

Cheap Grace

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

March 17, 2024 – Morning Worship on the 4th Sunday of Lent

Text: Ephesians 2:1-10

The relationship between good and evil, sin and salvation, grace and redemption is foundational to our Christian faith. And yet how often do we really stop to think about this deeply? We sing words about grace in hymns, we pray for God's grace in our prayers here in the sanctuary and even before our meals at home. But do we really understand what it is? What is the relationship between grace and how we live as Christians? Is a Christian truly a Christian without grace? And what is grace anyway? What is sin? What is the connection between the Jesus of the manger in Bethlehem, the Jesus of the cross and the Jesus of the empty tomb? And what does grace have to do with any of that? These, dear ones, are the key questions for us during this season of Lent, especially as Holy Week looms. So, how do we delve into this in a way that makes sense, that connects with our lives at the core of who we are, or at least who we strive to be?

We've been spending our time so far in Lent pondering these concepts by taking a closer look at the Epistles, the letters of the New Testament many of which were written by Paul or one of his proteges. Paul often times sounds as if he is talking/writing in circles, so it takes some effort to parse out what he's saying but it's a task worth doing as we've been discovering. I've always thought of Paul as the first person to really struggle with what it meant to follow Jesus. We forget that, while they were contemporaries, Paul never actually met Jesus in person while Jesus was alive. He knew of Jesus for sure. We know that because Paul, originally Saul, tells us he was a faithful, practicing Jew who was involved in efforts to discredit Jesus and his followers early on. Then, shortly after Jesus' ascension, Saul had a personal experience of Jesus on the road to Damascus which transformed him

from an enemy of Jesus into one his most devoted and influential followers. There is no question that the Twelve, Peter and the others, knew the human Jesus much better than Paul ever did, something their stories we read in the Gospels and their own letters, make very clear. Paul, however, was key to why we are sitting here today as Christians in a Christian church because Paul was well educated and a citizen of Rome. This meant he was free to travel throughout the empire, which he did faithfully, spreading the word of the Risen Christ and starting small congregations all over the place. If it were not for Paul, it is difficult to imagine how Christianity would ever have expanded beyond the boundaries of Palestine. But it did and here we are, left to put together the pieces of how we came to be here this morning.

This text from Ephesians is a beautiful one, tackling the very question which has perplexed so many since the earliest days of the movement which we know today as Christianity. In it Paul, or more likely one of his proteges, tackles this whole question of grace – what it is, how we receive it and why it matters. It also contains some extraordinary echoes of our own contemporary life in the 20th and 21st centuries, pretty amazing for a document that’s two thousand years old.

For example, how many of you have read any or all of the Harry Potter books, or seen any or all of the movies? (*pause*) So, as you read this text from Ephesians, do you hear any echoes of Harry Potter lore in it? (*pause*) No worries if you didn’t because it’s pretty faint, but it’s definitely there, right in the first two verses: “You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following *the ruler of the power of the air*, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient.” “The ruler of the power of the air” – anything sound familiar in that phrase? To me it contains definite echoes of the descriptions of the frighteningly evil Lord Voldemort, a villain who was part human, part wizard and part

snake, who seemed to be at times everywhere, hearing everything everyone was saying, just waiting for a time to pounce on the unsuspecting Hogwarts students and their families.

This phrase from Ephesians identifying “the ruler of the power of the air” conveys that same sense of amorphous malevolence lurking all around the early followers of Jesus as they try to make their way forward in a world hostile to the beliefs which defined their identities and their very way of life. Jesus’ teachings were all about the power of love, love of God and love of the other, and as such were antithetical to the moral malaise surrounding them in the Greco-Roman culture in which they lived. This feeling is further intensified by the phrase describing this malevolent spirit as being alive and active as evidenced by its being “now at work among those who are disobedient.” Thus, we can safely conclude that this ruler of the power of the air is evil indeed, swirling everywhere around the faithful, tempting them into what the writer describes as living “in the passions of our flesh [and] following the desires of flesh and senses.”

