

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Sunday, June 23, 2024
10am

Text: 2 Corinthians 6:1-13

Theme: Open Your Heart: In Sorrow and in Rejoicing

[prayer]

It's good to be back with you! Last Sunday I was in Richland, WA to witness the commissioning and ordination of our newest clergy members in the Pacific Northwest Conference. This special worship service concludes our annual conference session where United Methodist clergy and lay members from across Washington and North Idaho (and even a few churches in British Columbia) gather to engage in "holy conferencing."

Holy conferencing is what John Wesley called the work of networks of Methodists gathering to discern together the will of God for their common ministry. Wesley taught that holy conference is one of the "means of grace" – one of the ways we can experience God's grace in our lives.

Initially, "grace" was not a word I would have chosen to describe the experience of annual conference. At its core, annual conference is a business meeting. We talk about doing the "business" of the conference. That business is completed through a rigid process called Robert's Rules of Order. There are reports, petitions, motions, amendments, ballots, and points of privilege. If you watch the conference livestream, parts of it will probably remind you of CSPAN.

The work of democratic decision-making is sometimes thrilling, sometimes boring, and always bewildering. Because somehow through this messy, inelegant process we manage to approximate what we call the "will of the people." And in the case of the church, we have the audacity to go a step further and call it the "will of God." That is why John Wesley called our annual decision-making process "holy" and a "means of grace." It is indeed grace that God can work in and through – even in spite of! – this clunky but holy institution we call the church.

[pause]

In his second letter to the church at Corinth, Paul urges the church “not to receive the grace of God in vain” (v. 1, CEB). The Message paraphrases Paul’s plea as “Don’t squander one bit of this marvelous life God has given you.”

The Corinthian church, like every church, was a flawed and imperfect gathering of human beings. Paul wrote this letter in response to several painful challenges he was facing with the Corinthians. Rumors were spreading about the legitimacy of his ministry, straining relationships with some members of the congregation (2 Cor 1-7). Paul was trying to raise money for the church in Jerusalem, but the Corinthians opposed supporting the collection (2 Cor 8-9) – we’ll look at that portion of the letter next week. Paul also needed to refute false teachings in the church that were leading the Corinthians astray (2 Cor 10-13).

Despite the presence of sin and discord, Paul is clear in his letter that the Corinthians have been given a marvelous gift: “God caused [Jesus] who didn’t know sin to be sin for our sake so that through him we could become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). This is the marvelous life that God gave the Corinthians – a life where they could be set free from sin and transformed in righteousness through the power of Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross.

The Greek phrase “not in vain” – *eis kenon* – can also mean “not empty.” So, another way of translating Paul’s plea to “not receive the grace of God in vain” is “Do not let your faith be empty.” Our lives should honor the marvelous gift we have received from God in Jesus. We dishonor this gift when our faith does not bear fruit – when our belief in Jesus does not change how we live our lives, and *especially* how we engage the people around us, including those we have conflict and disagreements with.

Grace is not a gift we can passively receive. We must actively choose to accept it and cultivate its transforming purpose for our lives. Remember the parable of the talents (Matt 25:14-30)? A master gives three servants each a certain sum of money. Two of the servants invest the money and make more for their master; they are rewarded handsomely for their efforts. The third servant buries the money in the ground and is punished.

It is the same with grace. Grace is a gift we can invest so that it grows and grows and bears good fruit in the world. Or grace is a gift we can squander. Whether it grows or dies depends on us. If we want to see God's grace bear fruit – fruit like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22-23) – then we must cultivate the grace we have been given.

Paul offers his own life to the Corinthians as evidence of the ways that grace can grow and transform. Paul has allowed God's grace to turn him into a person who is focused on sharing love in every way and on every occasion, even with those who do not deserve it. He does this by emptying himself of his ego and completely opening himself to the people he is ministering with. He makes himself vulnerable in the same way that Jesus made himself vulnerable – vulnerable to suffering and hardships, beatings and imprisonment. He does not endure these things so he can be a martyr. He endures these things as an expression of his vocation as God's servant – ready and willing to do whatever it takes to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Our commitment to sharing the love of God will require us to make ourselves vulnerable, too – vulnerable to suffering, to opposition, to censure and criticism – even persecution. Remember what Jesus says: “My grace is enough for you, because power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9). Our endurance of these hardships is one way we witness to the power of God's grace. This is the paradox of being a Christian. When we imitate the vulnerable love of Jesus, the Holy Spirit works through that vulnerability and transforms it into the power of God. And the power of God is purity, knowledge, patience, generosity, truthful speech, and genuine love (vv. 6-7). Let God's grace sustain you through the hard things and drive you to live differently. The world may choose to honor you or shame you, celebrate you or reject you. But through it all, your calling is to love your neighbor and your enemy alike. When you stay focused on that calling, you can be confident that you will be seen for who you truly are: A servant of God and ambassador of God's ministry of reconciliation.

