

³¹Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³²and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” ³³They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free?’”

³⁴Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. ³⁶So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

I’ve shared before my favorite scene in *The Simpsons*. The scene is from *The Simpsons* “Treehouse of Horror VII (7),” which first aired 1996. The story begins with Lisa Simpson losing a tooth. Wanting a project for her upcoming science fair, Lisa places the tooth in a petri dish with some soda to see how quickly the tooth dissolves. However, when Lisa accidentally zaps the tooth with static electricity, this science project follows a different path. The next morning Lisa looks at the petri dish under a microscope to discover tiny cave people walking out from under the tooth and building the first fire of their tiny world. “I created life!” Lisa declares. At this moment, Lisa is called downstairs to eat breakfast, and when she returns to her room and peers into the microscope once again Lisa discovers the tiny people have made a huge leap forward as a society. They now appear to be in the days of the Renaissance. The tooth has been converted into their cathedral. Magnifying even more, Lisa witnesses many tiny people gathering outside this tooth-cathedral to watch one of the tiny people lift a hammer and nail a paper to the cathedral door. At this point, Lisa steps back from her microscope in astonishment, and she boldly proclaims, “I created Lutherans!”

Of course our origins are actually traced back to October 31st, 1517, when The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther issued his 95 Theses. They were basically 95 points of academic debate against the

Church's practice at that time of selling indulgences. In summary, the act kick-started a movement that sought to reshape the western Church in that day. Luther and the other leaders in his movement did not wish to be separated from the Roman Church, just reform it. A rift did take place, though, and people are welcome to their opinions on whether that ultimately was a good or bad thing. However, one good result from it all is that western Christianity – the Catholic Church included – soon instituted changes that moved Christianity out of medieval times.

That's the history in a nutshell, but the question remains "What does being a Lutheran mean?" That question was asked by a friend of mine earlier this year, and I had to give a response. "To be clear, we don't worship Martin Luther," I said out of the starting block. "Frankly, I'm convinced I would not have enjoyed being around the guy," I said. I went on to tell my friend that Lutherans share a lot with most other Christians. What stands out in unifying Lutherans is that we cling to God's grace. We definitely don't have a monopoly on that grace, yet we are ardent in lifting up God's grace. Of course, my friend responded with the question, "What does this grace mean?" I was like, "My man, you're running me through the wringer with these questions!" My friend is Jewish and he is definitely versed in religious thinking. I was just using terminology that was unfamiliar to him, and – frankly – words like "grace" might be unfamiliar to many Christians as well.

Here's the strange thing: the Bible never defines grace in a succinct way. It mostly defines grace through stories. Grace is revealed in the stories where our loving God gives a free gift with no strings attached. I told my friend that we see grace in various stories of Jesus' life, and of course in the stories of his death and resurrection. Yet, it is not just there. We see examples of God's expressions of grace throughout the rest of scripture as well, from Genesis 1 until the end. This grace reveals that God is full of steadfast love. This grace reveals that God is active. This grace reveals that God seeks to bring out wholeness and life in this world. This grace reveals that God desires to draw close to us; to meet us where we are; to serve us and to give us hope for a better day.

Like I said, we see this starting in chapter 1 of Genesis. The grace in this chapter is most apparent, I believe, when we contrast it to other literature. When we look at the creation myths of other ancient Mesopotamian cultures, none of them say that their gods willfully created the world and called it "good." Instead, those stories tell of an accidental creation, or it is the result of divine

war, or that the gods created humans because those gods were growing weary of doing the hard work themselves. The Israelites experienced their God differently. Their experience was that their God desires to bring forth life and light. Their God revels in creating the Sun, Moon, and stars. Their God created humanity to share God's image. Everyone – not only those born into their nation – bears that image. All of that is a revolutionarily new experience of the divine. And to top it all off, when all of creation was in place, the God of Israel gazed upon it and called it “very good.” God is active in this world. Yet, more than that, God cares and wants us to appreciate the life that we've been given. That is grace... a free gift from God.

Of course, there are times that we mess up, and times that this broken world beats us down to a point that we are unable to appreciate it all. There was a woman who kept a jar of her tears in her home. This was customary for the wives to do when their husbands went off to war, so that when he returned she could show him how much he was missed. This woman kept her jar, but her husband never returned. Without a husband, she was desperate to find income to keep on living. Perhaps she needed to feed a child or two. So she resorted to selling the commodity of her body, and I imagine that those experiences lead to even more tears being added to that jar. Yet, she began to hear of an itinerant preacher who dared associate with other “sinners” like her. He would dare to tell them of God's unconditional love for them. He took notice of these people who've been cast aside like her. What she heard gave her hope for the first time in forever.

The woman took her jars – one of tears and one of oil – and she snuck into the home of a religious leader Simon who was hosting this preacher for dinner. She entered, found the man she was looking for, and she began to wash his feet with the tears she had held onto for painful years, combined with the fresh tears streaming from her face. She poured the oil, too, and she cleaned his feet with her hair. She even dared to kiss his feet. All of it was done with the desperate hope that this man would acknowledge her and recognize all that she has gone through. She was so caught up in it that she barely registered the comments being made by the host and others at the table. She did hear that label “sinner” once again being lobbed at her... surprise, surprise. The preacher began to tell a story of a creditor and two debtors. Both were forgiven all their debts, yet one had a far greater debt.

When asked, the religious leader said of course the one forgiven the greater debt would love the creditor more.

At this point, the preacher named Jesus faces the woman for the first time – scandalously turning his back to the host! – and says, “Do you see this woman, Simon? I came to your home; you provided no water for my feet, but she rained tears on my feet and dried them with her hair. You gave me no greeting, but from the time I arrived she hasn’t quit kissing my feet. You provided nothing for freshening up, but she has soothed my feet with perfume. Impressive, isn’t it? She was forgiven many, many sins, and so she is very, very grateful. If the forgiveness is minimal, the gratitude is minimal.” Then Jesus spoke to her: “I forgive your sins. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.” That is grace... a free gift from God.

My siblings in Christ, there are so many other stories of God’s grace. We find them in scripture, we find them in history, and we find them in our own lives. Stories of divine love... of unwarranted mercy... of scandalous grace. That is what centers our identity as Lutherans – not some priest with a hammer 500 years ago, not a shared national heritage, not a propensity for potlucks and coffee, and definitely not a petri dish with a tooth in it. Our identity is rooted in whose we are. We belong to God, who claims us in our baptism. Who promises to be forgiving of us, and who gives us a new identity – beloved child of God – so that we may bear God’s grace in this world.

Amen.