

Sermon, Reformation 2019  
All Saints, Mt. Pleasant  
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Every three weeks, the mail carrier would deliver the same box to the same address. It was medium in size, but didn't weigh much at all. When he rattled it, it honestly didn't sound like anything was in there at all. Curious...but people order all sorts of curious stuff online nowadays. But then again, this package had been coming for years, every three weeks, right on the dot. And, to add to the mystery, the box was recycled. The exact same box, with its layers of stickers and packing-tape scars, would arrive time after time...until it got too beat-up, and a new one would appear.

It was a curious thing, something that stuck with the mail carrier even after he was transferred off that route and moved to the local branch. After a while of working behind the counter, he began to forget about the doorsteps and dogs of his old route, and began to recognize the patterns of his new surroundings. But one day, after a few weeks on the job in the branch, something came into the office that he hadn't seen in a while. It was that old box – carried in the hand of a middle-aged man. In his other hand, the man carried a paper bag, filled with whatever it was that had been going back and forth all these years. The postman looked at the bag and thought to himself – “This is it, I'll finally see what has been in that box all this time!” The man came up to the counter and set down the box and the bag. As he addressed the mailing label, the postman resisted the temptation to grab the bag and peer in at its contents. “Anything liquid, fragile, perishable or potentially hazardous?” he asked the man. “Nope.... Unless you count ‘bad taste’ as potentially hazardous!” The man proceeded then to open the bag and pull out twelve colorful neckties, each perfectly knotted, and loosened, as if they just been worn.

Neckties! He never would have guessed... All these years, the boxes that had come in, every three weeks, had been full of... neckties. “Yep, neckties.” the man said. “They're for my buddy. He never learned how to tie them. In college, I would tie them for him, and ever since, he's been sending me his neckties, and I tie them, and send them back. We've been going back and forth like that for years.” Month after month, year after year, the man's friend would MAIL HIM his ties, and he would mail them back, tied, and loosened, and ready to slip on. Well, they got themselves a system alright... But I think you'll agree with me that it's not a very practical one!

I'm sure there are plenty of people who live in the states that separate these two friends who could help the man tie his tie! There are surely diagrams that could be drawn, or YouTube video that could be watched to teach you how to tie a tie. Despite all that, these two friends insisted on keeping this crazy system going, year after year. It just doesn't make sense. It must be a way to keep up a relationship between old friends. A system that keeps them “tied” together (if you will), despite the best efforts of time and distance to cause them to grow apart.

This week, I've been thinking a lot about GRACE. Because that's at the root of the occasion for today's celebration - Reformation Sunday – the day we lift up the Reformation of the Church and

Martin Luther's charge leading the church away from legalism and clerical corruption and back to the Truth of God's GRACE. God's Grace – his loving MERCY to those who rely on him, his forgiveness for our sins through his Son Jesus Christ, his Spirit of wholeness which enters into our broken lives - it is a central tenet of our faith – But if you weigh it against logic, it doesn't actually make a lot of sense.

We Lutherans love to talk about GRACE, about what our God does for us through Christ freely as a gift, instead of what we have done or must do to appease him. It's traditional on Reformation Sunday to read from the third chapter of one of Martin Luther's favorite books of the Bible: Romans, which says, "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift."

It seems so simple – so fundamental to what we believe – especially if you've been hanging around the Lutheran scene for a while... ..but if you really parse this whole Grace thing out, It doesn't actually make a whole lot of sense.

Like those two old college friends, who must have spent thousands of dollars in postage costs by now, this whole Grace thing.... just doesn't...add up! Listen again to the verse from Romans: It says "SINCE all have sinned and fall short," we are justified - or made right - by Grace. Not "although," or "despite" our sin, but BECAUSE we fail to live in righteousness, that we are given the gift of the righteousness of Christ. It's in response to our shortcomings, that we are given the provision of mercy. Logically... it's all wrong. Earning forgiveness through right living – that makes a bit more sense... Gaining God's good graces in response to personal righteousness, now that seems like a reasonable proposition. But, FREE grace? Unearned righteousness? Undeserved forgiveness? That's a bit harder to wrap our minds around.

