

Third Weekend After Pentecost (A/RCL)

Romans 1.16-17; 3.22b-31

June 1, 2008

Holy Trinity, Manasquan

In an earlier chapter of my life I was a high school religion teacher. I taught first in River Forest, IL, then in Georgetown (Washington D.C.), before doubling back to the Midwest, getting ordained and teaching Lutheran Confirmation class in Mundelein, IL. From there I came to Manasquan, where I taught and still teach Confirmation to young Lutherans. No matter where I've lived or the religion or the exact age of the kids I've taught, the classroom challenge has been the same: how do I help them understand about grace, **costly** grace, not **cheap** grace??

The simplest definition I know of grace is: God's love that comes to us as pure gift and not reward. We **didn't** earn it. We **couldn't** earn it, no matter how hard we tried. God loves us not because **we're** good but because **God** is good. God loves us not because we're **lovable** but because God is **loving**.

Grace, this unmerited love of God, often shows up in our lives as the forgiveness of sins. We're guilty as sin, guilty as charged, and God suspends our jail sentence before we've served any of it. Then God seals the court records. There's no rap sheet left to follow us.

This is where it gets tricky with kids. They can easily and wrongly and maddeningly conclude, "Then it doesn't matter what I do. God will forgive me anyway." And then I want to jump up and down, yelling, "No, no, no! That's **not** what I said! You got it all wrong! What you do matters **a lot!** You've been bought with a price! Jesus **died** so our sins could be forgiven! The gift that's free to us cost Him His life. We **owe** Him something. We owe Him **everything**. If we really realize how much God loves us, how much God has sacrificed for us, we'll love God in return. Loving God means keeping the commandments. What we do matters **a lot!** Do you get it??" And at that point I'm like one of the adults in a Charlie Brown cartoon strip, who might as well be saying, "Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah...."

So then I'll drive them crazy but get their attention by bringing up the verse from today's epistle,

“...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3.23)

Their eyes are still glazed, so I'll ask, “Who's the worst person you can think of?” Back in Illinois, a couple decades ago, my students would pipe up and say, “John Wayne Gacey!” “Jeffrey Dahmer!” If you're not old enough to know who they were and what they did, that's okay. Replace their names with Adolph Hitler or Pol Pot or Saddam Hussein or Osama Bin Laden. Then I throw down the gauntlet: “You and I need God's forgiveness as much as any of them, you know.” “No way! I haven't murdered anyone! I'm not a terrorist! They're going to hell, no matter what they do now.” I respond, “I haven't killed anyone and I'm not an international terrorist either, but I need God's forgiveness as much as they do.” Now the kids are looking at me, wide-eyed, like, “What's the part of **her** story that **we** don't know about?”

And all I can do is repeat the same verse:

“...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3.23)

If there's no forgiveness for them, there's no forgiveness for me -- or you. I'm not a mass murderer, but I **am** a sinner, and therefore I do need a Savior. If you don't think you need a Savior, then I can understand why Jesus would seem irrelevant.... But how sad, not to **need** a Savior, not to **have** a Savior. ‘Remember that great line from the Exultet sung at the Easter Vigil? “O most happy fault, that merited so great a Savior!”

Martin Luther said that St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans was the Gospel in its purest form. Gospel means “Good News,” of course. The good news isn't that we are sinners, but that we have a savior, and that through Jesus' death and resurrection we have forgiveness of sins, and are “justified by his grace as a gift” (Rom. 3.24).

“For we hold that a person is justified [made right with God, made a friend of God] by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.”  
(Rom. 3.28)

Back to **grace**: God’s love that comes to us as pure gift, not as reward for anything we have done or ever could do. This same grace comes in the form of forgiveness that is granted despite the fact that we don’t deserve it. I teach our confirmands an acronym for GRACE: G-R-A-C-E: God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense. The “at Christ’s expense” part is to remind them that this is **costly** grace, bought at the price of Christ’s life. This is costly grace that is grounded in **faith: belief** that Jesus has already done everything necessary for our salvation, **trust** that God will keep all God’s promises, and **commitment** to live a live of gratitude for the Gift Given. (See *Here I Stand* by Roland Bainton, p. 49.)

Do you remember the story of Martin Luther being thrown off his horse during a severe thunderstorm and crying out, “St. Ann, save me and I’ll become a monk!”? He survived the storm and true to his word, entered an Augustinian monastery. Martin was a deeply unhappy monk, because he felt he could never measure up to God’s expectations, never do enough penance to have his sins forgiven, never hope to appease an angry God. The verse that turned his life and soul around was in the beginning of today’s epistle: “The one who is righteous will live by faith.” (Rom. 1.17b) Later he wrote,

Then I grasped that ... through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning... This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven.... (*Here I Stand*, pp. 49-50)

The gift seems too good to be true, but it’s not. All that’s necessary to receive and open and enjoy the gift is to realize that we need it, that it **is** for us, despite the fact that no, we don’t deserve it, and no, nobody else does either. We have to be willing to stand in the circle of sinners that includes folks with whom we **want** to have nothing in common, but with whom we **have** much in common: namely, sin and a Savior. The two indispensable, undeniable facts are that #1) we all are **sinners** and #2) we all have a **Savior**, who loved us and gave Himself for us, Jesus Christ our Lord....

Once we accept these facts of life about our sin and our Savior, we can free up the energy we've been wasting justifying ourselves and invest that energy being grateful for **grace**: God's Riches at Christ's Expense. Celebrate God's love that comes to us as pure gift and not reward, today and every day. Believe. Trust. Commit. Amen

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