

“Grace and Peace”

New Testament Lesson: 1 Corinthians 11-9

First Presbyterian Church

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May 17, 2020

During our Sunday school time beginning in June, what would normally be our Summer Forum, we will be using two video studies with guided Q&A and time for sharing. The first one is by Kathy Lee Gifford titled “The Rock, the Road and the Rabbi.” During that study, Gifford will transport us via video to the Holy Land for exploration and reflection.

The second study is by New York City Pastor Jim Cymbala titled “Life Changing Prayer: Approaching the Throne of Grace.” Cymbala will help us to delve deeply into the grace of God through scripture and prayer. You can see promotional videos on both these studies by following the links in this week’s website announcements at www.fpcindep.org. They both look really great.

I mention these studies today for two reasons. One, with hopes that you will plan to login, or God willing, show up for them, when we can get back to the church. And two, to prime the pump a bit for today’s study of grace and peace as presented in the Apostle Paul’s letter to Corinthians we heard today.

Paul is writing to the church in Corinth, which was struggling to integrate their faith into their day-to-day lives. People were fighting for power, cheating on their spouses, and taking each other to court. The Lord’s Supper had become a place of the haves and the have nots – a fellowship meal where some went without while others ate lavishly and greedily. You even had so-call teachers leading people astray and relationships that were crumbling because people didn’t know how to treat each other right.

And in the midst of all this, Paul seeks to inject a little grace and peace. To do this, he sends them a letter declaring grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. But is it really that simple?

Can grace and peace bring us back from our wayward ways, smooth over and guide us through those times when we are less than Christian, free us up when we are feeling trapped, bring us back together after a fall out with our friends and loved ones, make us better people when it comes to our neighbors, colleagues, classmates and even the strangers we meet along the way?

The answer is yes. The grace of God can overcome all of this and bring us to a place of peace – in our homes, workplaces and classrooms; peace in our hearts through loving words and actions,

a sense of peace and assurance when it comes to what we have and what we lack, peace within our souls when it comes to God.

The thing to understand in all of this is that peace comes from grace. The Apostle Paul says, "Grace to you and peace...." It's not grace and peace to you, but rather first there is grace, and then there is peace. Why is that. Why is it Grace to you, and peace? What does the grace of the Lord give to us that leads to peace?

Well, grace gives us acceptance. To live in the grace of God is to accept others for who they are and accept yourself, as well. Now this does not mean that anything goes. If we accept ourselves for who we are we know that we still have shortfalls, just like everyone else. So another part of grace is accepting constructive criticism from others, even as we strive to help others be the best they can be.

Acceptance is a two-way street. It's OK to let people know what you see and believe about them, - good and not-so-good but then we need to let people be who they are, trust God to carry the message through for the better. Otherwise we have anything but peace. Trying to change another person and insisting on it never goes well, does it?

Think about that person in your life who just drives you crazy. You'd do anything to fix it so things are better between you. But try as you might, nothing seems to make a difference. Well, that's because often we are the last person who can actually make a difference with those who are closest to us. If you've found this to be true for someone in your life- that you can't make a difference-then the only way to get some peace around it to let it go – let go of the criticism and let God work in the situation. And the only way to do that is through prayer.

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote a prayer that is perfect for this situation. It's called the Serenity Prayer. While the Serenity Prayer has been used in recovery programs for years, it was actually written by Niebuhr in the 1930s.

God, give me grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, Courage to change the things which should be changed, and the Wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.

Living one day at a time, Enjoying one moment at a time, Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace, Taking, as Jesus did, This sinful world as it is, Not as I would have it, Trusting that You will make all things right, If I surrender to Your will, So that I may be reasonably happy in this life, And supremely happy with You forever in the next. Amen.

I encourage you to do so – use this prayer of the shorter version I’ll also send – as a pathway to discovering true and last peace, within yourself and with those around you. Of course, this prayer is not magic. It can’t just be prayed like turning a light switch. This and all prayers of any power and blessing require a commitment to honesty – self-honesty before God and others.

There is no grace, no peace, without honesty. To accept yourself for who you are and help others to accept themselves, we have to be honest with ourselves, honest about our shortcomings. If we are covering things up – hiding even from ourselves those things that lead us down the wrong path, cause us to act badly, make us feel trapped and afraid, have us drive people away or disregard the needs of others – if we don’t get straight with ourselves and our God, how can we be open and honest with anyone else. It’s always us against them.

But there is a better way. Paul looks at the church he brought together in Corinth and sees all of these negative behaviors and attitudes taking hold and he knows that this is not who they really are, not who God created them to be. No, God created them – and us – to live in peace, with grace and mercy and abundance for all. And Paul shows us how to do that.

Paul says, “... In every way you have been enriched in (Christ Jesus), in speech and knowledge of every kind – just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you – so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In other words, in Christ, you are made whole, with the ability to speak courageously and kindly, with wisdom and honesty, standing strong in your love of God and faith in Jesus, guided by the Holy Spirit, so that you may lack of nothing, but in Christ have all that you need to live – and die – in peace.

If we do not live in peace, if we do not look upon our own mortality with a sense of divine peace, it is because we have not accepted the grace of God in our lives, a grace that frees us up to be truly honest with ourselves and other, a grace that allows us to be truly accepting of ourselves and others, even as we pray and strive to continually grow to become the people God made us to be.

Accepting ourselves and others for who we are, being honest with ourselves and others about what we see and believe, and trusting in God to make us – and others – the best we can be, this is the way of peace, for you and your loved ones.

GOD GRANT ME THE
Serenity
TO ACCEPT THE THINGS
I CANNOT CHANGE:
Courage
TO CHANGE THE
THINGS I CAN:
AND *Wisdom*
TO KNOW THE DIFFERENCE.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen