

Ephesians 2:4-10

GRACE IN ABUNDANCE

It's no secret that Martinsville and this surrounding area usually lead the state of Virginia in having the highest unemployment rate. I have heard people say that, due to the closings of so many textile and furniture companies, Martinsville lost ten thousand jobs in a decade. That's hard to comprehend, and it's even harder to experience.

When I talk with friends around the state, they always want to know how folks are doing around here, and I tell them that it's a struggle for many of our citizens. I go on to say something like this: "While we are going through some difficult times, what impresses me is that people here don't seem to have a 'Woe is me' kind of mentality. Rather, the general impression I get is that, 'Yes, we're going through some very difficult times, but somehow, we'll manage; we'll get through it. There are better days ahead.'"

If I have heard the message correctly, then is that just wishful thinking? Is it pie-in-the-sky, make a wish and hope it comes true? I don't think so because, I believe, that behind that statement there is strong resolve. People will do whatever it takes to get by, to get through this difficult period of our economic woes. Some make the commute to other cities because that's where the jobs are. Some get by on less; they become more frugal and buy only what's necessary. Some make do with what they have; instead of buying a new car, they may purchase a used car or make repairs to their old car so that it gets farther down the road and lasts longer. People make do in a pinch.

Besides personal resolve to tough it out, I think there is something else going on although you probably won't find reference to it in the newspaper or most other publications around town. I think, I believe, there is the abiding sense that somehow, someday, God will provide. People of faith know from past experience and trust the same today and into the future that God is and will be there for us. We believe that God's grace is sufficient and even found in abundance. We may not always have all that we want, but we generally have what we need.

I don't fully understand the implications of the Dow Jones' average with its drastic fluxes up and down in the market. I'm not sure what that means today or in the future in terms of people's investments, retirement funds and pensions, and so on. But, I do know there is a heightened sense of anxiety going around. There is speculation about a recession or even another – God forbid! – Depression like back in the 1930s. I don't know what's going to happen. But, whatever comes our way, we trust that God will be there with us and for us, and that God's grace will still be in force. We may not have all that we hope for, but we will have enough and probably more than enough. The Lord God, who fed the Israelites their daily supply of manna, quail, and water in the wilderness, will meet our every need as well. In God and in God's grace, we trust.

If I were asked to sum up Reformed theology in one word, I would have to say, "It's all about Grace." Our Presbyterian perspective concerning God and God's activity in our lives, time and time again, focuses on the grace of God. We don't just sing Amazing Grace; we repeatedly emphasize it for we have experienced God's grace throughout our lives. And, by the grace of God, I mean that who we are, all that we have, and what we shall become are truly gifts from the Lord our God – gifts that are totally undeserved and unearned by us, gifts that are freely given to us by God simply because it is God's nature to love us, to give to us, and to bless us.

Take just a moment and reflect on God's grace in your lives right now. Your family members and friends are gifts from God. Daily bread and so much more are ours, thanks to God. We have food to eat, warm clothing, and a roof over our heads. We enjoy rights and freedoms that are lacking in many areas around the world. Most of us have good physical, emotional, and mental health. That next breath you draw into your lungs is a gift of grace from God. So also, the breath of God's Spirit - within us and among us that has called us and has shaped us into a community of faith, a congregation of God's own people – that too is God's gift to you and me.

God has richly blessed our lives especially through the gift of the Son, Jesus Christ, who lived, died, and rose again for us. God has done for us all what we could not do for ourselves. In Jesus Christ, God offers us the forgiveness of sins and new, abundant, and eternal life on both sides of the grave. Now, that's grace!

On this Reformation Sunday, we remember October 31st, 1517, the day that Martin Luther publicly sought to reform the Church of his day by reminding the religious authorities that we are not saved by good works or by buying our way out of hell. Rather, he had rediscovered the good news in Holy Scriptures that we are justified (made right with God) by faith and by grace alone. Our sins are forgiven, not because of what we offer to God, but rather because of what God in Christ has done for us. That's a mighty big difference, and it's all about God's grace in abundance!

