

Scripture and Message

23 June 2024

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 6:1-13 NRSV

¹ As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. ² For he says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you." See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!

³ We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴ but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵ beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶ by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, ⁷ truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸ in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹ as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see--we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

¹¹ We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. ¹² There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. ¹³ In return--I speak as to children--open wide your hearts also.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Thanks be to God.

Message: In Sorrow and Rejoicing

During the next few weeks, we are going to be looking at a part of the second letter to the church at Corinth. Second Corinthians is really parts of several letters put together into the document we have today. It also references letters we no longer have like the 'letter of tears' to the Corinthian church.

The Corinthian church was very fractious. It argued about everything: the color of the carpet, who could eat what, who was welcome at the table, when worship should be held. It was always arguing, splitting, and reforming. It was always in the midst of a storm – some of their own making, some not....Paul writes to this messy and beloved church, "Don't accept the grace of God in vain."

How do you accept the grace of God in vain? That seems like an odd thing for Paul to ask, don't you think? I mean, grace is free, right? Grace is in God's hands and not ours. God pours out grace and we receive it. God's gives, and our job is simply to receive. We just open up our hands and grace pours in. That's how it works, isn't it?

Well, Paul has a different understanding, at least when it comes to the Corinthian church. And we have to admit that this bunch is atypical when it comes to representing the church today. I mean, they were struggling to get along with one another; there were feelings of superiority; there were questionable intimate relationships and some challenging theology undergirding it all. Nothing like any churches today. ... Moving on.

What does Paul mean with this plea to not accept the grace of God in vain? Now to give in to my Bible geek and Greek side, the word Paul uses is *kenon*, which can be translated as *vain or empty*. "Don't let your faith be empty," Paul is saying to the Corinthian church. If Lou were still with us, I would use the language of Bonhoeffer, "Don't let grace become cheap." Don't let this gift not bear fruit. Let there be some evidence of your faith in how you live in community, how you engage with the world around you.

Note that Paul isn't saying you must earn faith; it is a gift. But it is a gift that works in you and works through you. There are signs; there is evidence, says Paul; there is fruit when faith is not empty. Accepting the gift in vain means nothing is done with it, nothing internal and nothing external. Just nothing. Emptiness.

Grace is transforming. Grace is fruit-producing. But it is a partnership. That's the tricky part of this relationship. The giver of grace chooses to work with you rather than in spite of you. God chooses to invite you rather than overwhelm you. We can debate the cliché and whether God is the co-pilot or pilot, but either way, there is a seat for you too.

"Now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation. There is no need to wait," says Paul. Effort can be expended right now; hope can be lived; grace can be full. Right now. As evidence, Paul offers his own life, not as a boast, but as a sign that grace is at work in him and through him. But the road has not been easy. Grace does not make life simple or comfortable. If anything, it makes it more complicated and difficult.

One of the other lectionary readings this morning was the story of Jesus and the disciples in the storm on the sea of Galilee. It was evening and Jesus says to the disciples, let us cross to the other side. Now, this wasn't the safest thing in the world. The disciples probably thought they would be camping with the people on this side of the lake, but Jesus said let's go, so they went.

Remember, there was no electricity. That means there were no lights. Once the sun went down, it would be very dark – not a lot of light along the edge of the lake to steer by – perhaps some flickering fires – and one could perhaps navigate by the stars – if you could see them and had been trained to do that.

And once out on the lake, maybe a third of the way across, a storm rolled up out of nowhere. Jesus invited the disciples out into the middle of the lake and into the storm. They wouldn't have been there if he hadn't asked them to cross the lake. Their faith in Jesus put them into the storm.

That sounds familiar. Sometimes our faith puts us right into the middle of the storms of life. I dislike people who promise, "just give your life to Jesus and everything will be better – all of life will work out."

It really doesn't happen that way, does it? I mean, sometimes life seems to get harder because of faith. It is harder to just shrug off bad behavior and hurting people when we are truly a people of faith – when we don't believe in cheap grace – or empty grace. Sometimes, faith and grace make life more difficult.

Yet, that is where grace is made full, where life is embraced. It is in the difficulties, in the heartaches, as well as in the joys and celebrations – in sorrow and in rejoicing – that grace is made manifest in individuals and the community of faith. When we rally around one another, when we hold each other's grief and pain, when we enter into the hardships of another, when we endure, then grace abounds.

It is when we bring meals to hurting people; when we speak out against all forms of bigotry and hate; when we welcome in the ones who are lost and least; when we help those who are misunderstood and persecuted. This is when grace abounds.

So, then, how do we activate this grace? How do we ensure that we have not accepted God's great gift of grace in vain? Paul's advice is both simple and enormously difficult. We open our hearts. We risk loving and being vulnerable. We open ourselves to the possibility of being hurt so that we can approach the possibility of knowing joy. We reach out to connect with another person, risking being rejected so that we can also embrace the possibility of relationship. We share Christ, maybe with words, as we tell our story wrapped up in his story. But more often, and usually first, we share Christ by how we live in relationship with neighbors and strangers and loved ones all. We rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. The grace in our lives is most full when it comes out in relationship, when we open our hearts to those around us and trust in the abundance of God's grace.

And then like the disciples in the boat in the middle of the storm we recognize that Jesus is in the storm with us. God is in the midst of all of life's storms right beside us. And that means we can go forward without fear knowing we are at the side of Jesus, the one who can control the wind, the rain, and the water. We are with the one who will stand with us through any storm the world has to offer.