

Pastor Jon's Sermon from Sunday August 23

Text: Romans 12:1-8

“Responding to God's Grace”.

How good are you at living under the concept of God's grace? If you are like me... many days not so good. I know the idea of grace, but I don't often see it lived out in everyday life. Our world operates under the opposite of grace. If you don't pay your car payment or mortgage they will get repossessed. If you don't live up to my expectations, I will write you off. Grace on the other hand is something that is undeserved... like undeserved love. I hear people describe grace as unconditional love. Grace can also be defined as a gift or blessing.

So how good are you at receiving gifts? Do you protest when someone gives you a gift? Do you immediately feel you have to repay it? Do you feel you don't deserve it? Many of us aren't good at receiving gifts. Hence, many of us aren't good at receiving grace.

Philip Yancey wrote a book called, “What's So Amazing About Grace?” He was interviewed about the book and asked why he wrote it. He said, “As I studied Jesus' life, the notion of grace kept hitting me in the face. All his stories made the wrong person the hero: the prodigal son not the responsible older brother, Lazarus not the rich man, the good Samaritan not the Jewish rabbi. And I began to see grace as one of the great, often untapped, powers of the universe that God has asked us to set loose. Human society runs by “ungrace”, ranking people, holding them accountable, insisting on reciprocity and fairness. Grace is, by definition, unfair. That intrigued me.

If grace is so amazing, why do church people all too often operate without grace? “People think of Christians as uptight and judgmental. “We humans like someone to tell us, “If you just follow these rules and this program, you'll do the right thing and be accepted by God.” Odd, Yancey thought, that grace has come to convey the opposite of God's intent as given to us in Jesus Christ.”

Finally, Yancey said about grace, “It *elevates* the one you are showing grace toward. God's grace toward us puts us on a whole new level:

God now judges us as if we had never sinned, through the filter of his Son Jesus.”

The word “Grace” in the original Greek language of the New Testament is the word Charis. It literally means gift, mercy, kindness, or goodwill. Coincidentally, the word “gift” in the Greek language is “Charism”. By grace, God gifts each of us differently. Someone who you think is a very gifted speaker has Charisma. I would argue that Our Savior’s Lutheran Church in Neenah is a charismatic church... because we have an abundance of spiritual gifts. The gifts we have are an expression of God’s divine grace... each is given gifts according to the grace given us. So what do we do with the grace we have been given by God in Jesus Christ? We respond with thanksgiving and action. We joyfully serve using the gifts God gave us.

This is what our Romans lesson is about today. Romans 12 deals with question, “So now what?” Now that we know what God has done for us in Jesus Christ on the cross and in the resurrection (Romans 3-11) how do we live the Christian life?

Paul says to you live your life sacrificially. We must pour ourselves out for others. We aren’t only to be concerned with me, myself, and I. We are to use bodies and spiritual gifts for the glory of God for the good of the community. Paul calls Christians to live differently than the world, which glorifies the works of the flesh. The world operates with ungrace as Yancey put it. The Roman Empire is all about power and punishment... ungrace. Paul says “Don’t be conformed to that world.” But be transformed by the renewing of your minds in the Spirit of grace. How can we let our minds be transformed by this idea of grace for ourselves and others? For one, we can be more forgiving of ourselves and others. Our world seems to operate in a tat for tat mode. Election years are some of the hardest years on families, churches, and communities, because the rhetoric is meant to divide us... and it does. Your guy or gal is the best... no ifs ands or buts... he or she is the one who will save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. Well I have news for you, we already have a savior, who according to our Gospel Jesus is the rock on which we should

build our households. By all means vote, but our trust and hope should remain in God as lived out in Jesus Christ.

Paul continues in his letter to the Romans that the grace given to us should humble us, because by definition it is a gift. You can't earn God's love or favor. For sure we deserve punishment, but God offers mercy and pardon.

Second, we are to run our communities with grace. Now there is a concept. Paul describes the church as a human body, where ever member matters. Every gift matters. You might think someone else's gifts are expendable or your gifts aren't needed or don't matter. Nothing could be further from the truth. You can't just cut off an arm or a leg like it is no big deal. Every person matters in a community of grace.

Yes, as Christians we still need the law to convict us of our sin and drive us to the foot of the cross, but know that grace is the structure we now live under in Jesus Christ. This grace is found today in Holy Communion today and the words of absolution. May we be transformed by this grace and live our daily lives accordingly. May we value each person and the diversity of gifts we bring. Amen.