

“Super Faith”
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Text: 2 Corinthians 6:1-13
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As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. ²For he says, “At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.” See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! ³We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, ⁷truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

¹¹We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. ¹²There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. ¹³In return—I speak as to children—open wide your hearts also.

Who is your favorite superhero? While I recognize many of you likely don’t have one, for those of us who do, it’s an important question. Please bear with us. I was always partial to Spiderman, primarily because he was a high school kid. But Peter Parker was also kind of a nerd—which resonated with me, until he was bitten by a genetically enhanced radioactive spider who transferred spider-like superpowers to him. Then he was really cool! It could happen, right?

I also liked Batman—but then I realized he didn’t really have any super-powers. He was just in really good shape and had a bunch of cool gadgets that he could afford because his deceased parents were extremely wealthy. In her paper for our preaching group, “The Well,” my friend and colleague, Kathryn Zucker Johnston, shared a fascinating podcast from “The Fundamentalists” focused on Batman. It was a conversation between stand-up comedian, Elliot Morgan, and Irish philosopher, Peter Rollins.

Reflecting on Batman, Rollins said, “The problem with Batman as a person, not the movie, is he just hasn’t dealt with the death of his parents. He has avoided mourning... (so) he dresses up in rubber and beats up criminals and it’s a really impotent gesture. I mean he doesn’t really want to fix Gotham because...beating up a few criminals in a massive city is not going to do you any good...buying million dollar tanks to drive around Gotham is not as effective as doing an after school program or setting up a job training program with Wayne Industries...[Granted,] Batman would be really boring if the next movie was about him setting up an after school program...but here’s the thing, the Joker cannot do all of that mayhem without loads of people working for him... – some of them might be psychos – but most of them are just people who can’t get a job, they don’t have healthcare, they don’t have dental, they have kids to look after. ... Do you think they want to work for the Joker? I mean the Joker is crazy. You don’t want to work for a guy like that, he’ll kill you if you do something wrong. But that’s the only work in Gotham City.

“And then you have Wayne Industries, on Friday night (Bruce Wayne) beats up criminals, then on Monday morning he goes into Wayne Industries and makes billions of dollars and then what does he do? He spends loads of that on stupid, high-tech equipment.”

With that Elliott Morgan responds: “Well it’s not stupid high-tech equipment, it’s pretty cool high tech equipment...let’s draw the line somewhere...I love Batman...but yeah Monday through Friday he creates conditions that impoverish the community around him that creates criminals and then he turns around and beats up four criminals and calls himself a superhero.”

To which Rollins responds, “It’s almost like, imagine a society where we create the conditions for homelessness and then on a Friday night we give them food in a soup kitchen and think we’re doing good.” “I can’t imagine,” replies Morgan. “...it sounds so illogical.”¹

This really challenged my love of Batman, not to mention the efficacy of superheroes, or perhaps more troubling, the ineffective ways we respond to the broken systems that create poverty in our world. Could it be that Batman’s work to clean up Gotham is really in vain? What would happen if he took the millions spent on cool high tech equipment to create jobs programs for the unemployed? Hmm.

What does this have to do with 2 Corinthians? One of the issues in 2 Corinthians is that Paul is dealing with opponents there he refers to as “Super Apostles.” (See 2 Corinthians 10-12) They have all the characteristics respected by Greek culture. They are excellent speakers. They have the right family connections. And to top it off, they are miracle workers. The Corinthians were notorious for their proclivity to be impressed by flashiness, so they have apparently been drawn to these “super-apostles.”

For Paul, all that flashiness is about as meaningful as Batman beating up a few criminals on a Friday night. He warns the Corinthians against this kind of surface faith, faith defined by worldly standards of charisma, popularity and supposed miracles, focusing instead on faith defined by Christ-like action. “We urge you,” he writes the Corinthians, “not to accept the grace of God in vain.” What might it mean to accept the grace of God in vain?

The word, “vain,” in English has multiple meanings. According to Webster’s, it can mean, “having or showing undue or excessive pride in one’s appearance or achievements: conceited.” It can also mean, “marked by futility or ineffectualness: useless, having no real value: idle, worthless.”² The super apostles with whom Paul contends appear to be vain in the first definition’s sense; having undue pride, perhaps even conceited. Whereas Paul warns the Corinthians not to accept God’s grace in vain, meaning in futility, without value. The Greek word translated “vain” is “*kenos*,” meaning, “empty.” Perhaps for Paul, vain people—like super apostles, yield vain faith, as in worthless faith, faith without purpose or meaning.

In comparison to the flashiness of the super apostles, Paul lists the hardships he’s endured. While their ministry is defined by eloquent speech, social connections, and miracles, Paul’s resume includes afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, and hunger. From Paul’s perspective, these are the marks of those who follow the Crucified Lord. Enduring such things has brought forth a faith in Paul that conquers all the challenges presented by a world that treats them as impostors, though they are true; as unknown, though they are well known; as dying, though they know true life; as sorrowful, though they rejoice in all things; as poor and having nothing, yet

¹ *The Fundamentalists*, Elliot Morgan and Peter Rollins, “Trapped in a Sitcom” March 17, 2018, beginning at 35:38, from Kathryn Zucker Johnston’s paper for “The Well,” Charlotte, 2018.

