

Gifted Grace

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

March 26, 2023 – 5th Sunday in Lent

Text: Ephesians 2:1-10

Difficult as it is to believe, we are at the 5th Sunday in Lent! The first day of spring is behind us. Daffodils and crocuses are poking their way up into the sun. Easter goodies of all types fill the shelves in the stores. The subtle, and not so subtle, messages are everywhere that spring is here! It hasn't felt that way the last few days, for sure. We're at that point on the calendar when we wonder if we'll ever be able to put those winter coats away. Still, just two weeks from today we will be joining together in our festival Easter celebration service, the altar decorated with lilies and tulips and daffodils. Some of us will have huddled in the pre-dawn chill at Misquamicut Beach for the sunrise service, imagining what it was like for those first women who walked to the tomb in the pre-dawn hours so long ago.

Resurrection promises have been our theme for this Lenten season as we have explored several aspects of our faith, all of which have their origin in the Resurrection. We've talked about the need to continue always to study and read and learn, not only the Bible but what's happening in the world around us so that we know how it is that Jesus would have us respond. We've considered the importance of the sacrament of Communion as a source of nurture and renewal for our faith. We've considered how radically different Jesus understands sin as revealed in the story about the woman saved from stoning. And last week we talked about Jesus' unique perspective on forgiveness, that it must go both ways if it's going to mean anything at all. We cannot be forgiven if we are not willing to forgive.

Today our topic is the next logical step in our Lenten reflections, the notion of grace. In Confirmation class, understanding the concept of grace is foundational. Depending on the Christian tradition into

which one is being confirmed, the definition of grace can be quite theologically complicated. For us, I am happy to say, it is actually quite simple. Grace is God's unearned, unconditional love for us which saves us from being lost in a life of sin. Grace is made real for us in the person of Jesus whose life and teachings reveal to us this unconditional love of God. In his death and the empty tomb of Easter morning this grace is revealed to us in the promise of new life and new possibilities that are never limited, even by death. Grace is indeed the key which unlocks the gateway to an entirely new way of living as a person transformed by this unconditional love of God, incarnate in Jesus the Christ. Without grace, faith is reduced to a one way plea from us to a god far distant and uninterested. That, dear ones, is not what our Christian faith was ever intended to be.

In the text we read from Ephesians this morning, Paul is talking about grace – what it is and what it means. He begins by describing how the people used to live in sin without really understanding it was sin. The people were “following the course of this world ... [living] in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of the flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath like everyone else.” Remember this is a letter written to a faith community by Paul, or perhaps one of his disciples, in which he is reminding the people how it is they came to be who they are as followers of Jesus. “Remember how you used to live,” he urges. “You were ruled by your desires of the flesh and you gave in quickly to anger.” That’s a vivid description which is why this is one of those verses we tend to rush through because we think it doesn’t describe us. When we consider these verses, we automatically imagine drunken orgies ending in fist fights. Not us, we think. Except, that’s not really what Paul is talking about here. He's actually talking about the day to day preoccupations that fill our lives and push us away from living as Jesus taught. Like

grocery shopping and being irritated to the point of anger that everything is so expensive. Like offering that favorite hand gesture of drivers everywhere when someone cuts us off for that prime parking spot. Like feeling ever so slightly jealous when someone else tells you they are taking that fancy vacation or buying that gorgeous outfit you considered and then realized it was just too far outside the budget. Dear ones, Paul is reminding us that we *all* fall short of how God would have us live and that, like it or not, means we are all sinners in some way.

What? No, that can't be right, we think. That can't be what Paul means by "desires of the flesh," can it? Well, yes. It is. He even includes us in that one phrase. "Just like everyone else" he says. That pretty clearly includes us, dear ones. And that's the entire point of grace. We cannot ever earn it just by being a good person, even by being a faithful Christian. None of us can ever achieve grace because it is not achievable. It's not like a merit badge or an award for meritorious behavior. Grace is a gift of God that we don't deserve and can never earn. Grace is God's unconditional love for each of us that knows no boundaries. Grace is God's sure and certain knowledge that we are all capable of being the incredible person God created us to be, no matter how much we fall short of that expectation in reality.

