

Basics of the Faith 2: Grace
2 Corinthians 5:17-21
January 19, 2020

The New Testament is very clear about grace and faith being wedded to each other. It's what Jesus meant when he said "one must be born from above." C.S. Lewis was once asked what is distinctive about Christianity. His response: **Grace!** So what is it? What is Grace? To reduce it to its essential centre: it is God's gracious movement toward us in Christ that secures our salvation. Paul reminds us:

But God, who is rich in mercy...made us alive together with Christ...For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing: it is the gift of God-not the result of works... (Eph 2:4)

The Gospel has never been, "be good and God will love you", but always, "God loves you and died for you." In short, Christianity has always been about a personal relationship with God through Christ. It's never been about the church as an arm of society promoting civic responsibility. It's about faith in Christ, forgiveness, service, and community.

Some of you may have watched Dr Who, the famous time lord who has been on our television screens for several decades. The doctor comes from another solar system, and is the sole remaining time lord in the vast universe. He travels through time, usually with an assistant, most of whom he seems to meet in present day England. His travels take him into the past and the future and he engages in exploits which help to protect the people of their time from one danger or another. The important point is his ability to travel through time.

Imagine being able to time travel. Well a few summer's ago, on a visit to my home town, I must confess that on that Sunday morning I thought I had just slipped back in time. For there I was sitting in this church sanctuary looking around at the grey heads, none of whom I knew. The service began with a tall, well dressed man coming to the front and telling us a story about the fact that there is no such word as "coincidence" in God's lexicon. Essentially the message to me that

day was try to be a good, respectable, kind person like the Good Samaritan and God will bless you. Was I being taken back in time? Or is the same gospel of civic respectability still being preached in the Scottish Kirk today?

As a young boy I used to think that being a Christian meant conforming to the civic gospel I heard every week in church. Every Sunday husbands and wives, neatly dressed in suits and ties, frocks and wooly coats, walked purposefully toward the churches located on what seemed like every corner of town. With bells peeling amid the screeching seagulls flying overhead, this day was like none other in the week. Shops shuttered, factories closed up tight, pubs looking strangely deserted, and school playgrounds silent, this was a Scottish Sabbath, Christianity John Knox style. For a young boy like me Sunday was a day to be endured, not enjoyed. Having to wear a scratchy wool suit and act respectable was decidedly against my nature. I could be shoehorned into this Scottish Sabbath Christianity only by threats of punishment from a stern father. Christianity, I discovered, was not for me and when old enough and bold enough I would stare it down and flee its respectable precincts. After all, to be a full-blooded male, with a world full of potential happiness and fulfillment waiting to be embraced, who needed this anemic, bloodless, Christianity. That was how I felt then.

There are wonderful stories in the Gospels told by Jesus about people who discovered the Gospel to be the most precious thing ever found. You may remember the story Jesus told of the man who discovered treasure in a field. So precious is this treasure that he goes out and sells all he has in order to buy that field so the treasure can be his. Or the story of the merchant who discovered a rare pearl of great value and so he goes out and sold all he has in order to buy it. These are stories about how amazing, how simply life transforming this Gospel really is to people who find it one day.

These stories stand in marked contrast to the ways we are able to turn good news, and such excitement, into such a humdrum, boring, life-denying Christianity that I had grown up with. The institutional Church has many lovely sides, and does lots of good for people, but it also has the power to squeeze us until we fit nicely into its official version of moral and legal Christianity. For over 60 years we have

been in decline. Is it possible its partly, at least, because we were willing to replace the, life-giving gospel of Jesus for a middle-class morality? In this process Christianity is emptied of its demand for personal transformation. No longer are we sinners who need redemption, but only people who need a little help to be good. Where is grace and transformation and repentance in all of this?

What I remember most vividly about my conversion to faith in Jesus was the exciting experience of something totally new. For me it was a powerful, transforming, life-changing experience. Grace bore me on its wings to a new country filled with love and forgiveness. Grace drew me into the vitality and transformative life of the Spirit of Jesus. Grace helped me find home that had eluded me in the cavernous sanctuary where I had been baptized. Unlike Alphonse in the movie, I now knew that life had meaning and purpose.

Anthony Robinson in his book, **Transforming Congregational Culture**, describes civic faith as one that was, *the conscience of the community, the primary instrument of aid to society, and the centre of community and family life*, is no longer relevant in the post Christian culture in which we live.

So, Robinson asks, and I ask, what is the purpose of the church in this new world of religious pluralism, multi-culturalism, and post Christian social and intellectual reality? He responds that in this new social and cultural reality of 2020 our purpose is the same one that emerges from the pages of the New Testament church which was **human transformation**. The task of the church, as it has always been, is to make disciples of Jesus, or if you like, it is committed to the task of Christian formation.

People who seek out church today are not looking for a social club to hang their hat. Attachment to a church today offers few advantages in a post Christian society. Before 1960 being part of the church had advantages. In 1964 I went for an interview for a job on Bay Street in Toronto. I was led up the stairs from the banking floor to a large office with a huge desk and a very distinguished man sitting behind it. He asked me whether I drank, or smoked. And even more surprising was the question of whether I attended church or taught Sunday school. I

believe I was able to answer honestly that I did attend church. Even in 1964 these were probably illegal questions but this was a very conservative institution still living in the 1940's.

The Christian faith is at heart about grace and transformation. The point Jesus makes over and over again is that he has come to save the lost. He didn't come for the people who think they are well. In our reading today Paul says: ***So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ... (2Cor 5:17)***

Surely that is sufficient to remind us what the body of Christ, the church, ought to be about. Getting back to basics we learn from the New Testament that God's plan was to bring us back into relationship with the Father, through the Son and the Spirit. God is intent on transforming us, converting us, and sending us into society as salt and light. What ought we at West Flamboro to be doing? What ought to shape us as a community as we reflect together on where God is leading us? Do we truly believe that people need this Gospel of forgiveness and grace? Perhaps we need to renew our commitment to this story of grace and its power to transform us.

Is this your story? Has grace warmed your heart and turned your life toward God?

Amen