

Sunday March 6, 2022 Lent 1 Justified by Faith

Ephesians 2:1-10 Romans 3:21-27

“Be still and know that I am God” from Psalm 46:10 is the Introit song we will be singing throughout the season of Lent. This verse when taken within our hearts and repeated calls us to look at what is before us from different perspectives. Yes our own as individuals, possibly collectively as a gathered community in faith but also from God’s perspective. These words call us stop what we are doing and look both from above and within us. And this is the purpose of Lent- a time of self awareness, a time of acknowledging our lives for where we are and even the joy and wonder of what it means to truly say out loud and in a boisterous voices—I am His, and He is mine. God’s banner over me is really and truly love! This season of Lent calls us to get ready for that journey to the cross as we remember Jesus’ love and passion and the intentionality of what he was doing for us all, because of God’s grace.

But what is grace? It is the lurking presence of God revealed in matter—like a deer leaping across a meadow, or in the flight of an eagle, or in the presence of a fire, or even in a haze of rainbow after a summer storm. It is also in music that has touched the hearts of people for generations, or even in a child licking an ice cream cone. But it is also the revelation of God which is spiritual yet this spirit moves in the heart of people to do something profound. But how we define grace is our focus as we journey through Lent and prayerfully hopefully experience anew God’s grace as we prepare for Holy Week and hearing again the story of Christ’s passion and love.

There is a story about Fiorello LaGuardia a former mayor of New York City, after whom an airport is named, who during the worst days of the Great Depression and through World War II was adored by the citizens of that city. He was a man of the people- riding fire trucks, raiding speakeasies with police, taking orphans to baseball games, and when the newspapers were on strike he would go on the radio and read the Sunday comics for the children.

In January 1935 he went to a night court session which served the poorest region of the city. LaGuardia took over as judge for the night and presided over the cases which came before him. A woman was brought before him and charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told the mayor that her daughter’s husband had deserted her, the daughter was sick and her two grandchildren were starving. The shopkeeper from whom the bread was stolen refused to drop the charges. “It’s a bad neighbourhood. She’s got to be punished to teach other people around here.”

The mayor turned to the woman and said, "I've got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions \$10 or 10 days in jail. But as he spoke he also reached into his pocket and put it in his sombrero and said, "Here is the \$10 fine which I now remit to the court; and furthermore, I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom 50c for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. The bailiff then collected the fines. This money, \$47.50 was then given to the defendant. The newspapers reported this story the next day, and indicated that even the shopkeeper who had charged the woman had paid his fine. Along with the shopkeeper were some 70 petty criminals, people with traffic violations, and NYC police officers, each of whom had paid the fine which was given to the woman in need.

This was a moment of grace. But what is grace and why is it something we as Christians know and desire yet cannot fully understand? From Ephesians 2 we read that it is by grace we have been saved. We don't often use this saved language in our tradition but if we read this passage from the perspective of one who has never heard it before it really is amazing!

We all sin—some more than others—hence the need for prisons, police, fines, charges when behaviours have lead to something criminal. But also sin in our thoughts and go against the teachings of Jesus in what we might do. We all sin and yet what is key to our faith in God is that God still loves us/ Even when we were dead because of our trespasses/ wrongdoings. God still made us alive with Jesus- Because of Jesus and God's grace we have been saved—that is raised up and seated with him.

We have been saved through faith by grace. But it wasn't up to us to do this- or choose it or live. IT is the gift of God. Grace is God's gift to us not because we worked for it; but it was given to us freely and without reserve. And as people of the Christian faith, it is what sets us apart from other religions—grace.

In Luke 18, a rich young man comes to Jesus and asks what he must DO to inherit eternal life. He is capable of paying for anything but does not know how to get this desired eternal life that Jesus spoke about. He wants to obtain it like buying something in a grocery store or something very extravagant. He knows eternal life is worth having, but he is unsure of what it really is. He was not interested in knowing the Giver of eternal life, but just the knowledge that life could be eternal.

So what is necessary to receive salvation or the promise of eternal life? Faith. But who can receive this gift of salvation? Everyone can receive it but each one must realize that all have sinned. There is no one living who can say they are sin free. We all sin- no matter what the sins

are- we still do it- maybe not consciously but we still do. Not telling fully truths, telling stories which are not accurate, sharing the latest 'news' or even letting on one is like Mary Poppins—practically perfect in every way.

Paul wrote to the Romans “no distinction—all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. What is significant is this next line- “but because of God’s grace they are now justified.” All sinners need to be forgiven. And the people who know that they have sinned need forgiveness but this is only made possible because of God’s grace that is, His over and abundant love for us. But we must believe- in giving to us Jesus to preach teach and die for us.

To live by grace means to acknowledge our whole life story, the light side—of goodness and the dark of evil and sin. In admitting the shadow side, we learn again and again what God’s grace means in our lives. CS Lewis states, “Grace substitutes a full childlike and delighted acceptance of our need, a joy in total dependence. The good man is sorry for the sins which have increased his need. He is not entirely sorry for the fresh need they have produced. When grace takes heed something happens. We live in truth and reality.”

There is a story of a 92 year old priest who was venerated by everybody in town for his holiness and right living. He was a member of the Rotary Club and he was at every meeting on time, seated at his favourite spot in a corner of the room. One day the priest disappeared as if into thin air. They searched all over and could not find him. But a month later he was back at the Rotary Club and was sitting in his regular spot.

“Father, where have you been?” “I just served a 30 day sentence in prison”.

“But Father, you couldn’t hurt a fly, What happened?”

So the priest told the story: “I bought myself a train ticket to go into the city. I was standing on the platform waiting for the train to arrive when this stunningly beautiful girl appears on the arm of a police officer. She looked at me, turned to the officer and said, “He did it, I’m certain he’s the one who did it, “Well to tell you the truth I was so flattered I pleaded guilty and I don’t even know what it was I did!”

Grace filled living means experiencing the goodness of God throughout one’s life. Even in moments of darkness and despair- when life is uncertain; when life is misunderstood and when hope seems to wave up and down or away. And in those moments God is still there.

As we journey through this Lenten season, we will discern God’s grace for us. Through stories of hope and despair we will strive to know again that God’s grace is for all and that there

is hope even in the midst of loss, suffering and wonder. And through it all we need to keep our faith; to strengthen us when we are weak and to know in our hearts that there is a reason to believe. We are justified by faith because God loves us and will always love us.

Thanks be to God.

PRAYER:

God of love we praise you for your grace and unconditional love. Increase our faith, and enable us to truly love you and care for others whose hope is gone and whose future is uncertain.

We pray O God and offer this time to you as we walk this Lenten journey in faith. SILENCE
Amen