Another aspect of God's grace that we often forget is that it is God who gifts it to us, and to everyone else. We don't get to tell God who deserves this gift of grace and who doesn't. We have absolutely no say over how God gifts grace to other people, some of whom we really, really don't like. We are so quick to forget that everyone is a beloved child of God. Everyone. And this is really, really difficult to accept. Some people are just unlikable. They are rude and selfish. They are mean and sometimes violent. Let's face it, there are people out there who are downright reprehensible for a whole lot of reasons

we don't even want to think about and yet, impossible as it seems, each of them is beloved of God. Each of them can receive the gift of God's grace. But, and this is the real kicker, they have to want to receive the gift. And to do that, you have to acknowledge that you are not deserving of God's grace because of all the sins that make up who you are. God forgives those sins through the gift of grace, loving us in spite of our sins and trusting that we are capable of more. Jesus shows us how to move from sinfulness to faithfulness and here again, this is a choice not everyone is able to make, not everyone wants to make. But God's grace is still available to them. We can't change that. Ever. We can't tell God who deserves the gift of grace and who doesn't. We can't tell God who is an irredeemable sinner and who isn't. God does not need our help with that. The sad thing is these days there are way too many people who think God is counting on their help in gifting grace.

You know who I mean. Their outrageous actions have been all over the news just in the past few days. For example, the American Library Association released a report just this week documenting that requests to ban books from public and school libraries have more than doubled since 2021. The release reports:

The American Library Association (ALA) today released new data documenting* **1,269 demands to censor library books and resources in 2022**, the highest number of attempted book bans since ALA began compiling data about censorship in libraries more than 20 years ago. The unparalleled number of reported book challenges in 2022 nearly doubles the 729 challenges reported in 2021. A record **2,571 unique titles were targeted for censorship**, a 38% increase from the 1,858 unique titles targeted for censorship in 2021. Of those titles, the vast majority were written by or about members of the LGBTQIA+ community and people of color.¹

Make no mistake, many of these people mounting these organized book banning efforts are evangelical Christians. They are convinced they know what God wants and that God does not love LGBTQIA people. They “just know” that trans folks are evil and dangerous. They deny racism is a problem that requires deep and

¹ <https://www.ala.org/news/press-releases/2023/03/record-book-bans-2022>

thoughtful study if we are ever to move beyond its toxic hold on our society. Instead, they are fully vested in the belief that they are on the front lines of God's battle with sin and they are determined to win! This attitude which is so prevalent among these folks prompts the obvious question: What makes them think they know the mind of God? Why do they believe God needs their help in deciding whom God loves? How is it that they believe they can get in between God's grace and another person? Well, obviously I don't know the answer to that. I cannot imagine why they think and believe as they do. But I do know it's incredibly dangerous to let these book bans and censorship requests take hold. This is a situation where none of us can afford to sit back and figure someone else will take care of it. Everyone has to step up when this kind of nonsense is proposed. It's already happened here once. Last fall I wrote a letter to the editor of *The Westerly Sun* in response to a letter advocating certain books be banned from the libraries and I was surprised by the vitriol it unleashed. Hate is real, alive and well in Westerly-Pawcatuck. And we can never let it get a broader foothold here than it already has.

Another discouraging indicator of other folks trying to tell God who deserves God's grace is revealed in the dramatic rise in anti-Semitic incidents in just the past year. In an article published in Friday's *Providence Journal* reporter Jack Perry notes:

Anti-Semitic incidents reached an all-time high in the United States last year and increased in most New England states, including Rhode Island, according to the Anti-Defamation League. Rhode Island recorded 19 anti-Semitic incidents in 2022, up from 17 in 2021, with incidents reported in eight of the state's 39 cities and towns, the ADL reported in releasing its annual audit. Across the country last year, the ADL recorded 3,697 anti-Semitic incidents, a 36% increase and the highest total since the ADL started tracking such data in 1979. Of those, 111 incidents were categorized as assaults. One person died.²

² <https://www.providencejournal.com/story/news/2023/03/24/anti-semitism-in-rhode-island-increased-in-2022-adl-says/70040549007/>

I am appalled by these increasing incidences of anti-Semitism on so many levels. There is no reason for such bigoted, ignorant hate and yet it continues on, here and around the world. How God's heart must ache as God sees decent, faithful people bullied and terrorized in God's name, for no good reason. The Holocaust is so real in the minds of our Jewish brothers and sisters and I know – *I know* – this wave of rising anti-Semitism is terrifying for them. I know of some Orthodox and Conservative Jewish families right here in Rhode Island who have always kept what they call “go bags” ready in their homes in case they have to flee with short notice. I couldn't understand that – until now. I can't even imagine...

So, what are we to do in the face of these and other such egregious situations suddenly becoming all too commonplace in our beloved country? What would Jesus have us do as knowing recipients of this grace gifted to us by God? Well, for one thing, we need to sit through sermons like this that attempt to tell it like it is because we will never be able to effectively address situations we don't talk about together. We can't come to church and hear “Pollyanna” sermons that focus only on God's love and blessings for us. God expects us to be more than that, to do more than that. One of the strengths of this grace God gifts to us is to be found in this faith community of like-minded people who are committed to trying to live as God would have us live each day. We know it's an uphill struggle sometimes, especially when there are so many scary things happening in the world every day. But we also know this is the place we can come together to face our fears, to share them with each other and to invite God into the conversation about how we might be able to respond in some way.

Ever since the report of the Anti-Defamation League was released last week, my email and Facebook feed have been lighting up with suggested responses we might take as Christian clergy. One of

them in particular is something I have been trying to do throughout all my years in ministry and yet, in reading some of these materials, I have realized there was even more to be done. Let me explain. One of the inadvertent sources of growing anti-Semitic influences in this country is coming out of Christian churches, conservative ones primarily but not just them. This reality is visible in our upcoming Holy Week services which are too often providing fodder for hatred of the Jewish people and we don't even realize it. The reality is that our Jewish brothers and sisters have always approached Holy Week with fear and trepidation. Throughout history this week has been a time when targeting Jewish people was acceptable.

How can this be, you ask. Well, think about the texts we read during Holy Week. All of them, from Palm Sunday through Good Friday especially. If I asked you right now, based on your years of hearing those texts who sent Jesus to the cross, how would you answer? (*Pause*) It's not the Jews. It was never the Jews. It was always the Romans. Jesus was himself a faithful Jew who never intended to start a new religion. He always intended to offer his teachings as a reform to the Jewish faith he lived every day until he died. Jesus was not murdered by the Jews because he rejected Judaism. Jesus was murdered by the Romans as a political rabble-rouser whose message of God's kingdom on earth sounded way too much like encouragement to get the locals to rebel. The Romans killed Jesus because he was a real threat to their stranglehold of power in Palestine. This one fact is so easily overlooked, buried under the weight of Scripture verses filled with invectives against "the Jews." This is so important for us to remember and actively respond to, especially this year, as we prepare to observe Holy Week.

Next Sunday we will celebrate together once again the beautiful and deeply meaningful Palm Sunday Symbols service. However, if

you are listening closely and have a really good memory, you will notice that some things are different this year. Dav and I will be reviewing the hymns and special music to insure we do not inadvertently sing words which imply our brothers and sisters of the Jewish faith are any less beloved of God than we are. Also, I have thoroughly reviewed all the readings and have taken one out entirely because of its implication that Jesus intended to overthrow Judaism. He didn't. He was a faithful practitioner of Second Temple Judaism until the moment he died. I have also edited out language that implies the Jewish temple authorities were responsible for Jesus' death because they weren't. These accusatory texts made their way into Scriptures written many decades after Jesus' death as his followers were embroiled in the birth pangs of what gradually, *gradually*, became Christianity. It was part of their desire to carve out a separate identity from Second Temple Judaism, an identity which became even more important once non-Jews were admitted into the emerging faith.

Dear ones, my sincere hope for our upcoming celebrations of Holy Week and Easter this year is that they will remind us once again of the joy and hope our faith in the Risen Christ offers us. I pray we will accept with true delight the precious gift of grace, God's unconditional love for us and for all, freely given and freely accepted. I hope we will treasure each day as Paul asks us to in his letter to the church in Ephesus when he says, "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." Created for good works. Sounds pretty good to me. How about you? Amen.

