

Sermon

June 21, 2015

*“As we work together with God, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.”*

Grace. Grace is one of the most beautiful words in our language. It is a simple word that describes beauty, balance, delicacy, and strength. When I hear the word, I think of a prima ballerina or a major league shortstop; a finely made sculpture or the dignity of an older person facing the hardness that life can bring.

Of course grace is also a beautiful word in our religious faith. As Christians, it is at the core of what we believe about God and our life together. One of our best known hymns speaks of “amazing grace.” When we think of grace in theological terms, we think of forgiveness and love and a grateful heart as well as the capacity to endure. There is no higher or deeper word to describe what we believe.

That is why Paul’s phrase in his second letter to the Corinthians catches our attention. He warns his often challenging flock “not to accept the grace of God in vain.” What does that mean? How could we even do that as people of faith? Isn’t God’s grace irresistible so that no matter what we do, God’s grace will accomplish what God intends?

I think the answer to that question ultimately is “yes.” But apparently in the short term, as individuals and communities, we can undermine God’s grace in our lives so that, as Paul warns, we can accept it in vain; in others words, so that it does not achieve in our lives the purpose for which God’s grace is given.

One book over in the NT, Paul uses another phrase that implies that we can miss out on the benefits of grace. Paul writes to the Galatians, “...you have fallen away from grace” (5:4b). That phrase, “fallen from grace,” has come into our language to describe someone who has left the church or given up on the faith or is leading an immoral life in some way. What is interesting, though, is that in the context in which Paul is writing, he is describing a community that has forgotten the key to grace—God’s forgiveness and love; the Galatians have tried instead through super-religiosity and judgment of others to earn God’s approval. The result for them instead was a misguided sense of spiritual pride that cut them off from the benefits of God’s grace.

So based on that, grace does not necessarily come from being religious; in fact, our beliefs and judgments can even get in the way so that we do not experience grace for ourselves and therefore we are unable to share that grace with others. So to be sure we do not accept God’s grace in vain, what do we need to focus on as a community of faith?

For us, the first thing about grace to remember is forgiveness. We are forgiven people. God’s grace to us is the basis of our relationship with God. There is nothing—nothing—we can do to earn God’s grace or to make God love us more. The exchange has been made, the books have been balanced, and it is through Jesus Christ and his life and work that we are made whole.

Believing that, knowing and experiencing that, is truly transformative. God's grace allows us to be people of faith that do not worry whether we are doing everything right in terms of religion; or whether others are doing things right religiously. Instead grace empowers us to focus on what God has done right for us in Jesus. Judgment of ourselves and of others leaves our mindset and we are able to think and act and feel differently about who we are and others are because of Jesus.

And that is the next part of grace—forgiveness does not stop with us receiving it from God. Grace is a river, not a pool. We are called to be a people that forgive. Sometimes that forgiveness is over little things—a loved one not picking up clothes (again), being cut-off in traffic, arguing to the point of losing my temper over a silly thing. Those little things require forgiveness, too. Learning to forgive over little things is needed practice for when we may need to forgive really big things someday.

Like what happened in Charleston last week. During a televised bond hearing for the murderer, we saw that type of forgiveness. People from Emanuel AME Church spoke at that hearing, confronting and ultimately bearing witness to and forgiving the man who murdered out of racist hatred, killing nine of their fellow church members, friends and family members. If you haven't seen the video, look it up on the internet. They show truly amazing grace that expresses outrage and deep sorrow and yet, through God's grace, they also demonstrate the capacity to forgive this man and his hate-inspired diabolical deeds. Amazing indeed.

As forgiven people, able to forgive, grace also produces resiliency. God's grace allows us to keep our balance, even when we are buffeted with great challenges and storms. This resiliency is different from a phony optimism; it is deeper and tougher than that. When something bad happens, grace does not protect us from experiencing pain or crying out in grief. But what grace does do is enable hurt people to get up, carry on, rebuild, and say with conviction, "This test, this trial, will not keep me down. I will stand up with God's help. And when one day I cannot stand up, I know there are people around me who will stand up for me and carry on when my time in the arena is completed."

We see that type of resilience in the history of Emanuel AME Church in Charleston. If you don't know the history, I encourage you to look it up on the internet. Here is a thumbnail sketch-- the church was founded almost two hundred years ago after the white members of a Methodist Episcopal Church continued to disrespect their black members and they left and started their own church. The founders included a former slave who had bought his freedom. This man, Denmark Vesey, was accused of planning to lead a slave revolt and was executed. White racists then burned down Emanuel AME Church as an attempt to intimidate these good and faithful people.

But Emanuel AME Church was rebuilt. The people of Emanuel had grace, resilience to stand against injustice and cruelty, and endure. They continue to exhibit grace in a way that few of us are able to in this life. Too often we stumble over the little opportunities for grace, like saying "I am sorry" after a fight. Too often we live in the Little League of grace. The people of Emanuel live in the big leagues of grace. They are our example to follow.

And that is how we can be sure that we do not accept the grace of God in vain. God has given us an amazing gift through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Grace flows all around us. We experienced that grace when we were baptized. God's grace comes in the water and the words of the sacrament and God's Spirit unites us to what Jesus did-- and continues to do-- for us.

We feel that that grace in conversion, when we feel God's love flow over us like a waterfall. We may remember the day, the moment, when the reality of God's forgiveness and love touched us and changed us. From that moment, our lives were forever changed.

We experience grace in big and small ways through the everyday and the miraculous parts of life. Grace is something that is hard to describe in words, but we know it in our hearts. Life is different for us due to God's grace and we are glad.

So let us not accept God's grace in vain. Let us pray for God's grace to flow in us and through us to a world that so sorely needs it. Let us give thanks for our forgiveness and share that forgiveness in big and small ways with everyone we meet. Let us move from keeping scores of wrongs suffered to instead holding an eraser in our hands constantly and removing from the slate of our lives every real or imagined offense we experience. Let us be people who live in forgiveness.

And as forgiven and forgiving people, filled with God's grace, let us develop the resilience of character so often expressed by our black brothers and sisters. Our country, which I love, has often beaten, killed, and tried to hold down black folks. That is simply historically true. Resilience for us, as members of the white majority, is to have the toughness to hear that, acknowledge that, and work with black folks to change how we relate to one another. Hatred, distrust, dismissiveness, and contempt must be removed from our common life if we ever, ever hope to be a different type of nation.

Doing that work of grace, demonstrating resilience and forgiveness, is not easy. I am not sure how to do it. Parts of the work make me uncertain or even afraid. Frankly, it would be easier to do nothing. But if we do nothing, then we have accepted the grace of God in vain. And I will not do that; we will not do that.

So in one small way to do our part, we will have a prayer service in this church on Wednesday, June 24 at 7 pm. Roughly the same time and day when those racist murders occurred in Charleston last week. We will pray and invite folks of all backgrounds to be with us, including the speakers from our Lenten series on Race in America. We will have an open mike to say what is on our hearts. We will work to build relationships across racial lines based on God's grace, not our cleverness or good intentions. I do not know what will come next, but I promise as your pastor that I will hold on to God's grace and pray that grace will change our hearts and change our land. Amen.