

The Will of Grace
Preached by Rev. Patrick Hunnicutt
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA
March 29, 2020
Text: Hebrews 4: 14-16

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness...

If this were Sesame Street, we might say that today's sermon is sponsored by the letter, "Hebrews."

And if there were a word for this day, it would be grace.

Yes, the word of the day, is grace.

Grace is a majestic word, crowned with meaning, ever-worthy of being enthroned.

And its coronation as the word of this sermon is the story of grace itself at work.

This week, as part of worldwide efforts to limit the scope of physical interaction, we decided to reduce the number of people in the chancel to one musical leader and two pastors.

I am genuinely glad Yeri is leading us in music today, but without our music director, Ben, and his booming baritone voice, I knew we would need some help in the singing department. I was particularly worried about the closing hymn. We needed a well-known tune, one you could join us in singing. Otherwise, it'd be a Patrick and Whitney duet, and that might just break the Internet.

So, before giving any thought to the Scripture or the sermon, I chose *Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound*, because I know that you know it. You better sing along. The Internet is counting on you.

After solving the musical problem, I turned to what should ordinarily be my primary concern, that is, the preaching of the word, and what that word ought to be about. And here's the example of grace at work.

The hymn, *Amazing grace*, having met me in our need for biological and musical safety, led me to this text, to the amazingness of God's grace, in which we find our ultimate security.

This is what God's amazing grace does.

It meets us where we are, to lead us where God wills us be.

It meets us where we are, to lead us where God wills us be.

This definition of grace is not found word for word in Scripture, but it's found in the stories:

- God meets Adam and Eve in the shame of nakedness, and clothes them for the life of toil and labor God had assigned to them
- In the form of a burning bush, God meets Moses, who at the time was hiding from his people while shepherding someone else's sheep, and moves Moses to return to his people and lead them as a shepherd to their freedom
- The angel Gabriel meets Mary in her humility so that in her, God's divinity may take the flesh of our humanity.

Indeed, Jesus is grace in flesh and blood.

He embodies the grace embedded in our text today, which claims that in Christ, "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested, as we are, yet without sin."

Hebrews argues passionately that by virtue of his sacrifice on the cross, of his entering the flesh and blood of this life, Jesus gifts us with a once-and-for all forgiveness, and the new life that flows from it. As John Calvin says, "We may trust that we are the sons and daughters of God, because the beloved Son of God assumed to himself a body of our body, flesh of our flesh, bones of our bones, that he might be one with us; he [took] what was peculiar to us [our flesh, our vulnerability to sin and death] so that he might in turn extend to us what was peculiar to his own [his righteousness and perfect obedience and faith]."

This brings to mind an image of grace shared by an important pastor in my life. He wrote that when we are broken-legged and stuck in a pit, we are little helped by someone lowering down a ladder and yelling down for us to climb out. We need someone to come down to us, to meet us and be with us -- where we are -- to carry us where we need to go.

That is the will of grace, to descend to us in order to lift us up.

The New Oxford study Bible describes Hebrews as an anonymous sermon written in the latter half of the first century to encourage a community of believers to continue in faith in the face of hardship. Some in the community were losing hope, giving up, falling away. So, the preacher sought to reach the broken-legged in the pit of their despair, and lift them up, so that none of them would "turn away from the living God" or "neglect so great a salvation" that promised them the rest and peace of Christ. To lead them to the "assurance of faith and things hoped for," the preacher of Hebrews met the doubtful in the pit of their despair. That's grace.

Hebrews boasts that "we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved." This assurance can only emerge from those who have been met by God not just in their strength, but in their weakness. Not those whom God finds to be puffed up, but those who are shrunken down. Not those who are found and can see, but those who are blind, and lost.

That's what we need. We need to be met where we are, to go where God would have us be.

And that means we need to acknowledge our despair, our doubt, our fearfulness and frailty. We need to be truthful with ourselves and others, and allow them to be truthful with us, about how we and they are doing.

It's terrifying, when we hear of those connected to us getting sick, or the virus making inroads in places we hoped would stay secure. It's scary, when we feel the initial dullness of a headache, the first tickles of a cough or chills of a cold, and we wonder what it might mean. It's hard when the possibility of a neighborhood play date confronts us with what seems to be a life or death decision. and it's lonely, when no one understands how

hopeless it is when all of the rhythms and routines that we relied upon to survive an already hard world are taken away from us.

