

# TRANSFORMED BY GRACE



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Fifth Sunday after Easter

Acts 4: 32-35

<sup>32</sup> Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. <sup>33</sup> With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. <sup>34</sup> There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. <sup>35</sup> They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

## **The word of God, thanks be to God.**

Today we are taking a look at grace; and no I am not speaking of a particular person named Grace but rather the grace that God gives to us freely and unmerited because of God's love for us.

The grace of God is not always something we think about or can fully comprehend even though through scripture, such as today, we learn that God's grace gives us the ability to believe, grants us our life in God but also ***transforms us***. As God's grace works in us we see meaning and purpose for our lives, we lean into stewardship and open ourselves to new revelations that God would have us to learn.

What I cannot and will not do is define for you how the grace of God specifically should look in your life, but scripture will. Scripture talks of the many ways that God's grace manifests itself. God's grace manifests itself in our ability to love, to work for justice, to practice mercy, to love God that opens us to loving our neighbor, in our ability to exercise forgiveness, and to experience *metanoia* defined as seeking every day to walk as God would want us to. Our scripture for today gives us an instance where the early believers were transformed by God's abundant grace – grace with no limits –

where we begin to think about others and their needs beyond our own needs.

The Apostle Paul was transformed by God's grace and he knew it. Paul knew that he became who he was by the grace of God. 1 Corinthians 15:10 Paul writes, "by the grace of God I am what I am, and God's grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me." Paul knew that anything he accomplished was God's grace working in his life. Paul also knew that God's grace was sufficient or enough (2 Corinthians 12:9).

The disciple John spoke of God's grace as coming from God (1 John 4:10), "in this is love, not that we loved God, but that God loved us" and reminded us that we belong to God (John 10:27) "my sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me . . . and they shall never perish, and no one can snatch them out of my hand." What the disciple John experienced through God and shared were words of security and safety, not words of danger or harm.

As Presbyterians, what do we believe about God's grace? Presbyterians follow scripture. While we get some of our doctrines based on what a few people read and understood about scripture 500 years ago, as Presbyterians, we remain open to be transformed by what God continues to say. What I love about being Presbyterian is that even our Book of Order seeks to inform us about how we don't remain dormant or locked into one idea in our beliefs. In F2.02 the Book of Order reads: "*Yet the church, in obedience to Jesus Christ, is open to the reform of its standards of doctrine as well as of governance. The church affirms Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei, that is, "The church reformed, always to be reformed according to the Word of God in the power of the Spirit."* In other words, we are always open to be transformed by the newness of what God's Spirit may be doing or revealing to us today as we continue to live in obedience to Jesus Christ knowing that we belong to God.

Part of our doctrine stresses that we receive the "grace of adoption" and "enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God" (Westminster Confession 6.074). We believe that we not only belong to God, but we can approach God as children approach their parents. Scripture continues to teach us that God has compassion for us, protects us, provides for us and we are never forsaken, marked with a seal for the day of redemption. God's grace informs our doctrines of election and predestination knowing that everything begins with God's initiative all from God's divine love and God's divine mercy for each one of us.

I know, terms like 'election' and 'predestination' are frequently misunderstood and taken to mean that we are privileged above others, when indeed we all, every person is already privileged to be a child of God. The Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 12:13, "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink."

The Reverend Dr. David Anderson wrote a book entitled, Gracism in which he believes that all churches should seek to reflect the diversity of God. His book speaks of being transformed by God's grace makes us more inclusive. Dr. Anderson re-wrote the writings of the Apostle Paul in the scripture verses that follow 1 Corinthians 12:13 by saying it in this way:

*"Now the body is not made up of one culture but of many. If the blacks should say to the whites, "Because I am not white, I do not belong to the body, " it would not make it true. The blacks would still be a part of the body whether they vote for the same candidates or not. And if the whites should say, "Because I am not black, I do not belong to the body," it would not make it true. The whites would still be a part of the body whether they clapped their hands and shouted loudly in church or not. It doesn't mean that they are not filled with the Spirit. If the whole body were tightly structured, where would be the sense of spontaneity be? If the whole body were spontaneous, where would the sense of order be? As it is, there are many parts and many cultures, but one body."*

*Anderson goes on to say that Cuban churches cannot say to Puerto Rican or Mexican churches, "I don't need you!" Nor can urban churches say to city churches, "I don't need you!" If Palestinian Christians suffer, we all suffer, and if South African Christians are freed from apartheid, we all rejoice as we all are the body of Christ."*

For Rev. Dr. David Anderson, this way of writing Paul's letter to the Corinthians reflects best the point that he makes in his book, Gracism, that he believes the Apostle Paul was trying to make. We all belong to God, we are the church catholic or universal and rather than to practice racism (which is unbiblical) we are to practice 'gracism' which is showing the love of God and being loving to everyone regardless of who they are, what color their skin is, or what culture they are from as this is truly what God calls us to do. How Rev. Dr. Anderson lives out this commitment is to work towards pastoring a multicultural church, with a multicultural staff.

There are other ways of seeing this transformative grace as inclusive. Theologian Karl Barth was ways more inclusive in thinking about the grace of

God than we give him credit for. For Barth, Jesus Christ is the object of predestination, and humanity is elected in him. Thus, the grace of God as the sole cause of salvation is preserved at the same time that the universality of this election removes the greatest obstacle to the doctrine: its discriminatory distinction of the elect and non-elect. So often we want to make those distinctions for God and when we do, we make ourselves the judge rather than entrusting this to God.

After this sermon, Ellen will read our statement of faith from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Helvetic Confession written in 1562 by Heinrich Bullinger, meant for his own use as an abiding testimony of the faith in which he had lived and in which he wished to die. You will hear him entrusting all knowing that in what we can understand of God's grace we can have a good hope for all.

One more. There is a book that I appreciate by co-authors Philip Gulley and James Mulholland entitled, If Grace Is True. What you need to know is that these pastors became convinced that God's grace saves every person. And yes, we are speaking of universal salvation which I am not promoting but their writing gives this pastor great pause and much to always consider. By writing book, both pastors faced censure and put their pastoral calls in jeopardy, however, they became convinced by their own study of scripture that the gracious power of God does not end at the grave where some are redeemed and others are not. They write, "death does not have the final word, the judge does." They make the case throughout the book that the judge we will all face isn't a hanging judge but rather a judge, who in their words is our father. They write that "God's love will influence God's judgment". They write that "while God may express his disappointment and may even punish, God's final word will be a redeeming word of grace".

Now is that the norm of which all Presbyterian pastors preach and teach – it isn't. But this pastor believes that we have much to learn about grace that is God's unmerited favor and then how we are to express that same unmerited love and favor to others.

It continues to be a challenge both to try to comprehend it and even more challenging to practice the grace we have received towards others.

In a few minutes, I will take you to God's table. Likewise, this table of communion represents a gracious action given by Jesus Christ to nourish our Christian faith and receive the benefits of Christ's death on our behalf. The actions of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit are made real and effective for us and God conveys the good news of the gospel to us through our senses.

This morning I have sought to give you just a few things to reflect and meditate on regarding how we are transformed by God's grace. I am sure that you have your own stories of how the experience of God's grace has been transformative in your life but my prayer is that today, each one of us will have an enlarged vision of the power of God's grace.

Let us pray,

Grace, grace, God's grace, grace that will pardon and cleanse within. Grace, grace, God's grace, grace that is greater than all our sin. Holy One, help us this day as we travel to your table to have our own understanding of Your grace experienced deep in our hearts. Then help us to remember to be less judgmental and more inclusive as we practice our own version of gracism to everyone we meet. Amen