²See: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vain>

through the eyes of faith they possess everything. What a marked contrast such a life is to one that might accept the grace of God in vain.

I wonder with the Corinthians, do we run the risk of accepting the grace of God in vain? Surely in our world it is so easy to be distracted by flashiness that reflects the way of the world and not the way of Christ. Our culture is filled with “Super apostles” who draw all kinds of followers through means that are far from holy. How might that lead to accepting the grace of God in vain?

Before answering the question, we must first consider what exactly is God’s grace? How has God given us grace? The gift of life is in, and of itself, grace from God. Every breath we take is a gift from God. Life is not a given, it is a gift of grace. The gifts and talents we’re given, and the skills we develop are further examples of God’s grace at work in our lives. Of course, we are so prone to taking this gift of life and our God given talents and using them only for self-serving purposes. Such self-centered living exemplifies the sin that distorts us all. The ultimate grace of God is found in Jesus Christ, who gave his life in love to redeem us from this sin, and to reconcile us to God and to one another, to raise us to a new way of living. This is the grace God has given us.

What might it mean to accept this grace in vain; to have this grace poured into our lives for absolutely no purpose, no meaning? What would it mean for such grace to have no real value, to be idle, useless, worthless? Rejecting such grace in our lives exemplifies emptiness, but Paul urges the Corinthians not to “accept the grace of God in vain.” The issue here is not for unbelievers, it is for believers, for those who have accepted Christ. It is an injunction not to accept Christ in vain. Paul’s talking about empty faith; faith that is ineffectual, faith that has no real value, faith that is idle and useless.

Surely faith that is centered in myself is a vain faith—in both senses of the word, “vain.” It is self-centered, and it is empty. If faith is simply about me and my salvation and my personal relationship with Jesus—what purpose does that serve? As Mark Twain once said, “Too many Christians are too heavenly minded to be any earthly good!” Such is the nature of vain faith.

At the Men’s Breakfast a couple of weeks ago, Rev. Tom Are shared with us the story of Rob Kolodjay.³ He was a passenger on the plane that Sully Sullenberger landed on the Hudson River. As Tom shared with us, “Kolodjay told reporters after he was rescued that as that plane descended in silence, he kept thinking, ‘I hope I did what I was supposed to do with my life.’” I wonder if that’s the question that would go through my head in such a moment. I think I’d just be terribly frightened and think about my family and how much I would miss them. But in that moment, Rob Kolodjay asked himself a remarkably faithful question. It’s not, “Did I get to do all I wanted to do.” He’s not wondering about his bucket list. As Tom pointed out, “the bucket list is about me.” Doing what you are supposed to assumes we are accountable to another, to the ultimate other, to God. Ultimately this is a question of faith. It assumes life has a purpose, and that purpose is defined not by our wants and desires, but by our Savior, by our Maker, by the God who in amazing grace has given us life itself.

³ This story was also shared in Tom’s sermon, “Missed it by That Much,” delivered March 26, 2017 at Village Presbyterian Church. See:

https://www.villagepres.org/uploads/3/1/1/5/31151741/03_26_17_sermon_are.pdf

So what are we supposed to do? In each of the gospels, Jesus is asked a version of this question by people like us seeking purpose in life, trying to be faithful. “How do I gain eternal life,” asks one wealthy would-be follower. “What’s the most important law,” asks a lawyer. Put another way, “What’s life all about?” You remember how our Lord responded. “Love God with all you are. Love your neighbor as yourself.” At the Men’s Breakfast, Tom reminded us that the call to love our neighbor is at the heart of what we’re supposed to do with our lives. He is absolutely right. But there’s a second piece to that, the part that comes first with Jesus—love God with all you are. That’s what we’re supposed to do.

Ultimately love is defined by self-giving, offering ourselves, offering all we are and all we have in love for God and for one another. That’s what Paul did, giving himself in love for his Lord, even if it meant hardships and beatings and imprisonments and sleepless nights. He lived out his love for God, and for the congregations he founded. We live out this love in concrete ways, doing what we’re supposed to do; giving ourselves in worship, offering our thanksgiving and praise to God, praying, singing, listening for a word from God. We do this by loving God with all our minds; studying God’s word, responding in faith to what God calls us to do. We do this by offering ourselves in love for one another; living out love by listening to one another, caring for one another, supporting one another, within the walls of this church and beyond. We live out this love in our community and in our world, not simply by serving a meal to our neighbors in need—though God knows they need a meal—but by fixing systems that create homelessness in the first place—by helping to build affordable housing, by paying living wages in our businesses, by equipping people through education to be able to get decent jobs, a task that begins with early childhood education. Finally, we live out this love by sharing what we have, by investing the money entrusted to us by God, earned through our God-given gifts and abilities, by contributing these financial resources to God’s mission in this world. This is what we’re supposed to do. This is what our church strives to do.

Love God with all we are. Love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Live out this love in tangible ways. That won’t make us “super apostles,” but Beloved, it will ensure we do not accept the grace of God in vain.