

Matthew 26:17-30

Romans 3:21-26

October 4, 2015

World Communion Sunday

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

Good Stewards of God's Grace

GRACE AS A GIFT

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Every morning between 5:30 and 6:00 a.m., I walk my dogs out to the end of the driveway and get the daily edition of the *Wilmington Star News*. After Heidi and Holden have eaten breakfast and gone outside again, I settle in on the couch to read the paper. Depending on how much time I have, I might skim the whole paper and then go back and read the op-ed columns in more detail. However, I always take time to read through the obituaries, the comics, and Ask Amy.

The other day, "Ringed Out" wrote the following:

"Dear Amy: My husband and I have been arguing about this for the past year. I picked out my engagement ring and wedding band before my husband ever asked me to marry him. I love my rings and there is absolutely nothing wrong with them. While my mom was going through cancer treatments she gave me her wedding set (the diamond is a very old family diamond). I asked my husband if we could get the diamond put into a new setting and wear the new ring with my original wedding band instead of my engagement ring. I was honored that my mom entrusted me with her wedding set (since my parents are still married) and since the diamond is a family diamond I would love to be able to wear it instead of hiding it away in a jewelry box. I believe that by still wearing my wedding band with the new ring it is a good compromise. I'll be wearing what my husband put on my finger when we got married, as well as wearing an old family stone. My husband thinks that because I asked to do this that I don't like my rings anymore or that they don't mean anything to me."

If you were Amy, how would you answer "Ringed Out"? Well, Amy gave some practical suggestions to "Ringed Out," including incorporating the family stone and the engagement stone into a new setting. However, it was how Amy began her answer to "Ringed Out" that got my attention, especially in light of today's sermon topic. She said, "Your engagement ring belongs to you. It was a gift from your husband and now it is yours." In Amy's reply, I hear an implied question: Now what are you going to do with this gift?

That's a good question for us to think about this morning as we hear the words of the apostle Paul: "they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." (Romans 3:24) In another of his letters, this one to the Ephesians, Paul writes, "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) Paul might as well have written,

“The grace of God belongs to you. It was a gift from God and now it is yours. Now what are you going to do with it?”

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,” we sang to open our worship this morning, “that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.” It has been said that . . .

* Justice is getting *what* you deserve.

* Mercy is *not* getting what you deserve.

* And grace is getting what you *don't* deserve.

One of the joys of getting a nice gift is when it is a total surprise! We say something like, “Oh, you shouldn't have” or “I wasn't expecting this!” Of course, if you're totally honest, sometimes you might be disappointed if you don't get the gift you were expecting or hoping for. Sometimes you might even think you deserve whatever gift you're given.

When it comes to God's grace as a gift, we'd be hard pressed to tell God, “Oh, you shouldn't have.” Because if God hadn't, where would we be?

When it comes to God's grace as a gift, we'd be less than truthful if say anything other than, “I wasn't expecting this!” Which of us can imagine doing what God has done in giving his only Son for us?

When it comes to God's grace as a gift, we are less than honest or, at least, in complete denial if we say, “Well, I deserve God's grace as a gift.”

Listen to what Paul says just a couple of chapters later in his letter to the Roman Christians: “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. . . But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. . . For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.” (Romans 5:6, 8, 10)

What are we going to do with grace as a gift?

The writer Kathleen Norris tells about seeing a young couple with an infant at an airport departure gate. She says, “The baby was staring intently at other people, and as soon as he recognized a human face, no matter whose it was, no matter if it was young or old, pretty or ugly, bored or happy or worried-looking he would respond with absolute delight. It was beautiful to see. Our drab departure gate had become the gate of heaven. . . I realized this is how God looks at us, staring into our faces in order to be delighted, to see the creature he has made and called good, along with the rest of creation.”

She continues, “God loves to look at us, and loves it when we will look back at him. Even when we try to run away from our troubles, God will find us, and bless us, even when we feel most alone, unsure if we'll survive the night. God will find a way to let us know that he is with us *in this place*, wherever we are, however far we think we've run. And maybe that's one reason we worship — to respond to grace. We praise God not to celebrate our own faith but to give thanks for the faith God has in us. To let our-

selves look at God, and let God look back at us. And to laugh, and sing, and be delighted because God has called us his own.”¹

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but how I see” — and God sees me!

World Communion Sunday is a wonderful opportunity to think about God’s grace as a gift. In a few minutes, when we come to the table, read again the invitation in the bulletin and listen to the words of invitation. The invitation hasn’t been sent out to those who deserve to come to the table. The invitation didn’t go out to those who have earned the right to come to the table. The invitation goes out to all who put their trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The invitation says, “Christ invites us all to this Holy Feast. All are invited and all are welcome. Come, for the meal is ready!”

As we gather around the Lord’s table and take the bread and cup, “we remember Jesus, his promises, and the price he paid for who he was, what he said, and what he did.” And what he did was this: He made things right again between us and God through his faith, his life, and his death for our sins. “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound!”

Now, what are we going to do with this grace as a gift?

In his letter of April 25, 1784 to Benjamin Webb, Benjamin Franklin wrote, “I do not pretend to give such a deed; I only lend it to you. When you meet with another honest man in similar distress, you must pay me by lending this sum to him; enjoining him to discharge the debt by a like operation, when he shall be able, and shall meet with another opportunity. I hope it may thus go thro’ many hands before it meets with a knave that will stop its progress. This is a trick of mine for doing a good deal of good with a little money.”²

We call Franklin’s “trick for doing a good deal of good” paying it forward. He was talking about settling monetary debts by extending grace to others with similar needs, but the concept certainly applies to our Christian lives and what God calls us to do with the grace we have received as a gift in Jesus Christ. In one of Paul’s great benedictions, from Romans 11, he praises God and says, “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?’ ‘Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?’ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever.” (Romans 11:33-35)

Exactly! Which of us has given a gift to God, to receive a gift in return? No, God has given us grace as a gift in Jesus Christ. God has given us an abundance of gifts as a church. And God calls us to pay it forward in how we use what we have from God.

At the risk of jumping the gun a little bit, let me share with you how Paul encouraged the Gentile believers to “pay it forward.” Three weeks from today, I’ll be preaching from 2 Corinthians 8 & 9 in which Paul writes about taking up an offering. One of Paul’s driving motivations was to collect an offering from the Gentile churches in Asia Minor for the suffering Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. He had two goals, one practical, one theological. Practically, the believers in Jerusalem needed help. So Paul was

taking up an offering of money to help them. Theologically, the Gentile Christians had benefited from the preaching of the Jewish Christians. They had heard about and received God's grace and it made a tremendous difference in their lives. Paul knew the money from the Gentiles to help the Jews would be an important symbol of their unity in Jesus Christ. Throughout his appeal to the Corinthian Christians, Paul reminds them of God's grace and encourages them to be generous with their gift. Paul uses only one word to describe both God's gift of grace and the Christians' human response to that gift. Paul ends his appeal with these words: "Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!"

Come to the table of grace.

Come to the table of grace.

This is God's table; it's not yours or mine.

Come to the table of grace.

Let us pray: Christ, by your cross and resurrection you have set us free. You are the Savior of the world. May all who gather at your table today and eat and drink the bread and cup know your reconciling love. May your church go forth from communion with you to be one in Christ and one in witness to the world. Amen.

NOTES

¹Kathleen Norris, "Grace," in *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), pp. 150-151.

² "Pay It Forward," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pay_it_forward.