

The Bethel Pulpit

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October 29, 2017 – Reformation Sunday



BETHEL

LUTHERAN CHURCH

On the web at www.bethel-madison.org

312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

Text: Romans 3:19-28, John 8:31-36

Freed
& RENEWED
in Christ
500 YEARS OF GOD'S
GRACE IN ACTION

I was afraid my dismay would be obvious. Her words caught me off balance, but she was dead serious. And then I felt guilt and shame flowing over me. I was sure I had failed her and many like her. And I wondered how many other people there are who have spent years sitting in worship singing beautiful hymns and listening to sermons and reading the Bible and going to Bible studies were thinking exactly the same as this young mother. She offered me some encouragement and gratitude for talking with her, and I thanked her for her gift of grace; to which she replied, "I don't think I know what grace is." I gave a brief response, one that I had figured out a long time ago. Something like, "Understanding what grace is takes a lifetime." I don't really think that says enough. Luther's desire to reform the church was driven by growth in his insight into the grace of God.

So, what is grace? What is it about grace; what is it about God's love and mercy and forgiveness. God's grace is given to us over and over again in the form of unconditional love. There's the technical definition which is somewhat helpful, but we need a picture of what grace looks like, smell like, tastes like, feels like. We need to grow to widen our view of who God is in the world. Our God is all powerful, created the universe, controls it all. This God accepts and loves us. We cannot do anything to make that happen. The bond between us and Jesus is so strong that we are created in the image of the creator.

We are created in love, to be loved and to love. The love of God in Christ Jesus frees us to love outside of ourselves. That's the glitch; we tend to see God as we are. Now I would like to believe that God is a Michigan fan or an Iowa fan. I would like to think that God is waving the flag of the United States. I would like to think that God loves me because I am more lovable than the

next person, but that's a misguided image of God. Because God is bigger than we can begin to imagine, we are called upon to walk with Jesus and grow in faith so that we will see from his vantage point where everyone is surrounded by the grace and love and mercy of God. That's the truth that will set us free to be servants of the world.

I am thinking you have noticed that we have trouble loving ourselves and our neighbors. We are going to take a little side trip. I suggest that you close your eyes for the journey. I want you to come to know the grace and the love of God. Let that love - let that grace wash over you as you listen. Let the power of God's grace that raises Jesus from the grave surround you. Take a deep breathe, slowly inhale as deep as you can. Now just as slowly let it out, and breath normally. I want you to think of a place in your life in need of the most love, where do you need the abundant grace of God to touch you; what do you need to be forgiven, to be accepted, to be change for your sake and for the sake of others. It could be a hurt that has taken up space in your life for years. You have worked diligently to wall it off, to keep it from those around you, to keep it even from yourself. It's a truth that may carry with it shame, guilt, isolation. Jesus knows your place of pain and wants you to know you are loved and accepted. It may be a truth that leads you to distance yourself from the very thing you need — loving caring relationships with other people. It may be a truth of how you have caused and continue to cause injury to other people - your words are hurtful, you can't see others as being God's beloved. Maybe you can't see how the hurt you continue to cause can stop or ever be made right.

The truth you discover, just maybe isn't new to you at all; it might be the hurt of economic injustice or racism or hunger, or teetering on the edge of homelessness. The truth you find in your heart maybe the result of fractured relationships with your closest family members or friends. Is there some deception you are building up between you and your parents? Are you constantly fighting with the people who live with you? Are you worried about your marriage or how to turn a new corner with some other close relationship? Life with people we love is sometimes the most difficult. Have you done something in the past that you think is so horrible God could never possibly forgive you - give you grace?

Maybe you or someone you live with struggles with mental illness and the lack of understanding and shame that so often accompanies diseases of this kind. Or is it an addiction to alcohol or drugs or work that? Is your faith failing?

Who are you having trouble forgiving? Who are you having trouble including in your prayers? Who hurt you so badly that the mere mention of their name sends your heart racing? Whatever it is that needs God's grace, name it for yourself. You don't have to tell anyone; name it for you. Bring your truth into the light, into the grace of God. What kind of a powerful loving God do you need today? Where do you need the grace of God, where do you need Jesus to comfort you?

If I am an African American or a person of color facing subtle and not so subtle racism day after day, I want to know Jesus stands against racism and bigotry. That's grace. I want to know that Jesus is with me and knows the difficulties I face. If I am homeless or poor or hungry or piecing my life back together after floods or fires, I want to know that God wants the other people who have more than they need to reach out and help me. That's grace. When I am struggling with forgiving, I want to know that Jesus knows what that struggle is like. That's the kind of God we have - a God who really gets me, a God who doesn't make me change my body parts or the color of my skin, a God who showers me with grace and love when I am at my worst.

When I can see even a little more clearly the width of God's and love and grace and forgiveness for more than just me, God gets bigger, more powerful. God becomes more available when my anxiety shoots up or I have been betrayed or I feel as if I have failed to spread the good news about God's grace. Because of our own finite nature, we have a tendency to make God too small.

With a wide view of who Jesus is, there is room for me, for you, for all people to be confident that you in all your uniqueness, with all of your idiosyncrasies, — well, you matter. You matter and Christ's death set you free to be, to be the people Jesus sees in us.