

“Grace Received. Grace Given.”
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
Trinity Sunday
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Scripture Reading: Ephesians 2:1-10

¹You were dead through the trespasses and sins ²in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.

⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— ⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.



Sermon: “Grace”

Cost and reward. It is one of the basics aspects of human nature that we expect to be rewarded for our good work but when we make mistakes, we expect to have to pay for them, too. To err is human. But to make amends is required. If I accidentally break something of yours, you would rightfully expect me to pay for the repairs. If I forget your birthday, I might offer to take you out to lunch as a way of “making it up to you.” Whether we break a law, or offend an acquaintance, or even fail to live up to expectations, we know that there is a price to be paid and we can expect to have to pay it. It’s simple economics. If you do the crime, you do the time.

Which is why the concept of Grace can be so hard to comprehend. The passage from Ephesians we just read is the source of one of the basic tenets of Presbyterianism: The idea that we are justified or “made right” with God by God’s grace alone. But I’m not sure we always understand what “Grace” means.

Traditionally, we have seen violating God’s law as a grave offense. Some people still picture God like Zeus throwing lightning bolts at rule breakers. Or like a divine Dirty Hairly with an itchy trigger finger, just looking for a reason to come crashing down with all the weight of righteous justice. Being at cross-purposes with that kind of God rarely ends well. But that’s not God. That’s what human beings would be like if *they* were God. Scripture tells us that God deals in Grace.

The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible defines Grace as “God’s unmerited, free, spontaneous love for sinful [humanity].”¹ Which means that God loves us, just because God does and not because of anything that we have done to deserve it.

In the Ephesians passage that we just read, the author uses that word, “grace,” several times, culminating with this line, which is central to the reformed faith of which we Presbyterians are a part: “by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” But that concept can be really hard for some people to wrap their heads around because it is almost exactly opposite from the way our society works.

It is human nature to think the harder we work, the more we earn. And the nicer we are to people, the more they will love us. Conversely, the less we do, and the uglier we are to people, the less reward and love we can expect back. “Do unto others” and all that. So, if people prosper, it’s because they are good. And if they struggle and suffer, it must be because they’ve done something to deserve it. In the book of Job, that’s sort of the whole argument between Job and his friends in a nutshell right there. But this passage says that’s NOT how God works. Presbyterian author and Professor Shirlie Guthrie describes grace like this: *“God does not say, ‘I will love you if you are good, if you prove yourself worthy,... 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 – you, not your righteousness, your humility, your faith, or your accomplishments of one kind or another.’”*²

So, grace is a combination of forgiveness, mercy, and unconditional love, and it can be a powerful concept, but it only impacts us to the extent that we see ourselves as being sinners in need of it. Winning the lottery is fun for everyone, but it’s only life-changing good news for the poor and financially desperate. The rich person adds it to their bank account. The poor person celebrates the beginning of a whole new life. And frankly, a lot of us are spiritually rich. The church has been so effective in teaching God’s grace that we almost take it for granted. We know we’ve sinned and fallen short, but ... grace! So, it’s all good. God’s name be praised!

God’s grace will always be good news, whether we recognize it or not. But grace is more than God’s attitude towards us. Grace is also a defining characteristic of how God expects us to interact with each other. If we can’t appreciate just how much we need God’s grace, maybe we can appreciate how much the world needs *our* grace.

In the gospel of Luke, Jesus says *“Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”*³ And in 1 Peter the author calls us *“Good stewards of the manifold grace of God.”*⁴ In his second letter to Timothy, Paul encourages him to *“Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.”*⁵ Ephesians 4 says in part *“Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear... Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”*⁶

We are called to forgive one another, give the benefit of the doubt, not judge one another, and work toward reconciliation with those who have hurt us. We are called to be *gracious* toward one another. And an increasingly divisive world *needs* us to be gracious towards one another.

Now society, by necessity, needs a system of laws, and consequences for violating those laws is required. Even God does not shield us from experiencing the natural consequences of our actions, sinful or otherwise. But in this world, if you do something once, no matter how much you try to make amends, that label, that reputation, sticks with you forever. How many times have you heard it said “Once a _____ always a _____”. And you can fill in that blank with almost anything: Once a liar, always a liar. Once a cheat always a cheat. Once a thief, always a thief.

