

***“Blessed”***

***“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.”***

In an ever-so-slightly different form, that verse begins many of our worship services. They are familiar words for most of us, and as such, because they are so familiar, they become like wallpaper or white noise. We may experience them, but we really don't apprehend or comprehend them. They become invisible, and thus lose their impact on our ears and on our hearts.

So this morning I want to focus on them, in the hopes that we will become more attentive to them the next time we hear them as part of the liturgy. In the Lutheran Book of Worship, this is referred to as a greeting; but in St. Paul's Second Letter to the church at Corinth it is a final salutation. It fits both rolls ideally. As a greeting, it sets us up to receive what God wants to give us. As a farewell, it seals what God has spoken into our hearts. So let's see what this simple sentence can communicate.

***“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ . . . be with all of you.”***

That is a huge word: “grace.” In English it is used to convey a sense of style, as in *“That dancer moved across the stage with such grace, it lifted our spirits just to watch.”* It is applied to a prayer that is said before a meal (although I will never forget the first day of my freshman year in college when a sophomore sat down at the table opposite me, bowed his head and intoned, *“Rub-a-dub-dub; Thanks for the grub. Yay, God!”*) If your bank allows you a few extra days to make your mortgage payment without penalty, that is called a “grace period.”

But in theological terms, in the meaning from the Scriptures, grace means unmerited favor, undeserved love. It may well be the most important word in the theological lexicon. Everything flows from this concept of grace. Philip Yancey, in his book What's So Amazing about Grace?, calls it our *“last best word.”*

Yet, Davis Seamands writes, *“Many years ago, I was driven to the conclusion that the two major causes of most emotional problems among ... Christians are these: the failure to understand, receive, and live out God’s unconditional grace and forgiveness; and the failure to give out that unconditional love, forgiveness, and grace to other people ... We read, we hear, we believe a good theology of grace. But that’s not the way we live. The good news of the Gospel of grace has not penetrated to the level of our emotions.”*

Grace tells us everything we need to know about God and about our relationship to God. Yet St. Paul calls it ***“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ”***

Here’s where our confusion begins: we have a hard time keeping in proper tension *“one God in trinity and the Trinity in unity”* (in the words of the Athanasian Creed). *“What the Father is, the Son is, and so is the Holy Spirit.”* We could add to that *“What Father does, the Son does, and the Holy Spirit does. What the Father imparts, the Son imparts, and the Holy Spirit imparts.”*

The three distinct persons that make up the Trinity are working at a common goal, and that goal is to bring us into grace. Paul labels grace as being ***“of the Lord Jesus Christ”*** because His mission and ministry in the flesh was to enable us to receive the grace the Triune God wants us to have.

What is that grace? It is what connects us to God; it is the life-line that keeps us tied in time to eternity. It is all gift: you can’t buy it, earn it, achieve it, or merit it. It is the message that, in Christ, everything that is necessary for us to be in relationship with God has been arranged; all we need to do is to step into it.

Grace tells us that God wants that relationship with us; it is we who have moved away from it. Sin distorts our thinking and our doing because sin is a distortion of our being. In grace, God created us to be in union with Him, to find in Him our needs and wants — our core longings: love, security, understanding, purpose, significance, belonging (see them as your fingers and palm).

Because sin has distorted us, we no longer look to God for these values; we seek them elsewhere. We look for love in sexuality; we seek to belong by people-pleasing; we try for security by buying things; and on, and on. Grace is the invitation to come home to God and find in Him what we long for in the deepest recesses of our being.

We find that modeled in Jesus Christ. Jesus said: ***“Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise.”*** [John 15:9]

***“ . . . the love of God . . . be with all of you.”***

It is love that drives God to offer us grace. St. John tells us, ***“God is love.”*** [1 John 4:8] The very nature of God is love; we cannot truly penetrate the depth of that statement because we really do not operate out of love.

