

"The Safe Harbor of Grace"

Today we commemorate the 500th Anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. As 21st Century Protestants, I don't think we fully understand how radical this was. Since the time of Constantine, the official religion of the world had been Christian, which in those days meant Roman Catholic. So for 1200 years, the church and the head of state were closely entwined. There was no separation of politics and religion and this meant that the most powerful people in the world were the kings or queens and the Pope.

We also know that, over time, the church had become more and more corrupt. It had become common practice for priests to sell indulgences, or forgiveness of sins. AND on top of this, only the priest could read the Word of God. So the people in the pews were completely at the mercy of the priest's interpretation of the Scriptures. When you think about it, this should have been pretty frightening! But the people of their day really didn't know any differently.

Two things happened that radically changed the world of religion. The first was the invention of the printing press in the mid-fourteen hundreds. And the second was a German monk named Martin Luther. One day, while truly struggling with his own sin and the belief that he could never work or buy his way into Heaven, he saw a verse in Romans that I am sure he had read before, but this time he read it with new eyes. "The one who is righteous shall live by faith". And the rest, as they say, is history.

Luther began to question why the common man should not have access to the written Word of God. This of course was a huge threat to the priests. But even more threatening was his clear understanding that we are saved only by grace. Salvation is a gift from God. You and I

will always fall short of God's glory in our sins. We can never be good enough, kind enough, noble enough, devout enough to earn salvation. Never! And we can never say enough prayers or pay enough money to the church to buy our way in either! What a shift in thinking for the entire world of 1517!

But even after studying so much church history in seminary, I didn't really understand how threatening the Reformation was until I recently began reading one of Ken Follet's marvelous historical novels, A Column of Fire. It takes place in 1548 in England. In one conversation, a mother is trying to explain to her daughter why she must marry the man that the family has chosen for her instead of the one she loves. She says contemptuously of her daughter's choice, "His family are merchants and practically Protestant!" And with this line the whole impact of the Reformation became clear to me.

The bottom line is that Luther's understanding of what the grace of God means to everyman and everywoman was dangerous to those who had been in power. It meant that sin could not be held over church members' heads in order to collect money that often went into the pockets of the priests. And to speak up as Luther did was clearly a danger. But when God had revealed the truth so plainly to him, how could he remain in the danger of false teachings? Instead he chose the safe harbor of God's grace.

As I studied the passage in Romans that we just heard, I thought of the gifts that the Reformation has given us as 21st Christian, since we now have the ability and availability to understand the true meaning of God's word. My Bible states that, through Jesus Christ, we have access to God's grace. Some translations say that we are allowed to enter God's grace. But the original Greek uses a word that means the harbor where ships come for safety.

Paul's words to the church at Rome, to Martin Luther, but most of all to each of us here basically highlight all the blessings we receive through the safety of God's grace. The list includes hope, endurance, character and peace. But it is important to remember that these are gifts, given to us freely from God out of his great love for us. While Luther realized that he had done nothing to earn or deserve grace, Paul says plainly that there IS nothing we CAN DO to receive these blessings. As long as we try to depend on our own efforts, we are like boats tossed about on the waves of a stormy sea. When we reach the haven of God's grace, it is important to understand that we receive the calm seas that come when we depend on God alone. It is not about what WE can do for ourselves but about what God has done for us.

Paul tells us that the safe harbor of God's grace also holds hope on her shores. Having hope is especially helpful when we experience hardship and Paul promises that we WILL have to deal with suffering at some time in our lives. We all know that believing in Jesus does not exempt us from pain or conflict or difficulties. Yet, having hope can enable the mind to dream about what *will* be after we get to the other side of the valley.

I heard the story of a hopeful woman the other day. A man in his middle years was on a Caribbean cruise. On the first day, he noticed a woman that kept staring at him every chance she could get. While they were eating, if he was sitting on the deck or enjoying a show, every time he glanced up, she was looking his way. Finally she came over to him and said, "Please forgive me for staring at you but you look exactly like my third husband." "How many times have you been married?" asked the gentleman. She looked demurely away and then replied, "Twice." Now that is hope.

But it is not the kind of hope I am talking about. Paul says that when we have hope in the grace that God offers us, not only will we be able to endure suffering but that our suffering will

produce in us character and fortitude. So Paul is telling us that our suffering will actually make us better, more like Christ, than we were before.

And when we are wading through some valley in our life, what Paul really says in the original Greek is even more meaningful. He says that suffering is like a piece of metal that has passed through fire so that everything has been purged out that is not needed or pure. This is actually a very useful image because, when you *have* endured suffering of some kind, that is exactly what you feel like! Yet, many Christians will tell you that it is in the times of suffering that they have felt God's presence the strongest. Playwright Eugene O'Neill probably said it best when he wrote, "Man is born broken. He lives by mending. The grace of God is glue."

