

“GRACE ALONE”

Ephesians 2:1-10

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 10, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

This morning, and for the next four Sundays, I am rebelling against the lectionary. That means I am picking the text for the sermon instead of using one of the three texts appointed for the Sunday. I know what you’re all thinking: *Our pastor has gone off the deep end*. I know. It’s going to be a crazy ride, so buckle up!

Okay, not really. If I didn’t tell you I was rebelling against the lectionary, you might not even notice. But I am, and I hope it’s beneficial for all of you. I’m not going to rebel against the lectionary very often, because I don’t think it’s a good idea for pastors to pick what they want to preach about—at least not on a regular basis. If I always picked the texts, then I would always preach about what I want to preach about. But the lectionary forces us to deal with the parts of Scripture we don’t understand as well, or even the parts we might not like as much. The lectionary helps to make sure *God’s Word* comes through, rather than *my words*. It means I can’t filter out the parts that make us uncomfortable.

So it takes a special occasion to pull me away from the appointed readings. And I think we have one.

The year 2017 marks the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. And I’ll briefly try to explain what that means.

1517 was the year a spark was thrown into the Church that ignited a reformation. The end result over the next few decades was a split in the Church—not just between Lutherans and Roman Catholics, but between all sorts of Christians, including Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, and many, many more. The intention of Martin Luther and his colleagues was not to divide the Church. They would have preferred to reform it from the inside and maintain the unity of the Church. But whether or not their reforms would be accepted by the pope was not theirs to decide. In the end, their reforms were rejected, and the so called “Lutherans” were excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church. We didn’t actually leave on our own volition. We got kicked out.

And that’s important to keep in mind. The reformers were not trying to start something new. They only wanted to reform the things that were broken. If there was a certain practice or tradition that could be maintained without causing any harm, they kept it. Because of this, the Lutheran Reformation has often been called, “The Conservative Reformation.” And I hesitate to even use the word “conservative,” because it might make you think of American politics, and American politics has nothing to do with any of this. The word “conservative” simply means they tried to conserve as many good things as possible. This is in contrast to what we would call the “radical reformers,” who wanted to throw out everything and start from scratch. Our reformers just wanted to get rid of the bad stuff.

But let’s back up a little bit. Throughout the Middle Ages—those centuries before the Reformation—various false teachings and harmful practices developed in the Church. And by the year 1517, the field was ripe for reform. The practice that really caught the attention of

“GRACE ALONE” (Ephesians 2:1-10)

Martin Luther was the selling of indulgences. In order to help pay for the construction of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, the church authorized a sale of indulgences. For a certain price, you could purchase forgiveness for yourself or even for your deceased loved ones, so that they would be released from purgatory and into heaven. They even had a catchy little slogan, which, roughly translated, comes out to, “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.” Now, when you think about your dear old grandmother, suffering in purgatory for thousands years, paying off her sins, couldn’t you spare a few coins to get her into heaven? I mean, you would have to be a pretty heartless person to refuse that.

But when this campaign came near Wittenberg, the city where Martin Luther taught at the university, he was shocked, because you can’t buy the forgiveness of sins! And if the pope had the ability to free people from purgatory, why not just empty the whole place as a matter of good will?

So Luther wrote a little paper known as the “Ninety-Five Theses.” It was really just ninety-five brief statements or complaints about what was happening. He never expected much to come of it. He was just hoping to debate some other theologians. Perhaps the pope might even hear about it and rethink what was going on. So he sent a copy to the guy in charge of selling indulgences, and he posted another copy on the door of the church in Wittenberg. That was kind of like their bulletin board. It would be kind of like posting something on our bulletin board out there. Whatever it is, it’s probably not going to change the world.

But some of Luther’s students saw it, translated it from Latin into German so people could read it, and took it to the printing press. When distributed, it became the spark that ignited the Lutheran Reformation.

And before I forget, I should give a little disclaimer: the Roman Catholic Church of 2017 is not the same as the Roman Catholic Church of 1517. So don’t go around harassing your Roman Catholic friends, okay? I don’t think they sell indulgences anymore. Much improvement has been made, just not enough to make us want to get back together again.