Now, you may say, *“Hold on, Pastor. I love. I love my spouse. I love my kids. I even love a few folks in this congregation (maybe not all of them, but a few, at least).”* That may all be true; but for us humans love is always a transactional arrangement. When we love, we consistently look for something in return: approval, encouragement, requited love. This makes our love conditional: *“I will love you IF . . .”*

God’s love is unconditional; He loves because that what God is. ***“I have loved you with an everlasting love . . .”*** God tells us [Jeremiah 31:3]. There is no end to that love. The words for love (Hebrew [ahabah]; Greek [agap-e]) mean essentially the same thing: totally other-directed love. God’s love expects nothing in return. God rejoices when His love is returned; but it is given without expectation of getting any of it back from us.

Love and grace are linked together; because this love offered without conditions, it is likewise grace. What do you need to do to get it? Nothing. What can you do once you get it, and know you’ve got it? Just say, *“Thank you.”* It really is that simple.

We keep trying to make it something complex: *“There’s gotta be*

*something I have to do.*” Even if we don’t say it, we live it out: “*I’ll read my Bible more.*” “*I’ll give more money to the church and/or charity.*” “*I’ll volunteer my free time to help the needy or the distressed.*” Those are all fine things to do; but if you do them because you think God will be more inclined to like you, you are wasting that time and energy.

St. John writes: “***Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.***” [1 John 4:7-13]

Which brings us back to St. Paul: “. . . ***the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.***”

We confess in the Nicene Creed that we believe in the *communio sanctorum*, “*the communion of saints*” I used the Latin there admittedly to show off; and to point out that this can be translated as “*the communion of holy things*” (“*communion of saints*” means “*communion of holy people*”). What’s the difference? “*Holy things produce holy people.*” [“*Sermon-ettes by preacher-ettes make Christian-ettes.*”] In other words, the Holy Spirit brings us into contact with “holy things” — Word, Sacrament, the Body of Christ, prayer — to bring us to holiness.

It’s called “sanctification.” We need to understand that this is not an event; it is a process. It does not happen at a moment in time; it happens in moments over time. It is not a steady uphill progression, either; if we could graph it, it would look like a roller-coaster.

Today we hear St. Paul encourage the Corinthians: “***Greet one another with a holy kiss.***” (Sounds dangerous in our current context.) Paul encouraged that several times in his letters; it is a tangible way to show

love and fellowship in this community of folks who are still struggling to love one another and who are still learning how to be Christ's body in their world.

The communion of the Holy Spirit is the people of God acting out the grace and love of God with one another — sometimes that's hard to do. We all would like to think of ourselves as loving and lovable; but in our more honest hours we recognize that, all too often, we fail to love and we can project an aura that rejects love from others. This is as true in the church as anywhere else — but here we have resources to help us work in a different direction. These “holy things” around which we gather are there to equip us to become more loving, and more lovely.

Paul then adds: “*All the saints greet you.*” The communion of the Holy Spirit unites us with that larger church — the *Una Sancta*, “the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church” — to which all Christians throughout all of history belong. The next time we do “The Peace” (however that may be configured) I want you to think of that not as “howdy time” but as a way to share a greeting from “*all the saints.*”

We are tied in together; even if we are not in proximity, we are bound to one another. When I am counseling someone in my office, I make it a practice to turn to some of our people who are unable to come to church (for whatever reason, but most often these are shut-ins) and ask them to intercede for me and the person I am counseling— I delight to know that I have that support of the *communio sanctorum* as I seek to bring someone into the presence of God (I find also that these members are delighted to have this ministry!).

When the Star Wars trilogy first appeared in movie theaters, it was often said that, whenever one of the characters on screen said, “*May the force be with you,*” the Lutherans in the audience would respond, “*And also with you.*” We can get into a knee-jerk reaction to these words, as any familiar words, over time, carry less impact.

So I invite to re-new these words; let them come upon you afresh each week. Don't let them wash over you; let them reach in to cleanse and restore you. Let them become for you once again the blessing they were

intended to be. ***“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.”***

Amen.