

## 1.29.2023 Epiphany 4 (Ephesians 2)

There was once a poor woman who wanted to buy a bunch of grapes from the king's greenhouse for her sick child, so she took a day's wages, went to the king's gardener, and tried to purchase the grapes, but was rudely sent away. A second effort with many days' wages was met with a similar response, but on that day, it so happened that the king's daughter heard the angry words spoken by her father's gardener, along with the crying of the poor woman, and she inquired into the matter. When the woman told her story, the king's daughter said, "My good woman, you are mistaken. My father is not a merchant, but a king. His business is not to sell, but to give." The princess then plucked a fine bunch of grapes from the vine, and gently dropped them into the woman's apron, and so, the poor woman received as a free gift that which she could not earn.

We have received, as a free gift, that which we could not earn. As St. Paul wrote in our second lesson, "*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast*" (Ephesians 2:8-9). The same truth is stated in 2 Timothy, where we read that God "*has saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works, but by His own purpose and by the grace He granted us in Christ Jesus before time began*" (2 Timothy 1:9). Holy Scripture reveals the truth that human effort is not the means by which we are made right with God. If a person believes that pious acts, charitable giving, or any wonderful work (Matthew 7:22) can save us they are mistaken, because God is not a merchant, but the King. His business is not to sell, but to give, and give He has. Salvation came at an infinite cost, and if we, the finite and the fallen, will not receive it as a free gift, then we will not receive it at all.

*For by grace you have been saved through faith.* In our time together on Sunday morning, we often speak about the grace of God, but what we mean by *grace* can be difficult to express. As I searched for the best definition to share with you this morning, I came across these words by Frederick Buechner. Consider this definition of grace: "Grace is something you can never get but only be given. There's no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth. A good sleep is grace and so

are good dreams. Most tears are grace. The smell of rain is grace. Somebody loving you is grace. Loving somebody is grace. Have you ever tried to love somebody?" Buechner concludes these thoughts by stating, "There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too."

The way Buechner so vividly describes grace further reveals the truth that there is no connection between human effort and the grace we receive from God. His grace is a free gift, and by definition a "free gift" excludes merit in every form. As Buechner stated, there is "no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about," and St. Paul expressed the same truth when he wrote, "*If it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace*" (Romans 11:6). We don't deserve the taste of raspberries and cream, or earn good looks, and no person can bring about their own birth. These are all gifts that we "can never get but only be given," and every good gift is a dim reflection of the perfect gift that God has freely given through His Son: Salvation.

Now, as Buechner pointed out, the one catch we must all recognize is the truth that like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it, and the means by which we reach out to receive that which God so freely gives is a gift also, the gift of faith. *For by grace you have been saved through faith*. We've taken a moment to consider the definition of grace, now let's think of how we might define faith. In the letter to the Hebrews we read that "*faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen*" (Hebrews 11:1).

In a skeptical world, where many people view faith as an unreasonable belief in something not supported by evidence, it's important to note that the word of God speaks in very concrete terms about faith. Faith is *substance*. Faith is *evidence*. It is by faith that we recognize the *substance*, or the certain reality, of things eternal, things that exist whether the world believes they exist or not. Almighty God, Angels and Archangels, the saints who worship with us but upon another shore and in a greater light, are all not only perceived by faith, but in some mysterious way they are made present by faith, because *faith is the substance* (faith is the certain reality) *of things hoped for*, and, *faith is the evidence of things not seen*.

In the natural world we gather evidence through our physical senses. We see, hear, taste, touch, and smell, but as you know and as we profess in the Creed, Almighty God is the Maker “of all things visible and invisible,” and it is through the eyes of faith that we gather the overwhelming *evidence of things not seen*. The gift of faith leads us to pray, prayer leads us to the invisible God, and He opens the eyes of our hearts to the end that we may, in the words of St. Paul, look not “*at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal*” (2 Corinthians 4:18). The visible, natural world is passing away, but the invisible, super-natural kingdom of God is eternal, and it is by faith that we are provided with evidence of the certain reality of all that we cannot yet see.

Faith is *substance*, faith is *evidence*, and perhaps the most important aspect of faith as it relates to our conversation today is that faith is the God-given means by which we reach out to receive His gift of grace, or better yet, faith is the God-given means by which we reach out to receive Him. As is stated when a person receives Holy Communion, “Feed on Him in thy heart by faith...” Faith is not only the way we recognize the certain reality that God exists, or that we come to believe many things about Him, faith is the God-given gift by which we enter into intimate union and communion with Him. Yes, we need *substance*, we need *evidence*, but simple belief in God is not enough. St. James tells us that “*Even the demons believe - and tremble*” (James 2:19). Even the enemies of God know that He exists, and the Christ is the Savior of the World. His children must not only know of Him, or about Him, we must know Him. We must have a deep, personal relationship with the One, True God who “*at many times and in many ways*” (Hebrews 1:1), has so graciously revealed Himself to us, and who, on the Cross, revealed the infinite depth of His love for us.

*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.* The words we’ve considered this morning reveal the truth that the grace by which we are saved is something we “can never get but only be given.” Human effort is not the means by which we are made right with God. The only Way back to the Father is through the effort of the Son. The Person and

Work of Jesus Christ. His life and ministry. His passion and death. His resurrection and ascension. Our Savior Christ is the cause of our Salvation, and an important question to ask ourselves as we prepare to walk out of the church is this: Has the cause brought about an effect in you?

In this passage St. Paul writes not only about God being the cause of our Salvation (*For by grace you have been saved*), he also describes, in the next verse, the desired effect of this gracious gift, telling Christians that we are God's handiwork, "*created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them*" (Ephesians 2:10). We are God's handiwork, we are the work of His hands. From our first day to our last, "*it is He that hath made us, and not we ourselves*" (Psalm 100:3), and the desired effect of *His salvific work* is immeasurably more than to save us from hell and lead us to heaven. The desired effect of Salvation is to make us *a new creation in Christ* (2 Corinthians 5:17), a people *created in Christ Jesus for good works*, a people *conformed to the image of His Son* (Romans 8:29), a people made *holy*, because He is *holy* (1 Peter 1:15-16).

*"The old has passed away; behold, the new has come"* (2 Corinthians 5:17), for we have received, as a free gift, that which we could not earn, and the effect of this gracious gift of infinite love is meant to be shared with the world through *good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them*. May we, *by the grace He granted us in Christ Jesus before time began*, reach out in faith, to receive the gift of God, and to accomplish the good work of sharing this priceless gift with the world God gave the life of His Son to save.