

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera QLD

10th March 2024 – Fourth Sunday in Lent

Ephesians 2:4-10

GRACE

Grace. In our Western culture, I think this can be a concept which we find it a bit hard to deal with or to fully accept. Perhaps that's one reason why Christianity struggles a bit more in Western culture than some other cultures in the world, and that even among those of us Westerners who are Christians there is sometimes a tendency to break down or twist around a bit the role grace plays in our relationship with God. Why do we sometimes struggle with it? Is it because when we are a receiver we feel that someone giving us something puts an obligation on us that we need to repay them? Do we have ingrained in us so deeply the feeling that we have to earn or at least repay everything we receive that it's difficult for us to accept a gift freely given? Do you feel like that sometimes; someone gives you something, or does something for you, so you feel under a sense of obligation until you repay it in some way? And what about on the other side, as the giver of grace, how do we go with that? How do thoughts of, 'what's in it for me?', 'why do I always have to give something/compromise/make the first move?', are they thoughts and words which fit in well with us showing grace in our lives? Grace; it can be hard to receive, and hard to give out.

What is 'Grace', how do you define it, taking it in the context we have in our reading today? Some definitions can be: A free gift. Something underserved. Unconditional acceptance. Receiving something from someone which we can never hope to either earn or repay. We do use this word in these kinds of ways, talking about a 'grace period' on a loan, and it being suggested that we should 'show them some grace', but a lot of the time I believe that we do struggle with being both the receivers and the givers of acts of grace.

But grace is, without a doubt, as brought out strongly in this reading and in many other parts of the Bible, absolutely essential in our relationship with God; thinking firstly of course about God's grace to us. Because of our human sinfulness, which is our rebellion against God in all ways, from

the sin we are born into, to the sins we do, we cannot begin to come to God by ourselves. It is put so well here about how bringing us back into a relationship with God all began with Him, because it had to. This reading starts off with; ‘But God was merciful! We were dead because of our sins, but God loved us so much he made us alive with Christ, and God's gift of undeserved grace is what saves you.’ (v. 4-5) We were dead because of our sins, in other words, incapable of doing anything for ourselves. But because of God’s mercy and His love for us He showed His grace in making us alive again through Jesus! How straightforward is that?!?!? There is no way around it that our relationship before God is all based on what He does for us, is there? And how are we saved; how do we receive this gift of grace? Through faith; ‘You were saved by faith in God, who treats us much better than we deserve. This is God's gift to you, and not anything you have done on your own.’ (v. 8) Even our faith, we are told, that faith which allows us to accept God’s love and mercy by His grace, even that faith is a gift of God. This all has the result then, that we have nothing to brag about ourselves.

When it comes to our being saved, having our relationship with God restored, we walk the path of grace to the cross. The other two Bible readings we have here today show how that happens really well. In the Old Testament reading from Numbers 21, after being brought out from slavery in Egypt the Israelites are complaining against God as they are wandering around in the desert (that’s nothing new) so God sends venomous snakes throughout their camp to bite them. When people started dying they all were sorry, so God told Moses to make a bronze snake which would heal anyone who looked at it. God, in His grace, didn’t wipe everyone out at that time despite the fact they were always speaking against Him.

In our Gospel reading from John 3, as Jesus is talking to a Jewish leader named Nicodemus he reminds Nicodemus of that incident from the Old Testament, and Jesus then says; ‘the Son of Man must be lifted up, just as the metal snake was lifted up by Moses in the desert. Then everyone who has faith in the Son of Man will have eternal life.’ (*John 3:14-15 CEV*) What follows then is the most well-known verse in the whole Bible; ‘God loved the people of this world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who has faith in him will have eternal life and never really die.’ (v. 16) We

are saved by God's love in sending Jesus to die on the cross for us. This is a gift which we can neither earn nor repay. That is grace. In coming back to God, we walk the path of grace to the cross.

This is such good news for us, isn't it? Even though at times we can still be like the Israelites in the Old Testament and take it for granted, or complain more about what we don't have rather than be thankful for what we do, we still do know and live in, and respond to, this grace; that's why we are here worshipping God, hearing His Word, all of that stuff. But what else is there to our response? To put it in terms we often use in our Lutheran Church, we are not saved *by* our good works, but we are saved *for* good works. Let's go back to our reading here. In the last verse here it says, 'God planned for us to do good things and to live as he has always wanted us to live. This is why he sent Christ to make us what we are.' (10) God planned for us to do good things. That is why He sent Jesus to make us what we are. It doesn't just finish with us being saved by grace, that's the first half. And if we go back up to verse 7 we get a bit more of an idea of what it's about here; 'God did this so in the future world he could show how truly good and kind he is to us because of what Christ Jesus has done.' (v. 7) God showed His grace to the people of the world, so that in future, that's now, everyone would see how kind and good He is because of what Jesus has done. Those who receive God's grace now also become witnesses to God's grace. Our Christian life is a part of God's purpose, a reflection of Jesus within us. We walk the path of grace to the cross, and we walk the path of grace from the cross.

As Christians, grace is not just what we receive from God, but is also what we are called to show and share as witnesses to God. How does that come out in our lives? We do talk about this quite often, but if you're like me you also need to hear it and think about it over and over again. To walk the path of grace from the cross, what does that look like in your life? We can say first of all it's about God's grace being reflected in the choices we make in where we put our priorities, how people see us responding to God's love in the real ways of worshipping and serving Him. Our culture loves to see Christians as being hypocrites, and too often it seems we make it too easy for people to see just that. In our lives, our lifestyle, our decisions, what we do or don't do, are we doing those good things God has planned for us to do and living as He wants us to live?

How about in our relationships with others, how does our responding to God's grace come out there? Is there a relationship we have with someone, on any level, which would be very different if we were more able to reflect to them the grace we receive from God? In thinking about this reading here, if we are to really think about and pray about what is our call as those who receive God's grace, and then act on that, what would change? Who would we talk to differently? What situations would we view in a more positive way? Who might we reach out to support or help up rather than negatively criticising them? We are saved, through our faith, that is a done deal; that is made very plain here. But also very plain is that a part of the purpose of our being saved by grace through faith is that we become a part of showing others what this grace means. I encourage you to think about that, to pray about that, and hardest of all, to act on that. We walk the path of grace to the cross, and we walk the path of grace from the cross.

Grace. Even though on a human level we might find it hard to sometimes both accept and show, it stands central in our relationship with God. We are brought back to God by His undeserved gift of Jesus' dying to save us, a gift of forgiveness and hope we cannot begin to either earn or repay. That's grace. As we receive it, we are also called to now share it. Live in, and live out, God's grace every day; it truly is amazing. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- How would you define 'grace' (in terms of receiving and showing grace in our relationships)?
- Think about the grace God shows to you in your life: What does it mean to you? What difference does it make to you? How does it change how you go through life each day?
- Think about the grace God calls you to show as a witness to His love and kindness: Do you find this easy or difficult? Are there particular situations in which you find this hard? Are there situations or relationships you can bring to God and pray about asking for His help to show His grace more faithfully?

Pray: thank God that we live in His love and grace every day. Ask Him help us to be thankful and joyful about this, and to show our thanks and joy in how we both live our lives and share His grace with others.

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