And I should also say, regarding the “Ninety-Five Theses,” that in 1517, Martin Luther was not exactly what we would call a “Lutheran” today. He was still very much a Roman Catholic. If you go read the “Ninety-Five Theses,” don’t expect the doctrine to be very good. It was in the years that followed that Luther and his colleagues diligently studied the Scriptures and developed what we now refer to as “Lutheran doctrine.” And when the time finally came in 1530 to defend their teachings to the Roman Catholic Church, they took great pains to show that everything they taught has its source in Holy Scripture, and was also taught by the Early Church Fathers—especially those in the first five centuries. The goal wasn’t to start something new, but to go back to the sources.

But enough with the history lesson. We still have a sermon to get to.

So what was the main issue? The main issue had to do with the forgiveness of sins and how we get it. How can sinful human beings be declared righteous in God’s sight? Does mankind have to do something in order to get salvation? Can mankind even do anything? Or does God grant it freely as a gift of his grace? The reformers argued that God forgives sins freely on the basis of *grace alone*. And this comes to us through *faith alone*, not because of our works. And the authoritative source that teaches us this is *Scripture alone*.

“GRACE ALONE” (Ephesians 2:1-10)

So you just heard the word “alone” three times. Grace alone, faith alone, and Scripture alone. And the key word in all of this is the word, “alone.” I don’t know of any Christian ever who has argued against grace, faith, or Scripture. The controversial part is the word “alone.”

So this week we’ll start with the teaching of “grace alone.” And the Scripture reading I have chosen to teach this doctrine, comes from *Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians*, chapter 2, verses 1 through 10. It is on page 827 of the pew Bible. Please stand as you are able for the Scripture reading. From Ephesians 2, we begin reading at verse 1. And we read in Jesus’ name.

¹ And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. ⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.
You may be seated.

Grace. What is it? What does that word “grace” mean?

If we say a figure skater is graceful, we mean that she moves fluidly and in harmony with the ice and the music. My favorite part is when they fall down. Now maybe I’m just mean, but I actually kind of respect it when they fall. It means they’re pushing the limits of what they can do. And then it also highlights the skaters who don’t fall down. You appreciate their gracefulness because you know it’s really, really hard. A good figure skater is full of grace. That’s one definition of the word. And I give you that definition simply because I want to make it clear, that’s not the kind of grace we’re talking about today.

The way the Bible uses the word “grace,” it means something else. It means a free gift. You don’t have to pay for it. It’s free. No charge. And the thing that is given to us by grace is salvation—the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. God forgives our sins and grants us everlasting salvation by his grace. There is nothing we either can or must do in order to earn it.

As we read this text, you may have noticed that the word “grace” comes up three times (2:5, 7, 8). And then some related words too, like “mercy” (2:4), and “love” (2:4), and “kindness” (2:7), and “gift” (2:8). But the word “alone” doesn’t appear. But we’re using this text to prove the doctrine of *grace alone*. How can we do that if the word “alone” isn’t there?

Here’s the thing about grace: if grace is not alone, then it’s not really grace. If God’s salvation is free, but you also have to do something to get it, then it’s not really free. It would

“GRACE ALONE” (Ephesians 2:1-10)

be like ordering a free spatula off the TV. “Get your free spatula! Just pay \$9.95 for shipping and handling.” That’s not free. It’s \$9.95.

If grace is not alone, then it’s not really grace. And even though Paul doesn’t use the word “alone,” he explains this very clearly. “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (2:8-9) I don’t know how anyone could possibly be clearer than that. If grace is not alone, then it’s not really grace.

If we add good works to grace, then it becomes—you know—five billion easy payments of ... loving your neighbor as yourself. That’s some really expensive grace you got there.

So in order to avoid expensive grace, Protestants have always been tempted to add something really easy instead, like praying “The Sinner’s Prayer” or coming forward at an evangelistic meeting to ask Jesus into your heart. Once you do that, then you’re a Christian and you have God’s grace. But that doesn’t make grace free. That just makes it cheap. And I’m not sure cheap grace is any better than expensive grace.

But this cheap version of grace is really, really common. Probably the most popular evangelist of the twentieth century—I don’t need to tell you his name, but you might be able to figure it out—he said that God has done 99% of the work to save you. All you have to do is the last 1%. And that last 1% is your decision—your invitation to Jesus to come into your heart. But is that true? And where do we find that in the Bible?

If God has done 99% of the work of salvation, and the last 1% is up to us, then the reason we’re saved and someone else isn’t is because of what we did. Now, is that grace alone? Is that, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God”? You know what? It’s not. If the last 1% of our salvation is up to us, then it’s not up to God, and it’s not grace alone.

