

Grace in a Graceless World
A Sermon on Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
Second Sunday in Lent
March 12, 2017

Introduction

The first five Sundays in Lent are about our faith journey, especially our baptismal journey. We turn to the Passion of Christ only in the last week, beginning with Palm Sunday and climaxing with Easter Sunday.

Lent traditionally was a period of preparation for those who wished to be baptized. The church set aside Easter Sunday for baptisms. Disciples of Christ and other Protestant churches have Pastor's Class during each of the first five Sundays of Lent for children who want to be baptized on Easter Sunday. In Pastor's Class, children learn about the fundamentals of faith.

Today begins Pastor's Class for the rest of us. Our text raises fundamental issues about who we are as Christians. It is loaded with theological terms. What does it mean to be righteous? How are we made righteous? What is faith? What is grace? What is the relationship between righteousness and faith and grace?

This is heavy stuff. Paul makes the teaching easier to follow by weaving it into the story of Abraham, the father of faith. He asks us to think about how our faith is like the faith of Abraham.

First Move: Creating a Common Identity as Sons of Abraham

Paul is addressing two different groups in the Roman churches that have been in conflict: the strong and the weak.

Claudius, the Roman emperor, expelled the Jews from Rome around 49 CE, perhaps for leading a tax revolt. That would have included Jewish Christians. They were not allowed to return until 54 CE. Gentile Christians were not forced to leave, so they took over the leadership of the churches in Rome. Paul writes his Letter to the Romans about five years after the Jewish Christians returned.

Apparently a dispute developed between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians. Paul talks about this dispute in Romans 14. The Jewish Christians still believed that they needed to observe the Jewish dietary laws and the Jewish festivals. The Gentile Christians thought that the Christ event made observing food laws and festival days unnecessary. Paul refers to the Jewish Christians as the weak or

powerless or unable ones. This could be a reference to a weakness in faith, or it could refer to their economic condition when they returned to Rome from exile. The Gentile Christians are the strong ones.

Paul tries to bring the two groups together by building a common identity in Abraham. The Judeans already consider themselves to be sons of Abraham. They are descended from him by blood. Paul's argument in today's text is that the Gentile Christians also should consider themselves to be sons of Abraham.

Paul is having a discussion with an imaginary conversation partner who is taking the position of the Jewish Christians. This was a common practice in Greco-Roman literature. The imaginary partner is called an interlocutor. The interlocutor says that Abraham is their forefather according to the flesh.

Paul says, No, Abraham was more than that. That would make him the father only of Judeans. He also is the father in faith of all the nations.

Paul turns to the story of Abraham in Genesis 15 for authority. God had just appeared to Abraham in a vision and said, "Do not be afraid, Abram; I am your shield, your reward shall be very great." Abraham, or Abram as he was known then, said, "O Lord God, what will you give me for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus? You have given me no offspring, and so a slave from my house is to be my heir."

Then the word of the Lord comes to Abram, "This man shall not be your heir, no one but your own issue shall be your heir."

Then God brings Abraham outside and says, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. So shall your descendants be."

Then we have the key verse, Genesis 15:6. Paul quotes it in full: "And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness."

Abraham believed God's promise that he would have too many descendants to count, even though Abraham was almost 100 years old and his wife Sarah was almost 90. It took an act of faith to believe that God would create life from Sarah's womb. God declares that Abraham is righteous because of his faith. Righteous means to be in right relationship with God.

God tries entering into a new relationship with humanity through Abraham. God had previously told humanity to be fruitful and multiply, to be good stewards of creation. God watched from a distance and let humans try to work it out on their own. It hadn't worked.

Genesis 6:5 says that God saw the wickedness of humans was great and their thoughts were continually of evil. They were violent toward each other. God regrets making humans. God grieves over what has become of creation.

God sees only one righteous man, Noah. God brings a flood to blot out the rest of humanity. There is a new creation. God promises Noah that never again will God destroy every living thing. The rainbow will be the sign of the covenant. It represents the setting aside of God's weapon of war against humanity

After the flood, humankind has not changed. Humans are still violent. They still seek to build themselves up at the expense of others. They begin building a tower that would reach to heaven. They wanted to make a name for themselves. They wanted to become gods. God is concerned that there will be no limit to the evil that humans could do. God confuses their language and scatters them all over the earth. Creation is reverting to chaos.

God now brings blessings to one man and enters into a relationship with him. We don't know why God chose Abraham. When Abraham is introduced, all we know about him is that his family lived in Ur of the Chaldeans, he was 75 years old, and he and his wife were childless.

Paul emphasizes that God chose Abraham through grace, not because of any works that Abraham had done. Works are good deeds that we do because we are obeying God's will. Abraham is famous for his obedience. When his son Isaac was born, Abraham circumcised himself and Isaac and all the slaves in his household. When Isaac was a young boy, God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac and Abraham was willing to go through with it. These acts of obedience comes later. Abraham's faith or trust in God comes before the obedience.

Paul says that one who works is entitled to his wages. Wages come to them through obligation, not through grace. It was not through works of the law that the promises came to Abraham and his seed, but through grace.

In the second half of today's text, Paul says that the promises to Abraham extend to all people who have faith and trust God. Paul tries to reconcile the strong with the weak in his congregation by showing them that Abraham is the father of all people of faith, not just Judeans. God intends all people of faith to be a light to the nations.

