

Recently, our beloved church member, Lenore Christianson, asked me to talk to her about grace. I said, “Let me look through my sermon archives. I’ll find a sermon on grace and send it to you.” I looked into my archives and much to my surprise, I’ve never preached on grace. So, today is the day. Thank you, Lenore, for finding that gap for me.

Grace. We think we understand the term. The bank gives us a grace period. The seedy politician falls from grace. Musicians speak of a grace note. We describe an actress as gracious, a dancer as graceful. We use the word for hospitals, churches, baby girls, kings, and pre-meal prayers.

When asked, “Do you believe in grace?” who could say no? There are deeper questions. Have you been changed by grace? Shaped by grace? Strengthened by grace? Emboldened by grace? Softened by grace? Shaken to your senses by grace?

Let’s take a deep dive into grace and see what we get. Grace has a drenching about it. It is more than we deserve and greater than we can imagine. Grace has a wildness about it, a white-water riptide, turn you upside down about it. Yet, it has a gentleness and calming affect that is holy and sacred.

Here is my hunch. We settle for a wimpy grace. It politely occupies a phrase in a hymn, fits nicely on a church sign. It never causes trouble or demands a response. It is time to do a redo on grace.

Grace is the voice that calls us to change and then gives us the power to pull it off. Ezekiel 36: 26 states, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you." You might call it a spiritual heart transplant.

Allow me to take some license and flesh out this morning's gospel lesson. "Get up, you harlot!" "Who do you think you are?" The Priests slam open the bedroom door and pull the covers off of her. She felt the heat of their scorn. "Shame on you." "Pathetic." "Disgusting." They yell.

She scarcely had time to cover her body before they marched her through the narrow streets. Mothers snatched children from their path. Merchants peered out from their shops. Jerusalem became the jury and rendered the verdict with glares. BTW, there is no mention of the man she was committing adultery with. Double standard?

They brought the woman to Jesus who was in the midst of teaching. They had already judged the woman and were using her to test Jesus. "Teacher," they said to Jesus, "this woman was caught in the act of adultery. The law of Moses says to stone her. What do you say?"

The next sentence is particularly interesting. It says, “Jesus stooped down and wrote in the dust.” You would expect him to stand up and move forward. But instead he leaned forward. We have no idea what he wrote.

Jesus is prone to stoop. He stooped to wash feet, to embrace children, to pull Peter out of the sea, to pray in the garden. He stooped before the Roman whipping post. Stooped to carry the cross. Here he stoops to write in the dust.

The posse grew impatient with the silent, stooping Jesus. They demanded an answer, so he stood up. He placed himself between her and the lynch mob. He stood not to teach because his words were few. He stood on behalf of the woman. He said, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her. He then stooped down and wrote again in the dust.” (v. 7, 8)

Name-callers shut their mouths. Rocks dropped to the ground. Jesus resumed scribbling. The condemners slipped away. Jesus resumed scribbling on the ground. But he was not done.

He said, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” Well, there is a loaded question for her and for us. Voices of condemnation awaken us as well. She said, No one sir. And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on, do not sin again.” She was saved by grace. Grace is a God who stoops.

My dearly departed Uncle Dick said to me, “Grace is not earned. It is bestowed.” Not only is grace undeserved but it washes over us and cleanses us. It makes us better people.

Here is a way of thinking about grace. Agape love is not romantic love. Agape love is love flowing from God to us, then from us back to God, and from us to our neighbors. Grace is agape love. Love that is freely given with no expectation of getting something in return. Our food pantry is an example of agape love, or said differently, grace in action. There is a selflessness in grace.

Recently, I was visiting Bill Driscoll at home. While I was there, the speech therapist came. It was a gift to me. I got to spend an hour with Donna. I remarked at how well she was handling the care of her husband who had suffered a major stroke months earlier. If you spend time with Donna, you will see that she still has her sense of humor. She seems unburdened by all of this. At one point she said, “I have no fear.” I asked her why. She said, “I live by the grace of God.” Donna’s inner peace and human warmth come from God and she knows it. Grace, real and true.

Insurance companies speak of hurricanes and earthquakes as acts of God. They are really good at making money but they make lousy theologians. God does not act in the world by moving mountains or sending storms. God acts in the world by bestowing grace, agape love.

God works in the world when we are called to love and help those in need, even those who we do not like, and do not deserve grace.

That is when we are changed by grace, deepened by grace, emboldened by grace, strengthened by grace, softened by grace. Let us remember that our God stoops for all the right reasons.

Think about it. With all the pain and harshness of the world, grace might be the best chance the world has. Be a person known for your grace and you will be loved.

Think about situations in which you have experienced the joy of serving others without expecting acknowledgement or reward. Think about when someone cared for you or helped you without telling anyone else. Consider other examples of a living grace shaped life, not out of desire to earn God's approval, but rather because God's gift of grace motivated others to be grace givers. This week plan to be a grace giver, silently, secretly. Then thank God for the opportunity. See what happens. AMEN