

Reformation Sunday
Text: Romans 3:19-28
Preacher: Vicar Stephanie Kershner

St. Peter's – Lafayette Hill, PA
October 25, 2009

“Amazing Grace”

GRACE. Besides being my middle name, GRACE is probably the most important word in Protestant vocabulary.

A couple of years ago, I had to complete an essay and an interview for endorsement for ordination. A candidate for ordination has to be endorsed before they can complete their internship year. After my essay and interview was finished I was told by the pastor in charge of candidacy for the North Eastern Ohio Synod that I needed to use more Lutheran lingo in my essays and my interviews. So, to help me with that I've been brushing up on some of these words over the past couple of years. I've read about the theology of the cross, law and gospel, doctrine of the two kingdoms... GRACE is sprinkled in to each one of these theologies and many more.

But what is GRACE? If we were asked to think of another word to describe GRACE most of us would probably say “love.” But what is love? Love is a very difficult word to define these days because it can mean a variety of things and maybe has even lost some of its meaning. I use the word love to describe my feelings towards Josh, my parents, my sister. But I also use it to describe mint chocolate chip ice cream, and the tv show '30 Rock'.

The word GRACE is an important one to have in our vocabulary because it describes a special, distinct, specific love. The love of God in flesh, the love of God in Jesus Christ. And this love is defined in who Jesus is, in what Jesus does. Jesus takes GRACE, an idea, a concept that is difficult to wrap our minds around and embodies GRACE, lives GRACE, defines GRACE.

And this gift of GRACE is free! Paul tries to drive home that point in many of his letters. In today's reading from Romans he says: “since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” In Ephesians Paul says: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, but the gift of God.”

This free gift of grace is difficult for us to understand. We think we need to do something to get something in return. We think we need to earn grace in some way. Martin Luther struggled with this too. He was told by his church that he could be more pleasing to God if he became a monk, if he prayed more, if he fasted longer, if he went on a pilgrimage. And he did all of these things. But it didn't work. He never felt like he could do enough. He always felt like he was unworthy of God's love, unworthy of God's GRACE.

I want you to think of the most saintly person you know. There are people in this church whom I consider to be saintly. There are saints in every church. The person I am thinking of I do not know personally but is probably the most saintly person of the twentieth century. Mother Teresa. Mother Teresa served the poorest of poor in all parts of the world. She carried the dead bodies of the poor off of the streets of Calcutta in India. She cared for those people in the world who were unwanted, uncared for, and deserted by everyone. Mother Teresa lived a life of poverty. She lived a life of total submission to the will of God. Mother Teresa did many, many good works on this earth. But even though she was a saintly woman and even though she gave her life to serving others, Mother Teresa was not saved by her good works. She was saved by grace. And she knew this. In an interview once, when she was asked about her life's work she said: I am unworthy. I am unworthy. I am unworthy that God chose me to live with the poor. How unworthy am I that God chose to give me eternal life. I am not worthy."

The Bible is clear. All people are sinners. All people fall short of the glory of God. No one is saved by their good works. For us, knowing that Mother Teresa was saved by grace and not her infinite good works frees us. If Mother Teresa couldn't receive eternal life by her good works, then you and I can't either. We are saved by grace. We are saved because Jesus died upon that cross for each one of us. We are saved because of that powerful act of love.

When I was reading in preparation for my sermon this week I came across a Presbyterian pastor who compares baseball to God's grace. I thought it was quite appropriate for today. Pastor Nancy Becker says that "baseball is a game of measuring things against impossible standards – a game of numbers. Everything is added up and written down somewhere. You can find the batting averages of all the players. You can read RBI's, and ERA's and fielding percentages. Very precise measurements. There is no way to pretend success. There is no way to hide failure. It's all right there in the book. And the interesting thing about it is that nobody does very well. The best hitters get about three hits in every ten tries."

Josh likes to say that if he only hit three notes out of every ten then he would be fired. But not baseball players. If you hit three out of ten in baseball you get paid millions of dollars.

Pastor Becker goes on to say: "Nobody is very good when measured against that absolute batting standard of 1,000. That's a tough standard to fall short of – and everyone falls short of it. But there is another side to baseball. Aside that is more like the gift of grace. Everyone gets a chance to bat, everyone gets the same number of balls and strikes, each team gets the same number of outs, and what makes baseball more fair than some other sport is that there is no clock.

Life is a lot like baseball, a mixture of hits and errors. And there is grace in that. Grace means you'll have another chance. Grace won't exactly erase your errors, but it will give you a chance to make up for them. If we are just 200 hitters, God will hit 800 to fill in the gaps."

GRACE is undeserved. GRACE is unmerited. GRACE is unearnable. GRACE is unexpected. But the gift of GRACE, a gift for every single one of us, a gift from God in Christ Jesus is unending. Amen.