And friends, the hope that we CAN endure suffering and the promise that this will build character in us gives us a specific kind of peace – another gift that we receive through the safe harbor of the gift of God's grace. In fact, in another of his letters, Paul calls it the "peace that passes all understanding." We all have had times in our lives when someone has said to us, "I don't know HOW you did that" and we have thought to ourselves, "I don't know how I did it either!" In fact, I feel that way every time I preach a sermon. Each week when I begin, I find myself thinking, "What am I *doing* here?" Then God fills me with peace, reminding me that since God called me to preach in spite of who I am, that God will not leave me here alone.

But perhaps the greatest gift Paul promises us in the safe harbor of God's grace is God's love. Paul says that not only have we received this love but it has been "poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit." The images that these words bring forth are powerful to me. The first image I had was of living water literally pouring over my whole being and filling every part of me with love. And Paul truly means that we can be completely saturated with the love of our Heavenly Father.

This image is very comforting to me because, I know that sometimes in our humanness, we do not feel worthy of love and might even chose to refuse it. There was a country singer a few years ago that sang, "I was standing knee deep in the river and dying of thirst." Friends, anyone can stand knee deep in the river of God's love and die of thirst if we choose not to scoop it up and drink it! So,

by the power of the Holy Spirit, God rains that love down into our hearts in a way that we cannot resist. And it is this inner experience of God's love through the Spirit that sustains us as we go through trials and gives us the hope that we have been promised.

And thinking of God's love being poured out brings to my mind the cross. On the cross, God's love literally poured out of the wounds in Christ's hands and feet as he died so that we might live. This is the greatest picture of grace for all times. And I think that such a gift calls for a response. Friends, not only are we called to have faith that God will see us through times of suffering but we are also called use the hope and character and peace that we have received as byproducts of such a gift to share the availability of that grace with others.

The Psalm that we heard earlier understands that grace is a gift that is meant to be shared. He says, "I love the LORD because he has heard my voice and my supplication and has inclined his ear to me. THEREFORE I will offer him a thanksgiving sacrifice and call on the name of the LORD *in the presence of all the people.*" The Psalmist did not simply say, "Thanks God for getting me out of this tough spot" and then go his way. Rather he vowed to live a life that would show others who his God is and what his God has done for him, all the while knowing that what he deserved was death but what he has received is redemption and life.

But in one of my favorite verses of Scripture, the Psalmist also says: "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones." The first time I really read this, I had just started my seminary journey and could not wrap my mind around the idea that death could be precious. I am older and wiser now and having been with a good many people when they took that step from this kingdom to the next, I realize what a precious moment it can be. The end of all suffering. The beginning of true wholeness that we can only imagine. Perfect, amazing grace!

But I don't think this is all that the Psalmist means. These words remind us that every time God receives another one of his children into his arms in Heaven, God knows that his plan worked! His son did not die in vain. And another sinner has been redeemed by accepting the grace that has been offered.

But the most beautiful gift of the safe harbor of God's grace is how it changes us once we have accepted it. I read a beautiful story that shows what a gift God's grace is to us and how we can be thankful for it. A large prosperous downtown church helped start a mission church in the poorest part of the city that became known for having many converts to the faith. On the first Sunday of the New Year, the two congregations came together for worship. So when Communion was served, various thieves, homeless people and recovering addicts found themselves kneeling at the Communion rail with some of the most prominent people in the city.

The minister could not help but notice, as he passed the cup from person to person, that a former burglar knelt next to the very judge who had sentenced him to seven years in prison. Yet, by grace, the criminal had gone on to meet Christ and turn his life around.

When church was over, the judge said to the minister, "Did you notice who was kneeling beside me at Communion today?" The pastor replied, "Yes, but I didn't know that you noticed." And the judge said, "What a miracle of grace."

When the pastor agreed, the judge asked, "To whom are you referring?" The pastor said, "Why the convict of course." And the judge said, "Well I was talking about myself." And then he explained, "It did not cost that burglar much to get converted when he went to jail. He had nothing but a history of crime behind him, and when he saw Jesus as his Savior he knew there was salvation and hope and joy for him. And he knew how much he needed that help.

But look at me. I was taught from earliest infancy to live as a gentleman; that I was to say my prayers, go to church, take Communion and so on. I went through college and law school, passed the bar and eventually became a judge. Pastor, nothing but the grace of God could have caused me to admit that I was a sinner on the same level with that burglar. It took much more grace to forgive me for all my pride, to get me to admit that I was no better in the eyes of God than that convict I sent to prison."

So on this 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, I am thankful to Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox and others who had the courage to leave the safe harbor of doing church the way it had always been done and take the leap of faith that they did. Their bravery enables us all to understand for ourselves what the gift of grace really means. And it is also a wonderful reminder that everyone in this church is no better or no worse than the one we sit next to this morning. We have all sinned in our own ways. Yet, each of us is saved by God's grace alone. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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