

Sermon for Zion - October 1, 2017 – World Communion Sunday

Hymns: 65 – All People That On Earth Do Dwell; 818 - O Jesus, Lord of heavenly grace; 543 – Here, O My Lord; 670 - Amazing Grace; 490 – God of Grace

Scripture: John 1:14; 1:16-18 (NCV); Romans 5:6-11(NLT)

Sermon Title: Grace Alone

*John 1:14; 1:16-18*

*The Word became a human and lived among us. We saw his glory—the glory that belongs to the only Son of the Father—and he was full of grace and truth...*

*Because he was full of grace and truth, from him we all received one gift after another. The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. The only Son, who is truly God and is closest to the Father, has shown us what God is like.*

*Romans 5:6-11(NLT)*

*When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.*

*And since we have been made right in God's sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God's condemnation. For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son. So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God.*

Sola Gratia – By Grace Alone. A cornerstone of the Reformation, a foundational truth of the Christian faith. But what does it mean? After all, when we hear the word “Grace,” we think of the prayer of thanks we say before a meal; when we think of “graceful” we think of someone elegant or polite. But when we’re talking about the Grace of God, we’re talking about something so much more.

The Grace of God is the love and forgiveness of God that comes to us, even though we have done nothing to deserve such love. As Paul said in our reading from earlier, *“God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners... So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God.”* Not because we deserve such love; but because of the Amazing Grace of God.

We humans; self-concerned, self-absorbed; we frail, failing, foolish people; we who are lost, who are wandering, who are dazzled and led astray by a thousand and one temptations; we creatures who doubt even the existence of our creator, let alone feel

inclined to worship him, saving our admiration only for ourselves; we deserve only judgement. But God is merciful; more, God is a God of Grace, and not only gives entirely of himself to forgive us our countless wrongs, but restores our relationship such that we might even be called the very children, the very friends of God, the brothers and sisters of the One who died for us all. How is this possible? It is all Grace.

*Grace is love that seeks you out when you have nothing to give in return. Grace is being loved when you are unlovable. Grace is unconditional acceptance given to an undeserving person by an unobligated giver.*

Do I deserve God's love? Have I done enough good in my life for God to take notice of me, and say, "hey, that Rollwage is a really superb guy. I think I'll love him." The answer (no matter what you might think) is "No." A resounding "No." The love of God comes to me – and to you – not because we are so wonderful, but despite the fact that we're not. The love and forgiveness of God come to us not as God's response to our goodness, but as God's response to our brokenness and need.

We forgot that this was so. And it took a man named Martin Luther to help us remember.

500 years ago, Martin Luther was trying to please God. He knew he was unworthy of God's love, despite making tremendous efforts to earn God's favour, even to the point of leaving his studies in Law and becoming a monk. Yet despite being the best monk he could be, devoting himself to hard work, prayer, confession, and self-denial, he still saw an unbridgeable chasm between his unworthy self and the Holy Lord of all creation. In his mind, he felt that only the fires of hell awaited him; that he could never be good enough to earn God's love and forgiveness. As far as Luther was concerned, God's holiness, God's justice demanded that Luther spend eternity not in the presence of God, but in the company of the damned. After all, justice means getting what you deserve. And God, the great and righteous judge, sees through the most elaborate masks we try to create, to hide the darkest parts of who we are. Looking deep inside himself, Luther knew what he deserved. And it wasn't anything good.

Time and again, in prayer and confession, Luther begged God for mercy, that God would waive the penalty for Luther's sin, that Luther wouldn't receive the punishment he felt he deserved. But all his efforts at earning God's mercy fell far short. Luther was in despair.

Until, through his reading of the New Testament and particularly the writing of the Apostle Paul, he encountered the Grace of God. Through Paul, Luther came to understand that Justice is when you get what you deserve. But Grace is when you get

what you don't deserve. Luther didn't deserve God's love and forgiveness. But that's what God offered nonetheless. Not because Luther deserved it; but because God, in grace, offered his love and forgiveness as a gift. A gift beyond measure. A gift beyond price. Paid for by the life of God's Son.

Luther read through the New Testament again and again, and wherever he turned, he found Grace. The Gospels are filled with stories of the Grace of God revealed through the words and actions and interactions of Jesus - real moments of Grace, with real people in need of forgiveness, acceptance, love. For instance:

- Tax collector Matthew, hated swindler, extortioner of the poor, tool of the oppressors, called to follow as a disciple.
- A prostitute weeping at Jesus' feet, commended for her love.
- A Roman Centurion, the very symbol of the iron fisted occupiers of the land, commended for his faith.
- A woman caught in adultery, ashamed, accused, condemned, yet lifted from the dirt, forgiven.
- The betrayer, Judas, in the very act of selling out his friend for a handful of silver, is nonetheless called by Jesus, "Friend."
- The very ones who carried out the beating and crucifixion of Jesus, who receive a plea from Jesus that God forgive them, too.
- Paul – the former Saul, who made a career of hunting Christians down, of imprisoning them, of condemning them to death – Paul is knocked off his high horse by the blinding light of God's Grace, to become the spokesman of the very power which took away his old life, and replaced his bitter heart of stone with a beating heart of love.

This same Paul would write the words which changed Luther's heart:

*"God in his gracious kindness declares us not guilty. He has done this through Christ Jesus, who has freed us by taking away our sins. For God sent Jesus to take the punishment for our sins... We are made right with God when we believe that Jesus shed his blood, sacrificing his life for us" (Romans 3:24-25).*

That is what Grace means. That is what Martin Luther came to understand: that God's grace is for him, is offered to him, is God reaching out not to Martin the holy blameless monk, but to Martin, the sinful, broken man. Grace is God reaching out to sinful, broken You.

*Grace is love that seeks you out when you have nothing to give in return. Grace is being loved when you are unlovable. Grace is God loving you, giving himself for you; Grace is God calling you, welcoming you home.*

Communion is a reminder of that Grace; it is a celebration of that Grace. Communion is Jesus breaking bread, pouring wine, and saying, “This is me. This is my life. I’m giving myself to you. I’m giving myself for you. I am sacrificing my life for you, that you may be free from the power of sin and death. Take, eat; take, drink; and as you do, remember me. Remember my love for you and for the world. Tell the world what I have done for you, what I have done for all. Remember.”

And as we share, as we remember, through these symbols of bread and wine, through the proclamation of God’s saving Word, through the power of the Holy Spirit, God’s grace is made real in us again. As we share. As we remember.

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May you, too, receive, and know, and grow in the Amazing Grace of God. Amen.