I remember a conversation I had with someone once in their hospital room – It was when I was doing my clinical pastoral education during Seminary. It was an older gentleman, who was recovering from a bout of illness and he told me he was thinking about getting baptized. He'd never been a religious man, but now, he said, as he neared the end of his life, he said he'd like to make things right with God, and accept his will, and be baptized. But, he had a hang up. There was something he was struggling with, and he needed to be sure about it, before he went to the waters. He said, all his life, he'd tried to be a good guy, and he'd seen other people just living such sinful lives. And before he got baptized, he just wanted to be assured that those people were going to get what was coming to them. He said he didn't know if he could be a part of a system where the bad have the same shot at salvation as the good. He had a major problem with Grace.

Because, let's face it, it's tough! It doesn't follow the rules of a reward-shame culture. It doesn't make sense in a quid-pro-quo world. So we talked together about God's mercy and relying on his judgment, and not our own, but when the man left the hospital, he still hadn't made up his mind, and I never did hear whether he was willing to accept grace and be baptized. If you've never been exposed to it before - unearned Grace is a challenge to comprehend. And even as we grow in our understanding of Grace, living it - even just accepting it - never stops going against the grain.

St. Paul's letter to the Romans, where we read today about the gift of grace, is one of the earliest Christian writings we have preserved in the New Testament, one of the most timely responses to the shocking news of the resurrection, and I'd argue that ever since these words were written the world has been trying to silence them. In Romans, Paul is spreading the shocking news of Grace, first hand, and as the word spreads, the world reacts. Every day, believers in Christ are called to live out this so-called "Grace-life" and every day, the powers of this world stand against it.

Every day they try and they try to convince us that we are only worth what we earn, that we're only as important as our status, our employment or our name. Every day they try to convince us that we aren't loved, we aren't valued, and that this "God" that we believe in either isn't real or doesn't care. Gracelife goes, and always has gone, against the grain. And the struggle goes all the way back to Adam and Eve – the Serpent just couldn't let them live in the garden at peace with God, but had to get under their skin and convince them that they needed to get more to live more.

Moses experienced it too. Over and over, out in the wilderness, he tried to explain to the people that God, their deliverer, would be with them forever. But they just could not wrap their minds around it. So, over and over, they demanded proof, they murmured and complained, and strayed to worship foreign idols that operated under a bit more practical paradigms. And Jesus experienced it. He came to spread the message of a loving God, who did not need his believers to look a certain way or write the biggest checks or pray with the perfect words, but instead wanted them just as they are, with all their quirks and imperfections, just wanted them to come back to him, to be in right relationship with him. But the world couldn't handle it!

The Empire was afraid what worship of this God of freedom would do to the clench of the iron fist of their divine Caesar, and the religious authorities were afraid of what that kind of freedom would do to their carefully curated social control – they could see that already prostitutes and tax collectors were being told that they too had a place at the table. And so they turned on him for teaching Grace. They arrested him and tortured him for preaching Freedom. And they crucified him, to try to silence him once and for all.

But we all know how that turned out. We know that he could not be silenced, and that in fact, God's greatest display of GRACE yet was being reserved for when the world did exactly what he knew they would do, in the end, when they crucified his Son. And so he raised him up, to give to all, through his power over death the free gift of new life.

"SINCE ALL HAVE SINNED and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by God's grace as a gift." "Righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe" "There is no distinction," Paul writes, between Jew or Greek, slave or free - between those who have believed for a long time and for those who are just learning how. No distinction between those whose sins are hidden in private and those who feel like they're on display for all to see. No distinction between those who walk in here head held high, and those who couldn't get out of bed this morning, because of their physical, mental or emotional health.

Jew or Greek, Slave or Free, sick or well, newcomer or oldtimer, head volunteer or reluctant pew-sitter, ALL have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. ALL have been justified by his grace, as a gift. This is Gracelife. This is the life into which we enter through the waters of b, and by which we all - even if we came in here today feeling more like a slave than free - have been gifted with grace and truth, beyond our deserving, beyond human logic, beyond all comprehension.

All we have to do to receive this gift is come before his presence with open hands. As Lutherans, we celebrate the freedom that we don't need a mediator to stand between us and our Lord, that we can go before him and receive directly from his hand. We don't need a heavenly postman to bring us the Grace sent from God our Father through Jesus Christ. But if we did need someone to deliver that parcel of mercy and forgiveness that arrived at our door day after day, week after week. They might get a bit curious themselves, they might be a bit perplexed about how this back-and-forth, this never-ending Grace thing works. Because it doesn't always seem to align with logic - Especially when it seems like there's a lot more giving on one side of the equation than the other. It doesn't always make a whole lot of sense... but us and for our salvation, Grace makes all the difference.