In other words, the people of the church of Ephesus are being instructed in this letter to stop and think about how they were living their lives. The writer wanted them to see that they were slipping away from the teachings of Jesus and back into sin as they followed the desires of the flesh. This is exactly what Voldemort wanted to do in his quest to take over the wizarding world, and indeed the human world too. Voldemort wanted his followers to give in to their selfish, mean-spirited side in order to experience what was always referred to in the Harry Potter world as “the power of the dark lord.” And as the books and the movies progressed, the powerful lure of the dark lord proved more and more tempting. Ultimately, the forces of good defeat Voldemort and his minions in a bloody final battle in which many on both sides are killed and maimed. There is redemption and even resurrection of a sort as the series comes to an end. To me, the Harry Potter books, whatever they started out as, eventually became a

powerful retelling of the power of the forces of good, of love and even of God, in a tale of ultimate redemption. This is why I never understood the conservative Christian desire to condemn these books as promoting wizardry because they are obviously about so much more than that. That's why it was always clear to me that the people condemning these books had never actually read them. As is too often the case today, some people are quick to call "sin" on mundane things like books in their unceasing desire to force the rest of us into their narrow, cookie cutter view of what it means to be Christian.

This is where the whole notion of "cheap grace" comes into play. First articulated by German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1937, as the Nazis were rising to power in his beloved Germany, this whole idea of grace – what it is and what it isn't – was explored in his ground-breaking book *The Cost of Discipleship*. In this book, Bonhoeffer makes the distinction between what he calls "cheap grace" and "costly grace." He defines cheap grace as "the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."¹ In other words, cheap grace is to claim that because you have heard the Gospel preached, and acknowledged sin generally *and* that sinfulness is already forgiven due to God's boundless grace, you don't need to do anymore. As Bonhoeffer explains, "you have sinned but now everything is forgiven so you can stay as you are and enjoy the consolations of forgiveness." Put simply, you don't need to change what you're doing because God has already forgiven you for what you have done, are doing or will do.²

This, Bonhoeffer explains, is in complete opposition to what he calls "costly grace."

"Costly grace confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus. It comes

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Cost_of_Discipleship

² Ibid.

as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart. It is costly because it compels a man to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him; it is grace because Jesus says: ‘My yoke is easy and my burden light.’”³

Bonhoeffer’s argument is that “as Christianity spread, the Church became more secularized, accommodating the demands of obedience to Jesus to the requirements of society. In this way, the world was Christianized and grace became its common property.”⁴ The visible outward trappings of the church – church and Sunday School attendance and faithful observance of rituals and sacraments came to be understood as all that was needed to prove one was Christian. In other words, if you looked like a Christian to the casual observer, you were a Christian. There was no need to worry about discipleship in daily life because what you did on Sunday mornings, the cross you wore around your neck, the other people you condemned as unfaithful, was all that was necessary to prove you were Christian. The thing is, grace has no part in any of this, not when the life you live each day gives no evidence of the faith you profess.

This is exactly the point the author of Ephesians is trying to make in this beautiful text this morning. He reminds us quite directly and powerfully that our God is one who “is rich in mercy [and] out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our sins, made us alive together by Christ.” This, dear ones, is grace. Grace is a gift of God, freely given. It cannot be earned through faithful attendance at church, or through wearing cross jewelry or hurling Scripture quotes at folks we disagree with. Grace, this letter to the Ephesians makes clear, “is not our own doing; it is the gift of God.” And it is this grace, this unearned and undeserved gift of God, which defines who we are as followers of the Risen Christ. “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.” It is grace – the

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

unconditional and unearned gift of grace from God – which empowers and emboldens us to live lives transformed by the love we learn and experience through Jesus, the love Jesus exhibits to everyone without reservation or distinction. We experience the unconditional love of God because the human Jesus revealed to us what that love is truly capable of accomplishing. Because of Jesus, because of God’s unconditional love for us, we no longer need to live lives filled only with emptiness and stuff. Grace is what transforms us from beings who spend their lives chasing after the things of this world – money and success, perfect bodies living problem-free lives – what the text calls the desires of the flesh, into the beloved people of the living God. These people, God’s beloved creation, -- US – we know we are enough just as we are. We realize we are enough because God made us just as we are.

Dear ones, when we understand and accept what it means to be called and empowered by God’s grace, we dare to believe it might just be possible to change the world by who we are, in whatever ways we are able. We are free to accept this challenge from God, from Jesus, even though we have no idea what to do or how to do it. It is grace, God’s love freely given, that will make clear our way forward, one day at a time, one moment at a time, one step at a time. All we need to do is accept this gift of grace, fresh and renewed every day through our faith, and then take the next step forward into the day – with all its people and experiences and situations God has placed there. One step at a time, forward into life, God’s love and grace revealing the way. I think you can do that. I think we all can do that. But, the real question remains as always – what do you think? Amen.