This ministry of reconciliation is at the heart of Paul's teaching on the Gospel. Reconciliation is the end of hostility and the restoration of good, healthy relationships. Every Christian is called to the ministry of reconciliation in two ways. First, we are reconciled to God. Sin alienates us from God, but the blood of Jesus makes peace on our behalf with God (Rom 5:1). Jesus' righteousness is transferred

to us so that we can also be righteous in God's sight and enjoy a restored relationship with our Father in heaven.

This is the marvelous gift of salvation, the marvelous gift of grace. And this gift invites us to share the ministry of reconciliation with others. Because God has made a way for restored relationship with us, we can no longer carry animosity or grudges or resentments toward one another. When we are confronted by our enemy, the Gospel reminds us that Jesus died for that person, too. And grace compels us to behave toward that person from a place of love, not hatred.

When we seek to be reconciled to one another in Jesus, we are not denying that our relationships are messy and complicated. Reconciliation is not easy or simple. It *does not* ignore or gloss over the harm that has been done. It *does* choose to participate in Christ's sufferings for the world by choosing to open our hearts to the pain and vulnerability of speaking truth to one another about the difficulties in our relationships.

[pause]

Normally I look forward to my pilgrimage to annual conference. It's an opportunity to connect in-person with colleagues who understand the unique mixture of sorrow and joy that is pastoral ministry.

This year, though, I felt ambivalent about going. I wanted to see my friends. But I also didn't. The year was harder than I anticipated, personally and professionally. I had neglected staying in touch with some of my colleagues. I've been busy, but I also didn't want to be vulnerable with them. I didn't want to tell them the truth when they asked "How's it going?" I trust you understand and can recall times when you have avoided friends or loved ones because you just felt too tender to receive their love. It's our instinct to hide when we are hurting.

I also felt a little resentful that beloved mentors hadn't reached out and checked in over the last year. They were busy, too. They had their own hardships to endure. But still...they could have called. Even if I was afraid to talk to them, it would have been nice to hear their voice.

So, I showed up to the conference carrying all those messy feelings with me. The first day I was polite, even friendly, but I wasn't allowing myself to feel the joy of connection. I was holding on to that hurt, holding on to that resentment, keeping up the defenses around my heart.

It wasn't until worship on the first night that I let the Spirit crack me open a little. My heart softened. And rather than harden it up again as soon as the service ended, I decided to trust grace to do its work in me. The rest of the conference I let myself be vulnerable with my colleagues. We shared our sorrows; we shared our joys. We made new connections and restored old ones. And in the process we encouraged and inspired and poured new life into each other. At the end of the conference we commissioned and ordained new clergy into our covenant order, renewing our own ordination vows in the process. Despite Robert's stodgy Rules of Orders, this conference was indeed a means of grace.

[pause]

Paul says to the Corinthians, "Our hearts are wide open. There are no limits to the affection that we feel for you...[Please] open your hearts wide too" (vv. 11-13). That final plea is such a vulnerable moment for Paul. He comes to them just as he is. His life is a testimony to the grace of God working through his humanity. He loves the Corinthians, and despite the challenges they are facing, he believes it is possible for them to love him in return. Even so, he is willing to risk their rejection, just as Jesus risked the rejection of the entire world.

Grace does not require a lot. But it does require an open heart. Our world has always been risky and if you are paying even the slightest attention to the news, you will find reasons to believe it grows riskier by the day. Do not give into the temptation to believe that the way to protect yourself is by hardening your heart, avoiding the neighbor whose political bumper stickers give you heartburn, burying your head in the sand or locking yourself into an ideological echo chamber. This is receiving the grace of God in vain. Grace asks you to open your heart to your neighbor. This will not be simple or comfortable. In fact, it will probably complicate things for a while. But when we trust God's grace above all else, then we find connections we may not have otherwise enjoyed and make way for the miracle of restored and reconciled relationships.

How do we activate grace? By opening our hearts. By being vulnerable and open to the work of love. By risking the possibility of being hurt so that we can receive the possibility of knowing joy. We reach out to one another, knowing that we might be rejected, but embracing the hope of relationship. We share Jesus with each other and with our neighbors and with complete strangers. And we watch grace abound.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.