

“Celebrating Grace”

Mark 10:26-27, Luke 18:9-14, Romans 3:19-28, 1 John 4:16 & Revelation 7:9-10

Pastor James York

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Happy five hundredth anniversary. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther posted a list of 95 debating points on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg. Most historians declare this to be the beginning of the reformation. The focus of the reformation is the grace of God. The free, unmerited, unearned, lavish love of God for all people. There is nothing we can do or be to make God love us more or less. There is nothing we can do or be that gets us into heaven, for heaven is a free gift of our loving God. All the church words we have created like salvation, righteousness, justification, sanctification are all a result of God's grace for all people. There are no exceptions to God's grace and no "buts" which is extremely hard for almost everyone to grasp. It is human nature to claim God's grace for oneself, by identifying something one believes merits God's love that one is doing, then using that point to justify self and exclude others.

Marcus Borg writes, "I grew up as a Lutheran in a tradition that emphasized salvation by grace and not by 'works of the law.'" Indeed, "justification by grace" was the battle cry of the Lutheran Reformation; Luther's own personal and theological struggle had been against salvation by works. As Lutherans, we all knew that we weren't saved by works. Rather, we were saved by "grace through faith." Yet this strong emphasis on grace got transformed into a new system of conventional wisdom, not only in my own mind but, I think, in the minds of many Lutherans, and many Christians generally. The emphasis was placed upon faith rather than grace, and faith insidiously became the new requirement. Faith (most often understood as belief) is what God required, and by the lack of faith/belief one risked the peril of eternal punishment. The requirement of faith brought anxiety and self-preoccupation. Was one's faith/belief real enough, strong enough? Thus, in many of us latter-day Lutherans, only the content of the requirement had changed – from good works to faith."

It is extremely hard and rare for anyone to perceive the magnitude of God's grace. There is something deep within most of us that wants to earn God's love, sort people, judge people, and exclude a few people from God's love, blessings and heaven.

Luke 18:9-14 NLT “Then Jesus told this story to some who had great confidence in their own righteousness and scorned everyone else: “Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a despised tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed this prayer: ‘I thank you, God, that I am not like other people—cheaters, sinners, adulterers. I’m certainly not like that tax collector! I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.’ “But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed. Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, ‘O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.’ I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Each of us can almost always find aspects of our self in every person in Jesus' parables. Most of us have a lot of things in common with the Pharisee. We are church insiders, educated, and by world standards enjoy privilege and wealth. Do you have confidence in your beliefs? Do you think you are able to perceive God and God's will better than someone else? Have you ever thought people should do things a certain way in church? Have you ever thought that your beliefs are right and someone else is wrong? Have you ever thought that someone outside the church, someone from another religion or someone who does not believe in God is not included in God's grace? Have you ever tried to be a gatekeeper, that is not welcoming someone with gracious hospitality? We have a lot in common with the Pharisee which reveals again how we struggle to love all people. Fortunately, grace is for us. Grace is for everyone.

Martin Luther meditated on grace for 12 years as a monk before posting the 95 points. In that time he had his own transformational experience of God's grace which inspired him to encourage others to experience grace. His dream was to reform the church into a reflection of God's grace.

Embracing grace, led Luther and will lead anyone who embraces grace, down radical, turning the world upside down, paths. Grace makes all people equal. Each person has equal access to God at all times. Luther called this the priesthood of all believers. Luther advocated for each person to be educated and have access to a

Bible, so they could form their own perceptions of God's will for their life and the world. This path is hostile for it leaves no room for the rich and powerful to try to control others.

