But if the proper response to God’s love and grace is a life dedicated to God; and if we take that seriously, then we should not be just *finding* time for God, we should be *making* time for God.

And we should be making even the small decisions of our lives and the momentary interactions with other people reflective of God’s love for us. There is a house in our neighborhood where on Halloween, they participate in trick-or-treating by putting a big bowl of candy on a small table outside their door. Lots of people do this. But theirs is a little different because they always put out a sign next to it that reads “Take only two pieces. Jesus is watching you.”

When I was a kid, I was always told that God is watching you. That was supposed to be a threat to make me behave. But as an adult I remember this, and it serves more as a reminder for me to always try to please God or at least, not disappoint God. Of course, I fail sometimes. More than I’d care to admit. But a life lived in response to God’s grace is a life where we strive to live each day in a way that pleases God. That can be difficult and challenging, I know. Grace is easy and comforting, but life after grace demands everything we have

One of my favorite television shows is “Parks and Recreation.” In it, Nick Offerman plays a gruff civil servant named Ron Swanson. To some people, Ron Swanson has come to epitomize everything strong and manly. In one episode, he sits down in a diner and orders, telling the server quote: “Just give me all the bacon and eggs you have.” As the server begins to walk away Ron stops him. “Wait, wait. I’m worried what you just heard was, ‘Give me *a lot* of bacon and eggs.’ What I said was, ‘Give me all the bacon and eggs you have.’ Do you understand?”⁸

So, it is in that spirit that I say to you the only appropriate life after grace is one in which we give all of what we have and all of what we are in service to God. Now, I’m worried what you just heard was “we

should give *a lot* of what we have and *a lot* of what we are to God” What I said was “The only appropriate life after grace is one in which we give *all* of what we have and *all* of what we are in service to God.”

That is how we respond to God’s gift.
That is life after grace.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world, and in the world that is to come.

End Notes

¹ Guthrie, Shirley C. *Christian Doctrine*. Louisville, Ken.: Westminster/J. Knox, 1994. 319. Print.

² John 6:1-14, NRSV

³ Thomas H. Troeger. "Third Sunday of Easter: John 21:1-19, Homiletic Perspective." *Feasting on the Word*. Ed. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor. Year C, Vol. 2. Louisville, KY: Westminster-John Knox, 2009. 421-23. Print.

⁴ Barclay, William. *The Gospel of John, Volume 2*. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1956. 327. Print. The Daily Study Bible Ser.

⁵ Thomas H. Troeger. "Third Sunday of Easter: John 21:1-19, Homiletic Perspective." *Feasting on the Word*. Ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Vol. 2. Louisville, KY: Westminster-John Knox, 2009. 423. Print. Year C.

⁶ Ibid, pg. 425

⁷ Matthew 25:31-46, NRSV

⁸ Dippold, Katie. "Indianapolis." *Parks and Recreation*, season 3, episode 6, NBC, 24 Feb. 2011.