And this is where the doctrine of grace alone becomes very offensive—even insulting.

So look at the way Paul insults his readers in verses one through three.

“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”

The first word Paul uses to describe us is “dead” (2:1). I’ve heard our condition before God saves us described as someone drowning in the ocean. You’re struggling, and you’re about to die. Maybe your head has even begun to sink beneath the water. But God throws you a life preserver. And all you have to do is grab it. But that illustration doesn’t fit very well with what Paul actually says. Paul says we were *dead*. A better illustration would be someone lying on the ocean floor. You’re even past the point of CPR. But God reaches down, lifts you out, and breathes life into you. That is what Paul says happened to us. “Even when we were dead in our trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved” (2:5). Your decision didn’t have anything to do with it, because dead people don’t make decisions.

Now, if you think being described as dead is offensive, it gets worse, because Paul doesn’t just describe us as *passively* dead. It’s not just the normal dead-body-with-no-pulse sort of

“GRACE ALONE” (Ephesians 2:1-10)

dead. Paul describes us as being *actively* dead. We’re dead, but in an active way, kind of like zombies, I guess. Being *passively* dead—you know—just lying there without a pulse—that would imply that we were neutral toward God. But we were not neutral. We were actually hostile to God. We were walking in sin (2:2). We were following the course of this world—even the devil (2:2). We “lived in the passions of our flesh” (2:3). We “were by nature children of wrath” (2:3). Being dead in trespasses and sins does not mean we were inactive. It means we were actively hostile to God. We were dead, and we were also choosing death with every thought, word, and deed.

So God’s work to save us was not merely a matter of breathing life into a lifeless corpse. It was more like taking a walking, dead zombie who is actively fighting against God, and creating a new nature—alongside this zombie nature—a new nature that actually believes, loves, and serves God.

God does not convert people who are *favorable* toward him. He doesn’t even convert people who are *neutral* toward him, because such people don’t exist. God converts people who are *hostile* toward him, because that’s the only kind of person there is. Your salvation cannot depend on your choice when you didn’t even want to make the choice.

Now this might be kind of offensive, to hear that we didn’t even have a choice in receiving salvation. But this should really be a gracious and comforting truth to us, because if we didn’t have any involvement in it, then there wasn’t any room for us to screw it up. If the perfect God who doesn’t make mistakes is responsible for 100% of our salvation, then what do we have to worry about? I never have to wonder if I was sincere enough when I prayed “The Sinner’s Prayer.” I never have to wonder if I actually felt sorry enough for my sins. If everything is in God’s hands, then nothing is left in mine, and that’s grace alone.

So there’s this beautiful transition when Paul shifts from talking about what we were doing to what God did. Listen to this:

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and [God] raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (2:4-6).

Now this is marvelous. Paul is writing to people who are living on earth. Well, obviously. But notice what he says to them. Notice where he says they really are: “seated ... in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” Your salvation is so certain in Jesus Christ that Paul is able to say that you are already in heaven. Now, how does that work? I don’t know, because you’re obviously all right here. But, at the very least, it means your place in heaven is secure. “The prince of the power of the air”—also known as the devil—cannot snatch you out of heaven. God has already seated you there. Even though we still struggle with sin, and temptation, and various kinds of suffering, we already possess the reward. It is ours by grace alone.

Now, how can all of this be? Nothing is really free. Even when something is free for us, someone has to pay for it. Salvation is not expensive for us. It’s not even cheap. It’s just free.

For *us* it is free. But grace alone had a cost—a very expensive cost. Someone had to pay for it. And his name, of course, is Jesus Christ. He “bought [you] and freed [you] from all sins, from

“GRACE ALONE” (Ephesians 2:1-10)

death, and from the power of the devil; not with silver and gold, but with His holy and precious blood and with His innocent sufferings and death.”

Jesus paid for all this. Nothing needs to be added to his sacrifice. Nothing can be added to it. It has all been paid for. So when your doubts and sins oppress you ... When you wonder if that place in heaven still belongs to you ... When you question whether or not grace is really alone ... Do not look inside yourself for the answers. Do not look to your works. Do not even look to the strength of your faith. Look only to Christ. Consider his sacrifice. Did he purchase your salvation with his blood? He did. And have you been baptized into his death and resurrection? Do the Scriptures promise you the forgiveness of sins? They do. Your salvation is bought and paid for. It was costly for Jesus. It's free for you. And that's grace alone. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.