Second Move: Grace Defines the Christian God

Grace has come to be known as a uniquely Christian word, and it is largely because of Paul. Χάρις, the Greek word for grace, does not appear in either Matthew or Mark and appears only four times in John. The historical Jesus apparently did not use the word χάρις. There is no exact counterpart to grace in the Hebrew Bible. Paul in his letters uses χάρις 101 times. Grace does appear 25 times in Luke-Acts. According to tradition, Luke was a traveling companion of Paul and incorporated

Paul's theology into Luke and Acts. The father in the Prodigal Son is the outstanding example of grace in Luke's gospel.

Χάρις in Greek means a gift, something that is done as an unmerited favor. In Greco-Roman culture, a powerful benefactor granted a favor to a client and expected something in return. The client was expected to be loyal to the benefactor, similar to the Godfather. Strings are attached to the gift. I do something for you; you do something for me.

Christianity, largely because of Paul, removes the strings. The gift comes out of God's love for us. God chose Abraham out of love for humanity. Abraham didn't do anything when God first called to him in Ur of Chaldea. Mary didn't do anything when God chose her to be the mother of the Christ child. God is moved by nothing other than love to reach out to humans and enter into relationship with them. Even if humans stray from that relationship, God keeps trying to restore the relationship, as the father does when he sees the Prodigal Son return. Parents know all about this. No matter how many times your child screws up, you still love them.

Martin Marty, a church historian, says that grace, better than any other term, exemplifies the relationship of the divine character in action and the relation of the divine to human beings. For Christians, grace is what God looks like in action.

The problem is, we don't want grace. Paul Achtemeier, a New Testament scholar, says that we would rather be paid for what we deserve than be given something we have not earned. Our culture sends us the message that you have to work for whatever you are going to receive. An honorable person does not accept charity. This is a message that is universal to Western culture, not just the United States. Our culture is highly individualistic and competitive. We want to be recognized for our achievement. We want to be seen as winners not losers. There is no room for grace in it.

Grace offends us when it is given to someone else. How would society function if grace were one of our principles? We don't see it as grace. We see it as unfair. We have mandatory minimum sentences for criminals so that there is no possibility of grace. When the governor or the president pardons someone, we see it as corruption not grace. When the government gives aid to the poor, we think we are enabling the dependency of the poor. We cannot allow refugees to enter our country; they are fleeing violence and persecution at home but we have no place for them. They have done nothing for us and we fear they may be terrorists. We think of America First.

The church is different from secular society. We look to the gospel, not popular opinion and demagogues. We trust God. We orient our lives around our relationship with God instead of conforming to secular values. Grace gives us hope that God

hasn't given up on the world. There is so much oppression, greed, pride and selfishness in the world. The church should be helping to overcome all that sin in the world. But the church over the centuries has betrayed the gospel more often than it has spread the gospel. We should be joyful that God does not demand strict accountability.

Third Move: Grace Brings in LGBT Folks

It is grace that led us to become an open and affirming congregation. Our Wednesday night discussion group was watching an episode of *Living the Questions* six years ago and the issue of gays and the church came up. Several of you were offended at the way the church has treated LGBT folks. You decided to enter the discernment process to become an open and affirming congregation. We found that nearly everyone in the church had a close family member, a son, a daughter, a brother, a parent, who was gay. You had seen the suffering they were forced to endure. Martha Meyers had a gay daughter who committed suicide.

We had the vote to become open and affirming five years ago this month. John Russell drafted our covenant; it is printed on the homepage of our website.

Edmond Trinity Christian Church is an open and affirming congregation of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). We affirm the life and teachings of Jesus Christ by welcoming all people of diverse race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and socioeconomic status to worship and participate fully in all aspects of church life in a safe, loving, nurturing and compassionate community.

We had a secret ballot. You voted unanimously to adopt the covenant. You want our church to reach out to LGBT folks to let them know that we are a safe place for them to worship and participate fully in church life. Five years later, we are still the only open and affirming Disciples congregation in the Oklahoma City area.

Several gay people joined our congregation. Two of them died in the last year: David Nickell and Al Bateman. David had lifelong problems with alcoholism. He was in rehab six different times over 30 years. I didn't know this until after he died; his sister told me. David was gay but didn't tell anyone in the family until he was 40 years old. He said that was one of his regrets was that he never learned to develop healthy romantic relationships. Al began coming to Edmond Trinity 12 years ago to attend a Homosexuals Anonymous group that was led by Joe Samuels. Unfortunately, that group was intended to help people repent of their gayness, pray away the gay. Al

started attending church here but didn't tell anyone he was gay. He didn't tell me until the last time I saw him in St. Anthony's Hospital. Al also never had a long-term, romantic relationship.

Grace makes our lives richer. David and Al joined this congregation because they felt loved and accepted here. They became leaders among us. Their spirit filled this place.

Conclusion

Grace is about entering into right relationship with God. God reaches out to us out of love. God wants to enter into intimate relationship with all people, Jew, Gentile, Muslim, rich, poor, man, woman, gay, straight. When God pours love out on us, that love comes spilling out of us and onto other people. That is the heart of the good news: Grace Abounds!

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