

Third Sunday after Epiphany, Year C – January 26, 2025

“Grace—God’s Love Given in Abundance”

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ST. PAUL’S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

VERGENNES, VERMONT

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 | Psalm 19 | 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a | Luke 4:14-21

Grace is one of the most important words in our faith, but we struggle to define it. Even the poets struggle. Mary Oliver wrote, “You can have the other words--chance, luck, coincidence, serendipity. I’ll take grace. I don’t know what it is exactly, but I’ll take it.” What is grace?

Grace is central to our understanding of God, but it is hard to grasp in a clear and useful way. Let’s look at a few of the New Testament authors for clues about what grace is...and isn’t. Paul described grace as a gift in his letter to the Romans (3:24), and later wrote that the remnant of Hebrew people who had not been exiled were chosen by grace, not on the basis of works. Grace is different from works. Grace is a gift. We can’t earn it or do good works to receive it.

In his letter to the Ephesians (2:10), Paul wrote that God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive together with Jesus Christ, out of great love. Grace is a gift...a gift of love.

In a second letter to the Corinthians (12:9), Paul described a weakness, a torment, an affliction, that kept him from being elated. When Paul asked God why he had to suffer, God replied that God’s grace was sufficient for Paul “for power is made perfect in weakness...” After that, Paul boasted gladly of his weaknesses, believing that “whenever he is weak, then he was strong” with the power of Christ. Grace is a power, but not power as we usually think of it. When we admire someone for speaking truth to power, that’s worldly power. Paul didn’t have physical strength, riches, or fame. God’s power is made perfect in weakness. Grace is a gift of love. Grace transforms power so that power is made perfect in weakness.

In last week’s Gospel according to John, we learned that grace involves abundance. As in more-than-you-can-possibly-imagine.

Jesus and his disciples were at a wedding and the wine ran out. Now, of all of the wedding-day mishaps we could recall, running out of wine would be embarrassing, but it was an even bigger deal then because wine was a sign of a bountiful harvest, of joy and sweetness and

hospitality, of God's blessings. Running out of wine could have been interpreted as God's blessings being withheld.

Jesus' mother told her son to get busy and make more wine. He did as she asked, and provided more wine than the whole crowd could have consumed, not only during the three days of the wedding feast, but across many weeks. By changing those six large basins of water for purification into wine, Jesus provided almost a *thousand more bottles* of wine. And not just any wine—good wine. To John, grace is an abundance of joy, goodness, blessing, and God's presence. The wedding parable reminds us that grace gives us more than we could ever ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20). Jesus could have provided just enough wine for the wedding, but he gave beyond their expectations. Why? Because that's what grace looks like.

There are many times in our faith life when the Holy Spirit is called in to fill a person with grace. The church refers to these times sacramental, which breaks down to "holy mysteries." I shared the definition of a sacrament as "an outward and visible sign of inward and *invisible* grace." That's St. Augustine's definition. Our prayer book substitutes a word; sacraments are "outward and visible signs of inward and *spiritual* grace, because that thing that's invisible—grace—infuses our spirits with God's love.

The milestones we reach in our life in the church track with Jesus' life story. Jesus received the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove when he was baptized, and God said to him, "You are my son, in whom I'm well pleased." Baptism is when we receive God's unconditional love for each of us as God's children.

We may choose to receive God's grace again in confirmation, and reception, and reaffirmation. In these last three, the candidate has chosen to say "yes." God gives us free will, the freedom to choose yes or no. And this is an opportunity for candidates to say to their sponsors: "Yes, I know that I am beloved by you. I belong to you." Grace is not easily contained. It fills many jars.

In all of these ceremonies, and in the eucharist, we call in the Holy Spirit. Ordinary water becomes holy water in Baptism...and a wafer and wine become the body and blood of Jesus Christ. When we take communion, our spirits are renewed and strengthened by God's presence

through Jesus. We say “yes” to God at Baptism, Confirmation, and Reception, and every time we take communion. At every eucharist, we experience that moment when God said to Jesus and to us, “you are my child, in whom I’m well pleased.”

After God filled Jesus with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit led him into the wilderness, and that may happen to you as well, when you go out into the world. When you accept your authentic identity as a child of God, you will encounter the world differently. You may be tempted and tested, as Jesus was, but God’s grace will give you the strength to persevere and pass through trials.

On this day of our Annual Meeting, let’s take an inventory to see how we at St. Paul’s are choosing to receive God’s grace and spread it throughout the church and into the community. The first example that comes to mind is your generous response to this year’s pledge drive, your donations and hours of hard work in the community. God bless you for receiving God’s grace and sharing it with our church and community.

What else is in our inventory of grace, that we have in abundance and could share? What about hospitality? What if I asked you this year to invite one person for a coffee or to your home for a meal. It could be someone you just met at church...or someone you see in town who doesn’t seem to have a home. Or what about space? Many of us own homes and land, and the church has buildings and grounds. How can we use our resources to help the community? These are questions we’ll return to again and again, this year and in the years to come.

Let us pray together.

Almighty God, help us to choose “the immeasurable riches of your grace” every single day, and to remember that power is perfected in weakness. Fill our hearts with peace. You have brought us to a good place. You have blessed us greatly. We prayed to you to meet our needs, and you have met them. We have an opportunity now to share our abundance with each other and our community. As we look to the future and do new and exciting things, help us to trust not only that you will continue to provide, but also in who you are, the source of all grace. In Jesus name, we pray.