And in this country, it is common if not normal for someone who has committed a crime, been incarcerated for that crime, and then released, to continue having to pay for that crime years after their debt to society was supposedly paid. Formerly incarcerated individuals are often ineligible for public assistance, many employers refuse to hire someone with a record, and many landlords won’t rent to someone who has spent time in prison.

In general, human beings make judgements about each other and have a hard time letting go of those opinions, no matter what. But God does not function that way with us. And we should not function that way with others. Which is a challenge, I know. But the way we accomplish that is to begin small.

One approach is to embrace empathy. Empathy is not to be confused with sympathy. Sympathy is feeling sorry for someone else. It's about how *you* feel. Empathy is trying to put yourself in another person's situation and imagining how that must make *them* feel. Try to put yourself in someone else's shoes. What might they be experiencing? How may they be feeling? Are their actions motivated by malice, or could there be something else happening here? If you can do that, you can start to understand other people, their journeys, their struggles, and that is the beginning of compassion, forgiveness, mercy.

I'll give you an example: One of the things that bugs me is when I'm driving and someone comes up behind me and rides my bumper, flashing their headlights, expecting me to move over so they can speed on their merry way. Ever have that happen to you? Annoying, right? The thing to do is sit right there in that lane and let that jerk know who's boss! Right? Well, I was reading a story online once where a person was boasting of having done just that. Someone wanted to pass, but the driver matched speed with the car in the right lane and wouldn't allow the person behind to pass. That really showed them!

Then someone responded to that by recounting a story of the day he and his friends were hiking in the wilderness, miles from the nearest town when one of their group had terrible accident. He was bleeding profusely and because they were so far from a hospital, they decided it would be faster to take him, than to wait for emergency responders. So, they bundled him into their car and began driving as fast as possible. They applied pressure to his wound, but time was running out. As they sped down the highway, they came upon someone driving a reasonable speed in the left-hand lane. They honked and waved and flashed headlights, but the other driver just matched speed with an adjacent car and wouldn't let them pass. This went on for miles until they were able to reach a wider spot and could pass on the shoulder of the highway. The driver, who blocked their path to desperately needed medical help, had no idea.

Reading that story changed the way I see every person speeding past me on the highway. I often wonder if that "jerk who can't wait" is really rushing desperately to be with a family member who is dying, or if they may be late for a custody hearing or for a meeting with their boss to determine whether they will still have a job tomorrow.

I guess the point is that there is plenty of anger and malice and hatred in this world. And most of the time we are able to find some justification for it. And that justification allows us to hold grudges and treat people poorly and assume in them the worst possible motives. Yet that's not how God is with us. And that's not how God wants us to be with each other. We should be working towards empathy, compassion, forgiveness. We should be striving to be gracious towards others.

Now I think it is necessary to stop at this point and say that if you are in a relationship with an abuser, empathy, forgiveness, grace, doesn't mean accepting abuse. If you are being hurt, or taken advantage of, grace does not mean staying in that situation. Love, forgiveness, mercy might still be possible for you, but they happen as you care for yourself and get help to escape that unhealthy situation. Too often victims of abuse have heard the church say "love" and "forgive," and hear that as a call to accept their abusive situation. But God doesn't want that either. We can love and forgive even as we care for ourselves and hold accountable those who would do us harm.

Grace is what defines God's relationship with us. God loves us unconditionally. God forgives us for the ways we fail. And there is no sin that places us beyond the reach of God's mercy. And that's not because we are so good. It's in spite of the fact that we're capable of so much that is bad. If we truly are to love

one another as God has first loved us; if we are truly to live towards God's Kingdom, then we have to not only embrace God's grace for ourselves but find ways to embody that grace to other people.

Because we sing of God's grace and we celebrate God's forgiveness, and mercy, and unconditional love, freely given. But that grace doesn't just heal us, it enlightens us. It doesn't just show us what God is like, it teaches us what we are supposed to be like, too.

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

End Notes

¹ Mitton, C.L. "Grace." *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: Volume 2, E-J*. Ed. George Arthur Buttrick. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1962. 463. Print.

² Guthrie, Shirley C. *Christian Doctrine*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/J. Knox, 1994. 319. Print.

³ Luke 6:36, NRSV

⁴ 1 Peter 4:10, NRSV

⁵ 2 Timothy 2:1, NRSV

⁶ Ephesians 4:29, 31-32, NRSV