

## **“Total Grace”**

### **Sermon on Sunday, March 14, 2021**

**Dear church,**

Grace is our theme for today and the first thing that comes to my mind is how foreign a concept grace really is in our world. Let me give you an example if you need one. We're in the midst of college applications in our family, and maybe some of you remember that time of life. It's when all of a sudden your kids get more mail than you do. First it was Sarah who received all those invitations to colleges that I had never even heard of; later came acceptance letters, promo materials, welcoming letters and the like. This year it's Sam's turn. Someone yelling upstairs, "Sam, you got another college letter," has become a standard routine in our household.

As you know, an important part of the college application experience has to do with something we don't like to talk about: it's called tuition. Besides the question of "getting in" there is always that nasty little problem of "can we afford?" Sure, many colleges offer merit scholarships for high achieving and promising students. And they all have their financial aid systems and their own forms and requirements and a whole lot of bureaucracy of course. Thank God my wife is dealing with that stuff... Yet none of the colleges, not even Muhlenberg College, steeped in a tradition of Lutheranism and surely familiar with the central meaning of grace in our faith, not even they wrote to us: "And by the grace of God, as a Lutheran College, we are pleased to offer you free tuition. It's a gift! Enjoy!" No, we didn't get that letter, at least not yet. And we all understand why. After all, the professors and teachers, the landscapers and secretaries, the support staff and custodians, they also need to feed their families...

Therefore, the concept of grace, so important in our faith, and so much at the core of the Christian gospel, an implicit teaching in many of Jesus' parables and an explicit teaching in Paul's letters, the notion that everything spiritual is a gift, remains an alien concept in our world. I mean, ask Howie Roseman from the Eagles whether he can get a superstar receiver to play just for the grace of donning a Birds uniform. Nice try, but sorry!

No, we are used to things being offered to us only for a price, a transaction, the so-called market value. And that's where our faith comes into our lives from left field. There is nothing in our relationship with God that we can offer as a bargaining chip. What's my "market value" going to be in presence of

Almighty God? Isaiah famously said, “Lord, I am a man of unclean lips and I belong to a people of unclean lips.” (Isaiah 6) That about sums up our “market value” before God.

In today’s epistle, Paul reminds us: “It is by grace you have been saved.” And in order to grasp this most unusual concept, we usually have to un-learn a boatload of things that we were taught in order to survive. I remember for instance my dad, very well meaning and with great passion saying to me when I was growing up, “Always try to be the best!” And since he was not in any way inhibited by modern psychology like so many of us parents today, he wasn’t about to soften what he said. He wasn’t saying, “Try as hard as you can and it will be good enough. We will accept you no matter what.” That’s not what my father said. He said, “Always try to be the best.” Period. Well, I must have been a royal disappointment. Only a few times was I the very best in anything for a short time. But of course my dad loved me anyway and I believe he wanted to prepare me for the tough world out there. The world where you are not given things for free, the world where you have to earn your stripes, where the best get rewarded most of the time. And now I read the gospel according to Jesus and according to Paul and they both emphasize – grace, total grace, unearned love, unearned salvation.

How do we explain this without becoming schizophrenic, - living by merit in our work lives and living by grace in our spiritual lives? Do we have to be careful with this concept of grace? Is it a dangerous concept in the world we know? I will say this, if I told my youngest son Peter that it doesn’t matter how much work he puts in for school, his teachers love him anyway... I am not so sure that would be a great idea...

Let me try to explain how grace is important in our Lutheran faith here in this world and not only in the next. I think we all know deep inside that our most important relationships can’t be bought or bargained for. Loving someone doesn’t happen on a transactional level, it never does. And if it does, it’s not love but an arrangement. In the same way our faith is relationship oriented. Ever since the people of Israel discovered the God of the covenant thousands of years ago, it’s always been a relationship. And as in any genuinely loving relationship, transactions have no place in our relationship with God. Saint John once said, “God is love.” There is always enough love to go around. Religion may be one of the few areas in life where we must not achieve but receive. Our faith, our church is based on total grace. Amen.