Luther's reformation of grace inspired the United States Constitution and many of the principal people in our country value such as democracy, public education, equality, and freedom of religion. Reformation people are quick to say, "Once reformed always reforming." We think we are getting closer to expressing grace but realize there is always room for a fuller expression. Take the statement, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal" for example. At the time it was written it was a radical leap of equality. However, today I hear that, immediately wishing it said "all people." As our understanding of grace grows, we continue to reform.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome, who was mostly Jewish. Many of them believed that their understanding of scripture gave them a more complete view of God's will. **Romans 3:19-28 MSG** "So where does that put us? Do we Jews get a better break than the others? Not really. Basically, all of us, whether insiders or outsiders, start out in identical conditions, which is to say that we all start out as sinners. Scripture leaves no doubt about it: There's nobody living right, not even one, nobody who knows the score, nobody alert for God. They've all taken the wrong turn; they've all wandered down blind alleys. No one's living right; I can't find a single one. Their throats are gaping graves, their tongues slick as mudslides. Every word they speak is tinged with poison. They open their mouths and pollute the air. They race for the honor of sinner-of-the-year, litter the land with heartbreak and ruin, Don't know the first thing about living with others. They never give God the time of day. This makes it clear, doesn't it, that whatever is written in these Scriptures is not what God says about others but to us to whom these Scriptures were addressed in the first place! And it's clear enough, isn't it, that we're sinners, every one of us, in the same sinking boat with everybody else? Our involvement with God's revelation doesn't put us right with God. What it does is force us to face our complicity in everyone else's sin. God has set things right. But in our time something new has been added. What Moses and the prophets witnessed to all those years has happened. The God-setting-things-right that we read about has become Jesus-setting-things-right for us. And not only for us, but for everyone who believes in God. For there is no difference between us and them in this. Since we've compiled this long and sorry record as sinners (both us and them) and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, God did it for us. Out of sheer generosity God put us in right standing with Godself. A pure gift. God got us out of the mess we're in and restored us to where God always wanted us to be. And God did it by means of Jesus Christ. God sacrificed Jesus on the altar of the world to clear that world of sin. Having faith in God sets us in the clear. God decided on this course of action in full view of the public—to set the world in the clear with Godself through the sacrifice of Jesus, finally taking care of the sins Jesus had so patiently endured. This is not only clear, but it's now—this is current history! God sets things right. God also makes it possible for us to live in God's rightness. So where does that leave our proud Jewish insider claims and counterclaims? Canceled? Yes, canceled. What we've learned is this: God does not respond to what we do; we respond to what God does. We've finally figured it out. Our lives get in step with God and all others by letting God set the pace, not by proudly or anxiously trying to run the parade."

What is faith? I have heard faith defined as a specific profession to everyone have faith. We live in a time, in a country, that often uses an individual's words as the measuring stick for faith. What about a baby? What about the collective faith of humanity as a whole, across time, and space? Many tend to place a higher value on those who can read, write, and speak. Can faith be art, music, a sigh, a feeling? Some believe that faith is one's ability to receive and share love. Everyone is loved by God. Everyone loves someone or something, therefore everyone has faith. Some point to the scripture **1 John 4:16 NRSV** "So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."

Paul would probably not be pleased with how so many people today have focused on a person needing belief to be saved by God. In this excerpt from Paul's letter he only mentions belief/faith twice. He mentions God saving us eleven times.

Pay attention to what God is doing and join God in doing that. Let go of your judgements. Let come grace. Paul wrote, "Our lives get in step with God and all others by letting God set the pace, not by proudly or anxiously trying to run the parade." **Mark 10:26-27 NLT** "The disciples were astounded. "Then who in the

world can be saved?” they asked. Jesus looked at them intently and said, “Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But not with God. Everything is possible with God.”

Embracing grace leads one down radical, turning the world upside down, paths. Freedom of religion allows each person to believe, and not believe, however they perceive. As long as one’s actions do not harm another, they are free to believe and behave. It is a hostile path for most fear what they do not understand and fear what is different. If there is a gap in our understanding, we tend to make assumptions. Many want a world with guardrails that keeps others believing and doing things within a range that matches their values. Grace is the free, unmerited, unearned, lavish love of God for all people. We are loved by God regardless of what we do or believe, because God is love. We belong to God’s family and will enjoy heaven not because of anything we believe or do or don’t believe or don’t do, rather because God does it all for us.

My perception of God’s grace is expanding. I had a major inspiration while studying the *Sermon on the Mount*. Jesus loves us, Jesus save us, knowing none of us deserve love or salvation. We are to be perfect as God is perfect. We are to be pure love, peace, and joy. If a moment of hate has ever been felt in our heart, then we have failed. Because of grace, Jesus kept teaching for none of them, or us, understand God’s teaching or God, none of us are able to love and rejoice like God. Grace bridges ever gap. Grace completes every way we are short. Grace gives us God’s righteousness and glory. It is all God’s doing.

Something supernatural happened to me enabling me to grasp a snippet of grace. I am still wrestling with grace for I do not understand grace. I am unable to explain grace. I try, but I am not able to be a gracious person to everyone. Yet, every fiber of my being resonates with God’s grace. My perception is that God called me as a pastor to help others experience grace.

