

Grace Changes Us

If you made it to church today, you have already risen to meet a considerable challenge. The weather in the last month in particular has put a strain on backs, snow blowers, highway departments, schools, building managers, motorists, sports teams, and all of us in one way or another. The news reported an added incentive to careful winter driving skills, repair shops are experiencing wait times for parts because of all the inclement weather and resulting car accidents. When will this winter weather end? When will spring be sprung? When will life return a schedule that is not subject to change because of the weather?

If you made it to church today you may want to simply rest in the word. To that end, let me say that God has us covered. Already you have heard that “in the name of Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven and you are released.” That is a word which can free you. The Apostolic Greeting that is spoken at each worship also is a centering word, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” There are more gracious words built into the liturgy as the worship proceeds. But the gospel text for this Sunday may not be what you can expect if you are looking for rest.

We continue with the Sermon on the Plain this morning. It is called Sermon on the Plain because Jesus and his disciples came down from a mountain and stood on a level place together with crowds of people who were drawn to Jesus. Some of the crowds came to hear him, others came to be healed of their diseases, and still others wished to be freed of unclean spirits. All in the crowd were reaching out for him because he exuded power and all who were touched by him were healed. In the midst of this multitude Jesus turned his attention towards his disciples and addressed them. Jesus said to them, “I say to you that listen.” We assume his large group of disciples was ready to hear his word and enact it.

The story reminds us that others overheard his sermon, the crowds who had been attracted to him, and now, since there is scripture, those of us who read his words today. Overhearing Jesus puts one in position to consider becoming his disciple and not just an admirer. Overhearing puts one in the position of wondering how closely to listen to Jesus’ word. Will those who overhear also seek to enact Jesus’ word? Will we seek to become followers and not simply those who are wowed by what we can get from Jesus?

I imagine some who gather to hear this assigned text this morning which will be spoken in many congregations across the church may be surprised by the teaching. “Love my enemies? I was not expecting to hear that today.”

The story in Luke tells us that Jesus addresses those who are open to listening to him. Those he directly addresses are receptive to him and eager to do what he tells them to do. A little grammar will again help us to understand what is not obvious in the English text concerning what Jesus says. Jesus is commanding his disciples using the present tense of the verb. When Jesus says, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you” what he means is this, “Begin to love your enemies and continue to love them. Begin to do good to those who hate you and continue to do good.”

Jesus is not asking his followers to do one good thing and only that. Instead, Jesus is asking his followers to live in a new way so that reflects that their whole life is transformed. Disciples like Simon Peter were ready to hear this word of Jesus, because he had recently been overcome with the divine presence of

Jesus as he followed Jesus' strange fishing instructions. In a moment Peter knew himself to be unworthy, a sinner before Jesus, and that Jesus was the fullness of God before him. Jesus then assured Peter that a relationship and life with him was possible as he told Peter, "Do not be afraid. Follow me." The gift of grace to have eyes of faith was Peter's in that moment. It was then that Peter began to follow Jesus, to listen to his word, and to begin to live in the way Jesus taught. Grace changed Simon Peter. Grace propelled Simon Peter into a new life.

In that new life he could hear what Jesus was saying. "Begin and continue blessings those who curse you. Being and continue to pray for those who mistreat you." "Be compassionate and continue to show mercy." Be forgiving and continue to live in forgiving ways." Do these things because this is God's way."

For those who are open to Jesus and God, this can be a good teaching that directs ones behavior. A person can figure out what it means to be loving towards others, how to pray for those who mistreat you, what actions are merciful and forgiving. Jesus is teaching a way of nonviolent response towards those who threaten another's life. Many have taken these words to heart and figured out a way to be in the world although it can take a lot of discerning to know how to respond to mistreatment.

Love for enemies is an old teaching which precedes Jesus. Jesus adds to the old. In Proverbs 25 it says, "If you enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink." Jesus adds "do good to those who hate you." There is a hint that this is one step above alleviating hunger and thirst. There may be additional actions of goodness to do. Besides that, the ways of the world threaten to take priority over God's ways. An emphasis on loving and doing good in the face of hate will be needed.

I know I need to experience God's mercy over and over again so that I don't fall into the trap of thinking I know how to handle every situation. There seems to be a built in sense of wanting to protect self from others that lives in opposition to this love for enemies and this proposal of mercy towards others. I will give you an example, which is not an exact situation.

"That's it!" I thought. "That's the last time I am going to share my own story with him. I cannot believe he took what I told him and announced it to our mutual friends as if he had my permission to speak freely about my life. Never again!" I said to myself. I made a pledge to myself to cease sharing my life with this potential friend. In fact, I decided it would be easier to avoid this guy rather than go through the trouble of watching what I could say in his presence and what I would not say. He noticed my cool posture towards him but he didn't address it. I was mostly relieved. Of course, I had not taken the risk of being honest with this potential friend. When I first noticed that he could be casual with the content of our one-on-one conversations I could have said something directly to him. I could have expressed to him before I shared anything that I was sharing just with him but that it was not public information. I could have done some things to shape the relationship. But I had not taken that extra step. I was not valuing the human being for who he was. I was not in the mindset of building up the other. I was protecting myself instead. I was not thinking about how my actions to cut off the relationship kept this potential friend forever stuck. And I missed out on some of the good attributes of this person.

As these things always happen if you are working on becoming mature, I found myself in a different situation of facing my own mistakes. I had done something that I had no power to fix and no power to take back. All of a sudden I was stuck. I was totally dependent upon the actions another would take towards me and I did not know if those actions would free me or bind me. After months my verdict was

pronounced, and though I did not deserve it, I was given freedom. Having that experience of freedom given to me by a human being taught me about the grace of God and the silliness of cutting off from another person rather than working on the relationship.

Frederick Buechner writes, “Grace is something you can never get but only be given. There's no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth.”

The apostle Paul says “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” Rom 5:8 God’s grace is given to us through his Son, Jesus Christ. All people, apart from the action on God’s part, all without exception are separated from him by sin. Without Christ there is no reconciliation. But because Jesus took on our human nature and the consequence of sin, and defeated it through his suffering, death and resurrection, we are freed for life. We are given mercy. We are drawn to God in Christ Jesus.

A crucial teaching of the Christian faith is people are saved by grace. There's nothing *you* have to do. There's nothing you *have* to do. There's nothing you have to *do*.

What changes us and allows us to know the greatness of God’s love and then to join in living out that love is a grace greater than our sin, our best intentions, or even our hard work. It is grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who when he came to earth to live among us did not teach us about sin but about grace. Jesus aim was to reveal God to all and he did so by grace.