

Grace and Faith

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Faith United Church of Christ
Richmond Heights, Ohio
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Lessons (<http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=74>)
Numbers 21:4-9; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

Text: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” -- Ephesians 2:8

As most of you know, I grew up in a religious environment much more conservative than this one, and one of the reasons I left that type of Christianity is because of the verse from Ephesians that is the text for this morning’s sermon: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”

Christianity, for all of its emphasis on grace, remains for most people a religion of works righteousness. What I mean by that phrase is that for most Christians, throughout history and throughout the world today, Christianity is primarily about salvation, salvation is primarily about righteousness, and righteousness is primarily about works, including the work of accepting Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior. That, too, is a work, a human action, and if our salvation depends on it, then our salvation depends on us, which is as much a religion of works righteousness as any other.

I realize, of course, that those who hold to this type of Christianity – which, by the way, is the majority of Christians – would see things differently. Their idea of works righteousness means ceremonial and gesture; believing things about Jesus is something different.

I don’t accept that distinction anymore. If it comes from us, it comes from us, whether it’s an action, a thought, or a belief, and I no longer believe that any of this determines salvation. What determines salvation, as our text says, is grace: God’s gracious actions on our behalf, to which we can respond in faith, or not, as we choose. We can accept salvation, but we can’t determine it; God has already done that. “For by grace you have been saved” is what Ephesians says, and what I believe; it does not say, “you will be saved,” and that’s the great divide, in my opinion, between the true believers in the good news of Jesus Christ and the Christian wanna-be’s who are still convinced that salvation is something waiting for us to earn by accepting Jesus. I am a deeply committed Christian who completely rejects Christianity cast in that form. It is religious tribalism, and I, for one, am done with religious tribalism.

And I know I’m not alone. This past Thursday I was part of an interview for one of our candidates for ordained ministry, a young man studying at Union Theological Seminary in New York. And one of the points he made, rather emphatically, is that Christianity defined by doctrine or dogma is dead to people his age. The religion they’re looking for is one that lends experiential meaning and substance to their lives, not the lives of a handful of theologians who lived five hundred or a thousand years ago.

And many of those young people sense that such meaning is to be found in lives modeled on the example of Jesus, and they are drawn to people and groups of people where they see that example being lived out. They are turned off by churches preoccupied with numbers – numbers of members, numbers of dollars – and they are

turned off by churches preoccupied with boundaries – who’s in and who’s out and for what reasons. They are also turned off by churches mired in trivialities or politics.

What people our young candidate’s age want to see is churches made up of people whose lives are filled not with teachings or anxieties or trivialities, but with grace. They want to be part of groups of people drawn together not by their thoughts about Jesus but by their love for Jesus, and the people Jesus loved. They want to be part of communities of people striving more and more to disappear so that the living Jesus Christ may appear: in those communities at worship and in fellowship, in learning together and in serving together, and in engaging the principalities and powers of this world to advance God’s realm of justice and peace.

And it is grace, finally, that allows us to live that way, as individuals and as a congregation of God’s people. We are not saved by our thoughts about Jesus; we are saved through God’s grace that allows us to trust in Jesus. That’s what faith is. When someone says, “Have faith,” they’re not saying, “Think this particular thought.” They’re saying, rather, trust that this moment is not all there is or all that will be. Trust that the unknown future can and eventually will be better than the known present. Accept the fact that forces beyond your control are in control and that the ultimate reality beyond even those forces is benign.

That is grace. Grace is the relaxing of the heart from its painful cramps of anxiety and aggression. Grace is the tempering of our impulses to judge and control. Grace is the alternative to both fight and flight. Grace is what the Christian story tells us hung on the cross.

And the Christian faith is our willingness to trust that grace. That’s all it is. What faith is for a Jew, a Muslim, a Hindu, or a Jain I neither know nor particularly care to know, since I’m not a professor of comparative religion and since their faith is a matter between them, God, and their religious tradition.

The Christians faith is my business, both as a believer and as a religious professional, and that faith says that grace is the heart of what we believe. Grace simply isn’t AT the heart of our belief, it IS the heart of our belief, because we worship a God who is self-giving love itself, and grace is the defining characteristic of that kind of love. Love that is ungracious, like love that is ungenerous, is not love at all.

Because our loves are often intertwined so deeply with our desires, love can be treacherous and self-deceiving. Grace, focused as it is on the other, is less susceptible to being hijacked by our desires. The most gracious people are those who attend closely to the lives of others, and because their hearts are fixed in God, their hands are free to serve all that God makes and knows and loves.

Grace frees us from our captivity to ourselves, and in that liberation we find the life that transcends all the limitations of this life, including its physical end. We are saved not by what we do, but rather by what the Spirit at work in us allows us to do. That Spirit never forces, it merely and wondrously allows. That is God’s grace toward us.

And the supreme act of faith is to accept that gracious, loving, non-coercive way of life for ourselves. That’s what we mean by faith in general and by the Christian faith in particular. That’s what a Christian means by faith in God.

And in that mysterious and glorious exchange between God’s grace and our faith lies salvation.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” Thanks be to God.