In his book, *What's So Amazing about Grace*, Philip Yancey writes that there are only two alternatives to hypocrisy: Perfection or honesty. To claim we are something we are not is hypocritical; it's the opposite of Hippocratic -- it does do harm.

So let us not claim to be perfect in belief, perfect in assurance or calm. Some of this social distancing has been pleasant in some ways for some of us, but none of us is immune to the anxiety it arouses, and the grief -- grief at what has already been lost, and the anticipatory grief of losses yet to come. We must offer ourselves as much as to others the grace to meet us where we are in that grief, if we are to move to the hope and comfort God that wills for us.

Theology is sometimes described as "faith seeking understanding." It might also be known as the "grace of being understood."

Again, Hebrews tells us that Jesus was one who in every respect was tested as we are, that he understood then at a cellular level all with which we must contend today. How can this be true, given the novelty of Covid-19?

I would say this...that though Christ did not contend with this particular corona, the Son of God did live in infectious times:

- Jesus knew the infectiousness of hypocrisy, where judgment spread virally from those who ought more to have been judged.
- The infectiousness of injustice, where the strong exploited the weak, and where even the sidewalks of the holy sanctuary became the tabled den of thieves and robbers
- And certainly he knew the infectiousness of death, where the schemings of a murderous prompted many to shout "Crucify, crucify him!"

But then, as now, infectiousness has a double meaning. We can be sickened by infection and share passion and joy, infectiously. Grace is the pivot that can meet us, and redirect us, from one kind of infectiousness to the other.

Remember, how the disciples locked themselves in that room after Jesus suffered death on the cross, how they self-quarantined themselves in their own pit of fear and uncertainty. By grace, Jesus met them there, and did so to lift them into the joy of his resurrection, an infectious joy, that spread by the power of the Holy Spirit into a movement of many tongues, including our own today.

Friends, In these infected times, may we be infectious for grace.

May we be gracious hosts to grace, in all its forms, offering grace to others, and receiving the grace that is in them; meeting and being met where we are, so we may be moved to where God wills us to be.

Grace needs people for the world's people to know grace.

In my former work with the youth of this church, I had the gift of knowing four amazing Graces. They remind me that grace is not an idea, or an attribute, but an emanation from a person. We may know the sun by the warmth of its beams, but no beaming happens without that shining star. As the preacher of Hebrews says, "the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself." So too, grace is an emanation shining from the person of Christ, fully human, fully divine, who beams from each of us in whom Christ dwells. So let us shine. Let us extend that grace, and be open to receiving it.

Let us also follow where grace leads us. According to Calvin, grace both arouses in us the desire to do good and to serve God, and enables that good to be done. It's so heartening to hear so many of you asking, what can I do to help others in this time. That desire is of grace, and whatever you do out of that desire, is grace at work in you. If you feel that desire to help, follow that grace. Go to the "serve" page at the top of our website, and you can see all the ways you might help a local, national or international organization serve those most vulnerable in this crisis.

And though grace is associated with refinement and elegance of movement or personality, grace is also gritty. To be infectious, grace sometimes comes unsanitized, and when it has to, it fights. Lately, the cardinals in my neighborhood have been chirping with beautiful song. The reality is that their singing is really the sound of combat, as they assert and protect their territory. Grace, sweet sounding as it may be, is also the sound and sight of God battling on our behalf, in order to lay claim to the territory of our hearts, our bodies, our minds, and our souls.

We share a common foe. Let us battle together, with grace.

Each of our live-streamed daily devotionals this week offered an invitation:

- To hold fast to that which secures us,
- To fill our cups so that we may pour our love into the cups of others.
- To take care as we interact with loved ones in the close proximity of worry and disruption,
- To share in the hope of Christ's victory over the Devil of Scripture and the devils of our day, (with special mercy towards the blue ones :)
- And to rest in the harmony of forgiveness as we confess the discordance of our sins.

In this text and in our life, may we find,

- That the security to which we must hold fast, is grace
- That the blessing which fills our cups with overflowing blessing, is grace.
- That the gift we want for our loved ones and from them too, is grace
- That the chief armament of our victory,
- and the lone maestro of our symphony of forgiveness, is grace,
- The grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

And so I close with a final word from our sponsor, the very last sentence of the Letter to the Hebrews:

"Grace be with all of you."

Amen.