

INI - SDG

2nd Lenten Mid-Week Service
February 24, 2010
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church
Hecla, SD

Lenten Theme - "THE PULPIT OF THE CROSS"
- A Sermon on Grace

Text: Luke 23:39-43

Dear fellow criminals condemned on account of sin, but saved by grace through faith that is in Christ Jesus, grace and peace to you in His name.

What exactly is grace? We use it a lot in church and read of it quite a bit in the New Testament. The simple definition we've learned is "undeserved love." A more thorough, Scriptural definition might be, "God's undeserved love for sinners." Now, we may know what the word means, but how often do we really stop to consider how grand and glorious this undeserved love is? Can you think of any examples in the Bible of "undeserved love?" Maybe a good one would be the parable of the prodigal son. Jesus told the story of a young man who got his inheritance from his father before his father died and squandered it all. Then when he had nothing left, he came crawling back to his father asking nothing from him but to be his servant. The son felt that he no longer deserved to be called a son for the selfish things he had done. Do you think that son "deserved" to be loved and taken back by his father? Not at all. Yet what did the father do? He welcomed him back with open arms and had a feast in his honor. That would be an example of grace. It was that father's undeserved love toward his rebellious son.

Tonight as we journey in spirit to the hill shaped like a skull, just outside the city walls of Jerusalem, we hear Jesus delivering an amazing sermon on grace from the pulpit of the cross. Let us give our attention to the Word of God as found in Luke 23:39-43,

Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, "If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us." But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

This is God's Word. Amen.

On that Good Friday, there were three men who had the rather unique knowledge of knowing that this day would be their last day on the earth. We learn from the Gospel accounts that there were two robbers crucified with Jesus, thus fulfilling what Isaiah had written 500 years earlier, "***He was numbered with transgressors.***" (Is 53:12) These were two men who had been tried for crimes of robbing and were found guilty. The nature of their crimes were so heinous that they were punished to death by crucifixion.

One of the criminals used his remaining strength to join the crowds in mocking the Man in the middle. He did not let the horrible pain of crucifixion stop him from blaspheming Jesus. ***“If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us,”*** he jeered. The Greek here is even more emphatic - ***“You are the Christ, aren’t You? Save Yourself and us!”*** In other words, prove it. Show everyone and us too that you are the Christ by saving Yourself from this horrible death - and while You’re at it save us from the same!

The condemned robber on the other side of Jesus acts quite differently, doesn’t He. He rebukes the blasphemer and says, ***“Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation?”*** Though this horrible punishment of death wasn’t enough to humble you, but your fear of God should! Rather than wasting your energy making fun of Jesus, you should be getting your spiritual house in order, because you are about to meet you Maker. Or don’t you even fear him? The end of his life and his eternal judgment were hours away and here he was blaspheming a Man who was receiving the same punishment as he was.

Notice what else this second criminal says, ***“And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.”*** Here in the midst of the anguish of his crucifixion this man was openly confessing his sin! He was confessing that he deserved to die for what he had done. He was getting just what he deserved. But not Jesus. Jesus did not deserve this at all. Jesus did nothing deserving death.

Then what this condemned robber says next is truly remarkable. ***“Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.”*** There on a cross, of all places and of all times, this crucified criminal was brought to faith in Jesus in the last moments of his life. He believed Jesus was an innocent man. He believed Jesus was his Lord. And he believed Jesus was a King with a kingdom.

Just think of what this criminal was saying! When we think of Jesus as a King with a kingdom, we think of a stately but kind looking Jesus, with a golden scepter, crown, and wearing a royal robe. We think of King Jesus in all His glory sitting on His throne at the right hand of God the Father almighty. But that is NOT what this criminal was looking at. With his eyes he saw a Man bloodied and bruised. His crown was not made of costly jewels but of thorn branches woven together and driven into His skull. His throne was not golden but a rugged cross to which He was nailed. Angels were not singing His praises, but the powerful and influential were mocking Him as He passed by.

Despite everything the thief on the cross saw with his eyes he still called Jesus, “Lord” and saw Him as a King with a kingdom. What could possibly cause such words to flow from the mouth of this thief, but the work of the Holy Spirit Himself. For, Paul writes to the Corinthians, ***“No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.”*** (1 Cor 12:3) Even here, even at this scene of brutality, death, and pain, even in this thief’s dying moments, even at this place and at this time the Holy Spirit was at work bringing him to faith in Jesus.

