

## “Grace Given; Grace Received”

**Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35**

*Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost; September 13, 2020*

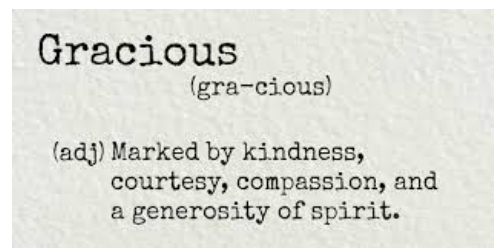
“What must I DO to inherit the life of the age to come?” a rich young ruler asked Jesus once upon a time (Luke 18:18). Notice the “DO” — not “What must I BE to inherit the life of the age to come?” but “What must I DO?” It’s odd that we modern Christians believe and trust in the virtues of doing something over being something.



The Jesus answer to “What must I do?” to get this gift is... Well, basically nothing. “The life of the age to come” is also referred to in other Bible translations as “eternal life” and it’s not something you somehow earn. Eternal life is something you receive as a free gift of grace. To be “saved” means that grace, not guilt or shame or merit, has the deepest place at the core of your life. Salvation inhabits the heart of your being, enabling you to break free from your bondage to sin and take your part in God’s story of redemption.

But God doesn't just give you grace to get you started. God gives you grace to keep you going. God doesn't require you to put your house completely in order before Jesus enters. When Jesus comes into your house, he will help you clean it up. Not just some people stumble from grace, rather, all people will stumble from grace sometime and another. But God's grace is totally sufficient to pick you back up again and keep you going. I repeat: Grace is there not just to get you started. Grace is there it keep you going.

Living in a state of grace means a life attitude of graciousness. "It was all free when you got it; make sure it's free when you give it," Jesus told his disciples (Matthew 10:8). We who have freely received from



God are to pay it forward — freely give and forgive. That's called being "gracious," or showing "grace," or acting graceful, or a life of graciousness.

Graciousness is humbly receiving someone else's gift to you. It sounds rather simple. So why is it still one of the hardest lessons we

must learn, re-learn, and re-learn, et cetera, et cetera throughout our lives?

One of the first ways children learn about graciousness is by asking with a “please,” and responding with a “thank you.” It was as a child that most of us can remember the first time of having to grit and grin our teeth to be gracious as a guest at someone else’s table. How many of you received strict instructions from a parent who said that when you were at someone else’s table, you would receive everything that was offered to you and that you would eat what was put in front of you? Has our culture stopped teaching our young the necessary rubrics of grace?

For a younger me, that “grin and bear it” rubric meant that when my mother’s uncle Otto made a great show of sharing his favorite candy, a horrid tasting little lozenge known as a “horehound drop” — I held out my hand, took it, offered a big smile and “thank you.” Even more, as he watched, I bravely popped it into my mouth. The same held true at the dining table.



Perhaps you can remember your own childhood experience.

Whether you despised bloody red beets, those horrid Brussel sprouts, or



that weird barley casserole, if it was put on your plate you ate it. Or at least some of it. (My family rule was that you didn't have eat all of

anything, but you had to eat some of everything!) “You don't have to eat everything, but you have to try everything.” Or to play a bit and turn this into a biblical principle, that we might call the “Romans 12:2 Rule”: “be transformed, little Gregory, by the renewing of your mind, so that you can work out...what is good, acceptable.” Or as St. Paul put it earliest in what we could call the “1 Thessalonians Rule”: “Test everything. If something is good, hold it fast...” (5:21).

In Paul's letter to the church in Rome, we read that one of the early church's biggest challenges to true community was being gracious about food. For some Christians, especially Gentile believers, the traditional dietary restrictions associated with the laws of “kashrut,” of “keeping kosher,” no longer applied. Jesus's dying on the cross, his rising



from the grave forever, and his ascension into the heavens changed the “rules of engagement” between the human and the divine. For some believers, the salvation attained by Jesus on their behalf on the cross was so overwhelming and complete that they had no qualms about regarding all the other stop-gap measures that had been established before the coming of the Messiah as no longer binding. Observing the strict rules of “kashrut,” rules that separated those who followed the Torah of the Lord from the pagan world they lived in, were no longer necessary marks to distinguish the people of God. Salvation from sin came through the action of the Messiah, not through “kashrut.”