Grace is a dilemma for me for in my belief in grace it seems I become like the Pharisee thinking that those who do not believe in grace like I do are missing an important truth. I strive to not let my thinking evolve that I somehow have a more complete understanding of God. Is it possible for each person’s unique way to ultimately be a journey to love? I am fascinated and learn from each person’s story. I try to express my beliefs in a way that gives others room to believe differently. I am not afraid to express my beliefs and to live my beliefs, but instead of judging another or encouraging someone to live like me I often say, “This is how I experience God”, “This is how I sense God wants me to live” realizing that it is completely different for others. There are lots of questions in the sermons I share, because I do not have the answers. Hopefully the questions help you on your journey of loving God and loving everyone.

So what might grace look like on one of the hotly debated topics today. Should a person stand, kneel, or raise their fist during the national anthem? Is the answer different for a person with a different experience? Is the answer different based on intent? It seems there are a lot of assumptions, projection, and false information happening on this issue. If you don’t go to the source and get the answer as to the why you are probably far off from one’s intent. Can we ever really understand a person’s intent without listening to them and understanding their context? I want to be clear up front that I am not advocating for any posture merely pointing out some connections with Martin Luther and grace.

A person stands to honor all who sacrifice to make our country a place where someday everyone will be free. A person kneels to advocate for a country where all people are treated equally. A person raises their fist, because they love a family member unjustly killed by a racist person, as a gesture that they will not forget them or stop loving them, that they will advocate for just treatment of all people. Are all of these loving, good, and appropriate?

A person stands as a statement that they want to maintain the status quo, to force certain people to behave like them, to deny others equal rights, to imprison others, to shame others. A person kneels in anger, to fuel discord and division. A person raises their fist out of selfishness, to draw attention to themselves. Are all of these hateful?

Three people, in three different postures, sometimes have much more in common than three people with the same posture but for very different intent. The issue gets even murkier when some people start saying what they think an entire group of people want. And murkier still since we have a variety of issues that people are trying to address. The person who is standing for patriotism is going to have a hard time communicating and understanding the person kneeling for social justice, because they are two different issues. A person’s choice of posture is a mix of many unique variables evolving over time. Some people resist change, standing due to tradition alone. All of our postures fall short of revealing love for God and love for all people. Each posture

needs the grace of God to enable one to be truly loving. Each posture is that person's attempt to love, although that love may be really twisted and come out all wrong. Martin Luther said, "All creatures are veils under which God hides Godself." I wonder if Luther would knee today during the anthem? It seems consistent with his desire to have conversations that make it possible for all people to experience grace, be educated, and free. At that time the church and state were one so Luther was unpatriotic, a traitor, a troublemaker, for his desire to have conversations about church reform that would welcome and fairly treat the poor who were being excluded. Luther never wanted splits in the church, or war, rather a church that shows grace to all. Perhaps kneeling is a prayer that unites one with a long line of prophets, reformers, and dreamers who advocate for justice to roll down like waters, to live by grace alone, and have a dream that one day black boys and girls will be able to join hands with white boys and girls as sisters and brothers. Or maybe the posture that reveals the most love is different for each person.

A Presbyterian approach to applying grace to this issue, or any issue, is to pray, talk about it, pray, vote, and repeat. We keep searching for the most excellent way of love, a way in which each and every person is equally loved. Unfortunately, as soon as we choose a way we find that someone is not loved by our actions so we pray, talk, pray, and vote again and again striving for love for all. Once reformed, always reforming. You are called to pray, debate with others in an ongoing quest to find and live the most excellent way of love.

Is it possible that God is all encompassing, delighting in a variety of ways, lifestyles and forms of worship? Is it possible that grace has us all on a journey to be a glorious loving, whole person? Is it possible that grace has even demons and the devil on a journey back home to God's love where all will enjoy love and harmony for eternity? Is it possible that God is infinite in grace and all powerful, therefore grace has no limit? This sermon and I have plenty of flaws needing major reforming. I hope it makes you aware that you also need reforming which makes us all aware that we live by grace alone.

As we celebrate our 500-year reformation, grace alone, anniversary let each one of us strive to reform our life with grace, reform this church with grace, reform Christianity with grace, reform our country with grace and reform the world with grace. Let us also be aware that we will each fall way short. Praise God that God's grace will always make up the difference.

Revelation states, **Revelation 7:9-10 NLT "After this I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb. They were clothed in white robes and held palm branches in their hands. And they were shouting with a great roar, "Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne and from the Lamb!"**

John's vision of heaven had a vast crowd from every nation, every tribe, every people, every language rejoicing as they proclaimed, salvation comes only from God and God alone. We live and will be made glorious by grace alone. Amen