

June 5, 2005
 Genesis 15:1-6, Romans 4:13-25
 Dr. Lewis Galloway

“Hoping Against Hope”

Sometimes the simplest things are the hardest of all to grasp. We use simple one syllable words every day that are easy to use but difficult to define. In the church, we use words like faith, hope and love and assume everyone understands what we mean. What do we mean when we talk about grace? *Amazing Grace* is probably the most beloved of all the hymns sung by North American Christians. Yet, the hymn doesn't explicitly define grace. The hymn tells of the life changing and sustaining power of grace.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved.

How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed.

Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come.

'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.

We have a deep sense of what grace does, but the idea of grace is not easy to understand. Who can really explain God's unmerited favor?

When the Apostle Paul searched for the best way to help the Christians in Rome understand that the promises of God rest on grace and grace alone, he went way back into the history of the people of Israel. He searched for just the right story to explain the grace of God.

Paul could have talked about the grace God showed King David, but David was a handsome lad with lots of courage and charisma. Who wouldn't have wanted to be gracious to someone who already had everything going for him? David was the kind of guy who had all eyes on him when he cut a path through a crowd. When he accomplished great things like slaying Goliath, defeating the enemies of Israel, or composing beautiful Psalms of praise to God, people could have said that he accomplished all that he did through his natural leadership skills, his quick wit or his poetic heart.

To explain the meaning of grace, Paul could have gone back to the great leader and lawgiver Moses. Through Moses, God established a covenant with the people. God brought the children of Israel from Egypt to the desert at Mt. Sinai. When God made the covenant with Israel, God told them: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." With those words as a preamble, God established the Ten Commandments that begin with our duties to God and end with our duties to our neighbors. With Moses, it is too easy to forget about God's grace displayed in God's mighty act of deliverance and to think only about keeping the law. When all you are thinking about is doing the right thing, it is easy to forget the grace that under girds the law.

Paul intentionally skipped over David; he intentionally skipped over Moses. Paul went all the way back to the beginning of the people of God when God first called the Abraham and Sarah to be the father and mother of the whole people of God. There was nothing in them that made them likely candidates for parenthood. Abraham and Sarah were old when the Lord told them that they would be the forbearers of a multitude of nations-not one nation but a great multitude of nations. Abraham was ninety-nine and Sarah was ninety. They failed the fertility test. They would have been the last candidates chosen for *Survivor*. Yet God chose them.

Just when Abraham began to despair of ever having children, God brought Abraham out to look at the stars. God said, "Abraham, count the stars. You can't do it. Your descendants shall be as many as the stars in heaven." Abraham believed God. He believed the word and gift of God. As Paul says, he believed in God "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist." With Abraham and Sarah nobody could make the mistake of thinking the covenant of grace rests on natural attributes like those of David or on obedience to the Law of Moses. "Hoping against hope," Abraham and Sarah believed God. That is, when all human hope was gone, they put their trust in God and God did not disappoint them. They swam against the stream of human expectation and felt beneath the surface of things the powerful currents of the grace of God.

Paul proclaims that the promises of God rest on God's grace alone. Salvation comes through the hearing of faith rather than the doing of the works of the law. Like Abraham and Sarah we receive this grace of God through faith alone. Abraham and Sarah believed God and it was "reckoned to them as righteousness." We are their spiritual children. Grace is not something we earn through our merit, talent, good looks or favor. God's grace is not what we earn through keeping the law perfectly. Grace is a gift that we receive in faith. Grace is not a substance you can collect in a jar. Grace is a relationship with God. God has established this loving and gracious relationship with us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Being in a right relationship with God is simply a matter of trusting God's unmerited love and favor. Faith is "counted as righteousness" because it is through faith that we come to experience God's astonishing love for each one of us.

Why, then, is it so hard for us to accept God's grace? Sometimes the simplest things are the hardest to understand! I remember a man in one congregation we served who had been a faithful Christian all of his life. He was in poor health. More difficult than his health was his troubled spirit. He could not accept the fact that God forgave him and loved him. He knew he was dying and he did not feel at peace. With anguished cries, he kept telling me that he wasn't good enough to go to heaven. He didn't feel worthy of God's love. That is precisely the point: we are unworthy of God's grace. This is why our salvation comes through grace and not through merit. His spiritual pain became the point of contact with God's grace. It was Paul Tillich's definition of grace that helped him come to peace. Tillich said that grace is accepting yourself as one who is accepted. Bit by bit, he began to see that God loved him and had forgiven

him. Now he could forgive himself and accept himself as a beloved child of God. This is the righteousness of faith.

You and I are not worthy of God's grace. We look around and think we are worse than some and better than others. God is not interested in keeping score. God does not measure our lives by a human yardstick. No one is worthy. As Abraham and Sarah learned it was not their human worth or their capacity to bear children that made them parents of a multitude of nations, it was God's grace—God's grace alone.

God's grace is all around us. It is within us and among us. Yet, we do not see it and when we do we are often afraid to take it. Once Jesus taught that unless we turn and become like children we will never enter the kingdom of heaven. I have often wondered what he meant. After watching children receive gifts, I think I better understand his words. When a child is given a gift she doesn't hem or haw, get embarrassed, be coy or say, "awe shucks, you shouldn't have" or "I'm not worthy of this gift." With great directness, anticipation and excitement, she simply reaches out her hand and takes the gift as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Receiving grace is like that. You simply reach out and take it trusting that the promises of God which sound too good to be true are indeed, as Frederick Buechner has said, are "too good not to be true."

Here we are, "hoping against hope," that the promises of God are true. I suspect that most of us have tried to live on the basis of our own wits and talents. We may even have tried to prove our worth by being perfect or to build our self-esteem on our own accomplishments. Sooner or later, we discover that human skill, good fortune and hard work are not enough. We are not as good as we think we are. We are not as strong as we pretend to be. What some folks call "luck" doesn't last forever. Sooner or later we brush our heads against the limits of life or run head first into a wall we did not see. Sometimes when all human hope is gone, we may come face to face with the grace of God. Hoping against hope, we discover that the gracious promises of God are true. God has prepared a future for each one of us that is more wonderful than we can imagine and greater than we could accomplish on our own.

People who live by grace are people who hope in a world that God alone can create. They see the world as a place where forgiveness sets us free from repeating the past, where hospitality is extended to the stranger, and where generous and courageous people find solutions to seemingly unsolvable problems. A church that lives by grace laughs at its own quirks and shortcomings, shares its resources with the world and reaches out to others with the same divine grace that sustains it. A grace filled church believes that "with God nothing is impossible." Secure in the love of God, a grace filled church is not easily shaken by controversy or afraid to try new forms of service.

Today we break ground on our new building; may it be for us a new beginning in mission and ministry. Like Abraham and Sarah, by the power of God's grace, we are setting out on a new venture of faith. The challenge before us will be how we use this space as a platform for mission—to welcome others who are seeking God's amazing

grace, to nurture children and youth in the faith, to deepen spiritual fellowship, and to create ways of reaching out in the power of God's grace to a community and world in need.

Grace is a simple word that defines our life and fills us with hope.