Sermon, March 6, 2022

John 1

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

What does “grace” mean? Usually when I ask this question to younger kids or teenagers, they say…the prayer we say before a meal. I asked our Friday Bible study participants and they said….

The internet definition in relation to the Christian belief is the free and unmerited favor of God, as manifested in the salvation of sinners and the bestowal of blessings. This definition states the main idea of grace.

Grace is free and unmerited. God gives us grace without cost to us. Grace comes even though we do not deserve it. There is nothing we can do to repay God for his favor or blessings. If we would even try, we could never pay the price that grace costs. Grace comes as a gift from God and our payment was made through Jesus on the cross.

Three of our Bible texts for today tell us about a gracious God. Although it may seem at times that the Old Testament God was wrathful and preferred to judge people, the most common description of God is this. The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

The prophet Joel calls on the people of Israel to return to the Lord. After a terrible plague of locusts, the people fear that God will send something even worse upon them. Joel is cautious in his response to their fear.

God has told him that the people must return to God. They are not to do so with empty ritual such as tearing their clothing in mourning. They are to rend their hearts, to open them up to the Lord as they fast and pray.

Joel doesn’t present empty platitudes about how God will relent and not bring any further judgments upon them. He says….who knows whether he will not turn and relent and leave a blessing behind him. Only God knows if and when he will again bless the people.

Joel also remembers the past actions of God, the one who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The people are to gather in worship, to fast and pray together. No one is to be excluded in this time of prayer, not the old, the young, infants and those who are more interested in each other on their honeymoons.

What God will do next is up to God. All the people can do is stand before God, offering themselves as they are. They make their prayers in faith, in hopes of God’s graciousness.

The psalmist describes the God that Joel and the people of Israel hoped and prayed would hear them. He uses those same words….The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Our psalm praises God for all the good God has done. God hears the people and is good to all. God is faithful and gracious, upholding those who fall and raising up those who are bowed down. God opens his hand and satisfies the hunger of all. This is a God who listens and provides. This is a God who is worthy of the praises of all creation.

John begins his gospel with a prologue that adds a new facet to God. The Word was with God and all things came into being through the Word.

The Word became flesh and lived among us. John moves from the Word that is life and light to a flesh and blood person. The words “lived among us” is literally…pitched a tent.

Jesus came to pitch his tent, to live among us as one of us. He dwelled among the people in his earthly life and brought God’s grace and truth to them. Jesus continues to live among us through the Holy Spirit, bringing us grace and truth.

Joel is maybe not 100% sure of God’s word to offer the people blessing as they turn back to God. He may reserve a bit of doubt. However, God’s word is all he has to stand on. God had shown his grace to Israel. Joel chose to have faith that he would again.

The psalmist stood on the past actions of God to compose a new poem expressing faith in God who had proven himself in the past. God’s grace and mercy is offered to all, even before we ask. He is already near to those who call on him. He always watches over us.

John testifies how this gracious and merciful and loving God came to earth. God became incarnate in Jesus so he could live among his people. Because of Jesus, we have received grace upon grace, more than we could ever imagine.

Moses was an instrument of God. Moses delivered the law to the people once God had spoken it to him.

Jesus will speak for God as well, but not just as an instrument, but as God’s Son. Jesus is the one who makes God know through his life. His life itself is grace and truth.

How do we today connect to this grace and truth? How do we experience God as gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abiding in steadfast love?

When I was in seminary, we talked about how God is always mediated. We cannot experience God directly, for our human minds cannot comprehend our holy God. In the Old Testament, if someone saw God, they died. Even if they got too close to God or something that was seen as containing God, such as the Ark of the Covenant, they died. Only a select few was able to see a glimpse of God. Moses himself only saw a bit of his back and the hem of his garment.

God comes to us in ways that give us glimpses of God. God uses other things to convey his love to us. The Bible is God’s word mediated for us through the written word. When we hear it read, God’s word is mediated through the voice of another person reaching our ears.

God needs to use other things as a means to communicate with us. In 1997, at the Churchwide Assembly of the ELCA, a document entitled “The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament” was adopted.

It contains four parts. Part one is the Proclamation of the Word and the Christian Assembly. We gather in worship to hear the word of God through preaching, hymns, prayers and more. Part two is Holy Baptism and the Christian Assembly. I’ll talk more about this one in a few moments and during the sermons over the next two weeks.

Third is Holy Communion and the Christian Assembly. I will talk about these later in this Lenten series. Last is The Means of Grace and Christian Mission. This will wrap up our Lenten season in April.

The document begins with instruction on how God created the church. From Luther’s Small Catechism and The Augsburg Confession comes this quote: God gives the Word and the sacraments to the Church and by the power of the Spirit thereby creates and sustains the Church among us. God establishes the sacraments "to awaken and confirm faith."

Just what is the church? According to our Augsburg Confession, “This is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel.”

There is a children’s song that goes….a church is not a building, a church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is a people. I am the church! You are the church! We are the church together. All who follow Jesus, all around the world, yes, we’re the church together.

While we have a very beautiful church here to worship in, it’s not this building that is the true church. It is all of us here. We are having church today because God’s word is being proclaimed. This is where we administer the sacraments. This is where God promises to be with us, even if only two or three are gathered.

How we do church is very much reminiscent of the first Christians worship. The second chapter of Acts gives us one of our most complete pictures of how Christians gathered for church and to be the church.

Peter preaches to a crowd of people. He offers them the same message as John the Baptist and Jesus had. Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven.

This promise isn’t only for that crowd, but to their children perhaps not yet born, and to those who will come generations after them. For all who are far away may also include those in the far reaches of the world who have not yet heard the gospel.

In any case, about 3000 people were added to this motley crew who were not even calling themselves “Christians” yet. Luke, the probable author of Acts, then describes how these new followers lived.

They hung out with the disciples, now called apostles, listening to their teaching. They ate together and prayer together. They were awe-struck by the many wonders and signs the apostles performed.

They developed a communal type of lifestyle. They made themselves into a community where they shared all they had. Those with more possessions would sell them and divide the proceeds among those who did not have as much.

They did not give up their Jewish traditions for they continued to worship in the temple. The words of the law and prophets still were important to them. The God they knew from the temple was still with them and was worthy of worship and praise.

They ate meals together, breaking bread as Jesus had broken bread with his disciples. This was done in people’s homes, where they would continue to talk about God and Jesus and what this new life meant for them.

And people noticed. More and more, God inspired others to join in this new community. This is the community that continues until now, the church.

God sustained the church then and sustains the church now. God offers us sustenance through his word and sacraments. These are offered freely, by God’s grace and love.

When I do First Communion classes, I always ask how many sacraments does the Lutheran church have? I’ve been giving lots of hints so far this morning. What do you think?

Answers I get from the classes, including the parents, range anywhere from 2 to 10. A fair number of people, usually raised in a Catholic church, will say 7.

The Lutheran church recognizes two sacraments. There are criteria for what makes a sacrament. It must contain the command of Jesus and an earthly element.

In Matthew 28, Jesus commands the disciples to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The earthly element used is water.

In Luke 22, Jesus celebrates the Passover meal with his disciples. He gives them the bread and wine, indicating they are his body and blood. He commands them to continue to share this special meal by saying…do this in remembrance of me.

Over the Lenten season, I’ll be talking more about our sacraments, the means of grace. Today on this first Sunday of Lent, we will share in Holy Communion. Through Jesus body and blood, may we all be strengthened for our Lenten journey. God’s grace be with you. Amen.