“Remember me,” is his dying plea to his Lord and King Jesus. He demanded nothing from Him. He knew he was a sinner and as such deserved nothing from the most holy God. He was being justly punished for what he had done. He simply called upon Jesus in His mercy and grace to call him to mind. ***“Remember me,”*** he said.

Just as remarkable as the Holy Spirit’s work in the heart of this dying man, even more remarkable is the response of Jesus. Herein we find the second sermon delivered from the Pulpit of the Cross. ***“Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.”*** What blessed

words fall from the lips of Jesus on this most dark and dreadful day! Amen - yea, yea, so shall it be - that today, you, thief on the cross - yes, you will be with me this very day in Paradise, the very dwelling place of almighty God Himself. For this thief this would indeed be a Good Friday!

What Jesus was preaching from the pulpit of the cross is nothing more than pure, blessed grace. There was absolutely nothing this thief had done to deserve going to Paradise. Much rather, the thief already admitted that he was a criminal worthy of punishment. He broken the Fourth Commandment by rebelling against the laws of the government, he had broken the Tenth Commandment by coveting the possessions of his neighbor, and he had broken the Seventh Commandment by stealing. But above all else, in breaking these commandments he had broken the First Commandment by loving something more than he loved God. By his actions he had shown himself to be an enemy of God. Certainly Paradise is not a place this man deserves to be.

But this is exactly what grace is! It is God's undeserved love for sinners, just like this repentant thief. For **"where sin abounded, grace abounded much more."** (Rom 5:20) This man's sin certainly did abound, but the undeserved love of God abounded all the more. Jesus assured him that this very day the two of them would be together in the Paradise of God. This man confessed his sins, confessed his faith in Jesus, and looked to Him for forgiveness. And as God promises, **"Whoever believes in Him (Jesus) shall not perish, but have everlasting life."** (Jn 3:16)

Just think of how that day had begun and ended for this thief. It began by being man-handled by Roman soldiers and dragged to Calvary to receive the death penalty for his crimes. So many fears and terrors must have clouded his heart and mind. The fear of pain, the fear of death, and the fear of falling into the hands of an angry God. But here at the place of his execution he found not terror, but the comfort and grace of the Gospel. This Friday would end by him closing his eyes to this world and his soul ascending to the blessedness of the Paradise of God. He would truly thank God for this Friday!

Jesus is also preaching to each one of us about grace from the pulpit of the cross, isn't He? Which one of can demand that Christ save us, as the first thief did? Which one of us thinks we deserve to go to heaven? Do not fool yourself. Our sinful pride likes to think that we are not *THAT* bad of a sinner. We think there are worse sinners out there than us. After all WE left the comfort of our warm homes on this frigid Wednesday night and went to church. Our sinful pride likes to think that we deserve SOMETHING from God for all we've done.

But what do we really deserve? Do we deserve anything better than the second thief deserved? That is, being punishment for the transgressions we have committed. We know what God's law is and we know what it means for us. We've memorized each of the commandments and we've even worked with our children and grandchildren on them. We've taught what they means. And yet how many ways have we failed to keep them, just today? Did you grumble either out-loud or in your head that you had to go to church tonight? Is there somewhere else that you would rather be? Have you laid your eyes on something that belong to your neighbor and like a gambler coveted what he had and wanted it for yourself? Have you loved the Lord your God with everything you've got? Have you loved Him with your whole heart? Have you loved Him with all of your strength? Have you loved Him with all of your soul? Have you given your all to Him who gave you everything? We deserve to die and be condemned as well. All we can do is confess our unworthiness and go to the cross of Christ and plead that He would remember us.

Praise be to Jesus for the grace which He brings us. While our sin abounds, His grace abounds all the more. God promises that WHOEVER believes in His only beloved Son as his Savior from sin, will NOT perish, but have everlasting life. We also have this promise from God and His Word, ***“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1Jn 1:9)*** To those who repent of their sin and believe on Jesus for forgiveness of sins, He assures us day-by-day saying, ***“Assuredly, I say to you, you shall be with Me in Paradise!”*** Praise be to Jesus for His boundless grace! Amen.