Luther came to this revelation while reading the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans, and we find the same theme in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Twice in the passage, which was read earlier, the Apostle Paul stated emphatically: "By grace you have been saved." The second time, he reiterated that truth by going on to say, "And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the results of works so that no one may boast." In other words, we are redeemed from sin and death only by the faithfulness of God, Who grants us grace in abundance and faith enough to say, "Jesus Christ is Lord!"

How do we thank God, who has blessed our lives with so much grace, who has given us –not necessarily everything we ever wanted but – everything we need for this life and the next? How do we respond to all of the blessings of life the Lord our God has poured out upon us? We respond to such grace with gratitude, and our gratitude is best expressed right where we are, here in worship. We also respond by passing on and sharing God's blessings with others.

Did you notice in the Ephesians passage how the Apostle Paul, just after made the strong case that we are saved only by grace, went on to say, in the very next breath, "we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works..." We are saved by God's grace and not by good works. However, in grateful response to God for our grace-filled salvation, we do good deeds and so extend God's grace further into the world. Grace is given to us in order that it might be passed on to others, through us. Having received God's grace, we are to be gracious. Having been blessed by God, we are called to be a blessing to others.

What better place to start than right here in the church? We are here because God has called us to this place and this people. We didn't end up here by fate or chance. We are here because God called us to be sisters and brothers in Jesus Christ. Ours is a sacred calling and it's not to be treated lightly. God's grace has been given to us so that we can be gracious to each other. Let us give our selves as a blessing to each other.

But God's grace doesn't stop here. We are blessed in order to be a blessing to others, especially those in need. In the kingdom of God, privilege is always linked with responsibility, and salvation is coupled with service. One of the tenets of our Reformed faith states that "The election of the people of God (is) for service as well as for salvation." With that in mind, the Reformation Sunday emphasis around here is yoked with our Mission Fair – why? - because recipients of God's grace must also be dispensers of God's grace. That's why we concern ourselves with reaching out to the needy through organizations like the American Red Cross, the Free Dental Clinic, Grace Network, Hospice, Mental Health and a host of other fine agencies. We join together both here and with Christians elsewhere to extend God's grace on to others. We work together to share God's abundant grace to meet human needs.

I have always appreciated the truth found in this illustration. Shortly after World War II came to a close, Europe began picking up the pieces. Much of the Old Country had been ravaged by war and was in ruins. Perhaps the saddest sight of all was that of little orphaned children starving in the streets of those war-torn cities. Early one chilly morning an American soldier was making his way back to the barracks in London. As he turned the corner in his jeep, he spotted a young child with his nose pressed to the window of a pastry shop. Inside the cook was kneading dough for a fresh batch of doughnuts. The hungry boy stared in silence, watching every move. The soldier pulled his jeep over to the curb, stopped,

got out, and walked quietly over to where the little fellow was standing. Through the steamed-up window he could see the mouth-watering morsels as they were being pulled from the oven, piping hot. The boy salivated and released a slight groan as he watched the cook place them onto the glass-enclosed counter ever so carefully. The soldier's heart went out to the nameless orphan as he stood beside him. "Son, would you like some of those?" The boy was startled. "Oh, yeah... I would!" The American stepped inside and bought a dozen, put them in a bag, and walked back outside, handed them to the boy and said, "Here you are." As he turned to walk away, he felt a tug on his coat. He looked back and heard the child ask quietly: "Mister... are you God?" (Charles R. Swindoll, *Improving Your Serve*, Pp. 52-53)

We are never more like God than when we love and give to others. After all, "God so loved the world that he gave..." We don't give in order to be blessed or saved. Remember, salvation is the gift of God. Rather, we give because, created in the image of God and created in Christ Jesus for good works, we strive to respond with gratitude, love, and devotion. Having received numerous blessings from God, we share ourselves and bless the lives of others through the gifts we offer. Then, in turn, we receive God's grace in abundance yet again as we experience the deep joy and abiding peace that result from helping others, doing God's will, and being in partnership with Jesus Christ to extend his ministry further into the world.

As we have been richly blessed, let us strive to be a blessing to others. And, in the process, our lives will be blessed by the abundant grace of God all over again – to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Randall C. Stevens
First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA
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