

Pastor Jon's Sermon from 3/10/2024

“Grace is for all!”

The theme running through all our lessons this week is “grace”. I witnessed a moment of grace last night at my son's rowing banquet in Madison.

All of the seniors traditionally get up and give speeches to the underclassmen, coaches, parents, support staff, and all families present. Typically these speeches are about how much a person has learned and developed as a badger rower... which is meant to motivate the younger rowers to work harder. This speech was different, however. This young man's speech was about his mom... the person he looked up to the most and wanted to thank the most for his success. He lost his dad at the age of 2 to cancer. But his mom, who worked internationally while raising two kids, picked up the pieces and made things work. The most beautiful part of the speech was that he essentially apologized for all the times he and his mom butted heads, when he made life harder for her, and when he wasn't the best son. It was a true public act of repentance that would make any parent cry and any child think. The grace moment came after the banquet when I witnessed him and his mom hugging for a super long time sharing words of love in each other's ears.

Unfortunately, our choices in life come up to bite us at times... and we have to face the consequences. This was the case in our first lesson when the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness. They were complaining against God and Moses about the food in the wilderness. God provided water from a rock and manna. But the Israelites weren't satisfied. They wanted meat. So, God gave them so much meat that they threw up. They were thinking life was better when they lived in slavery and had better food to eat and more certainty. God became exceedingly angry with the Israelites because they forgot what God had done for them. So, God sent poisonous snakes to bite them. And many died. The people finally came to Moses and repented. “We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us.” Moses prayed for them and God gave

Moses the task of putting a bronze poisonous snake on a pole. When people were bitten, if they looked at the pole they would be healed. Notice God didn't take away the snakes, however. People still got bit. But God gave people a way out and healing. Even in God's anger, God still was gracious. And it is ok to cry out to God and complain. Just read the psalms. But we should not forget how much God has done for us.

Oddly enough, the serpent pole was declared an idol later under King Hezekiah and was destroyed.

But Jesus picks up on this image in the Gospel of John, just before one of the most memorized verses in the Bible. John 3:16.

Jesus said, ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

First, Jesus was lifted up on a cross. And when we look at that cross we see how much God loved us... and how far God was willing to go on our behalf. God will not abandon us now.

Second, John 3:16 says God loves the whole world. Not just America or a certain group of people. God loves everyone. We are all fearfully and wonderfully made. The Greek word here is Kosmos. God loves the Kosmos. And as Christians we too should try to live out God's love for the whole world.

Third, God gave. This is gift language. This is where grace comes in. Grace is God's unconditional love. We don't deserve God's gift to the world in Jesus Christ. But God chooses to give anyway. Why is grace so hard to accept? Because in our culture, we think we have to earn it. But the good news is God's grace is sufficient for us as is.

Finally is the word, “Whoever or Whosever”. Whoever believes in Jesus shall not perish but have eternal life. Whoever includes everyone.

Black leader Mary MacLeod Bethune (1875–1955), who grew up as a young girl in the Jim Crow South... an “educator, activist, and presidential advisor,” writes:

With these words [John 3:16] the scales fell from my eyes and the light came flooding in. My sense of inferiority, my fear of handicaps, dropped away. “Whosoever,” it said. No Jew nor Gentile, no Catholic nor Protestant, no black nor white; just “whosoever.” It means that I, a humble Negro girl, had just as much chance as anybody in the sight and love of God. These words stored up a battery of faith and confidence and determination in my heart, which has not failed me to this day.¹

Whosoever includes you and me and any category or label people place on others. God so loves us... as is. And by believing or placing your trust in Jesus and his promise of eternal life, you will find life... abundant life... eternal life... both now and after we die. We don't need to be perfect. We don't need to look the best or be the best. We will fall short of God's glory daily. But just as the Israelites repented, God gave them a way to heal. When we look at the cross and believe in Jesus', we too are healed, forgiven, and given a new life.

Amen