But for other disciples giving up “kashrut” was more difficult. For many Jewish-Christians, giving up any of the Torah laws that had been established for so many centuries was just too radical a break with the teaching of their ancestors. Giving up such identity made them feel isolated from the Lord God rather than insulated by the gift of the Messiah. As those who have endured and survived the rages of Hurricane Laura well know, if you have a life-vest that has helped you to survive — you don’t abandon it just because the water recedes. Some

early believers really wanted to “hang on” to their old flotation devices, “just in case.”

The result was that this mixed situation made for a lack of “graciousness.” Those who now felt free to eat whatever they wanted also ridiculed and chastised those who felt they should still observe the dietary restrictions generations of their ancestors had obeyed.

Continuing to observe the old tradition didn’t seem to have hampered their newly found salvation gifted to them by the coming of the Jesus the Messiah. But we know how people can be. Those who adhere to the tradition felt insulted by the “newbie’s” lack of care and concern about Jewish heritage. The Gentile “newbies” also ridiculed old tradition believers for clinging to antediluvian (in other words, before the flood) customs.

Such an old 1st century debate obviously has nothing to do with the 21st century church, does it? Except maybe that many churches still struggle to behave graciously in the face of real and true differences among people who are trying to live honest and true lives of faith. And, well, we could list the stuff that polarizes churches here and there —

after all, we're still currently United Methodist and dealing with issues regarding theology and human sexuality that will come to ahead in the next year. (If COVID-19 is under control by then.)



I think it was Pope Francis who noted that the history of Christianity can be a study in the continued failure and application of graciousness. Throughout the centuries each new generation of believers has been “offered” something like horehound candy and bad barley casserole. And each new generation is challenged to respond with graciousness, not with ungracious behavior. As the 1st century church struggled to define its identity, Paul cautioned believers against acting out by drawing lines in the sand: “You, then, why do you condemn your fellow Christian? And you: why do you despise a fellow Christian? We must all stand before the judgement seat of God...”

“We must all be stand before the judgment seat of God...” We all stand under the shadow of the cross. No matter how fiercely and fervently we defend our interpretations of God’s work and God’s requirements, there remains a humbling truth: We may be mistaken.

This is what came to be known as “the Protestant Principle,” although it is most often observed by those in the breach.

Admitting the legitimacy (and maybe the rightness) of other viewpoints, admitting our own fallibility, admitting the need for periodic course corrections (*semper reformanda*) and new directions, admitting



just plain wrongness — is a most significant act of graciousness a person can do. You have proven to me time and time again that you are a gracious congregation. And I’m confident that together, come what may, we will all humble ourselves and our conversations before God.

This is a bedrock of biblical faith. Notice I didn’t say anything about it being a bedrock of our political partisanship. I said the bedrock of biblical faith. The earliest Christians struggled to come to terms with the differences that divided them, even as they realized that it was the grace of God that united them. Faith and grace, not right and might, are what made it possible for the first communities of Jesus followers to find a foothold for the kingdom of God. For two millennia, for every new generation of disciples, that struggle has been replayed.



I'm just trying to lay some groundwork today for the difficult conversations and decisions that will eventually be coming our way. My prayer is that by God's grace, not one of us will default and lay judgment upon those with whom they may disagree. You can't get any further from the truth of Jesus than by judgment. You can't get any further from the truth of our ancestors than by judgment. Nothing could be further from the truth about the relationship between the divine and the human than judgment.

How many of you once upon a time have tried to have a dinner party, a brunch, or just a picnic? Chances are you didn't get an R.S.V.P. without a few "particulars." Instead of an "eat what's on your plate" mentality, we're increasingly becoming a "put whatever I want on my plate" culture. Of course, there are health concerns, allergies that thankfully we now know about and can so safeguard our guests. But aside from truly life-threatening food allergies and dietary restrictions, there seems to be a disturbing attitude generally among people — "I don't care to be gracious, I expect my

*Répondez  
S'il vous  
plaît*

every desire to be catered to” It’s about “me, me, me and I don’t care about you” everywhere a person goes. That attitude is spilling over. Everyone wants it “their” way, or it’s going to be the highway where that angry person may manifest road rage.

You and I are traditional people when it comes to public etiquette. You remember when we all gathered at a common “dining table.” The laws of etiquette and civility determined what happened at the face-to-face dining table. Now the “dining table” is online, and the “face-to-face” component is dim and distant. At the on-line dining table, graciousness is often jettisoned. On-line banquets — of ideas, and opinions, and hopes, and dreams — are passed around as mashed potatoes and pot roast were a generation ago. But now fewer and fewer diners are being gracious and tasting a bit, if anything, of what they are being offered. Instead four-year old fits about “I don’t like this!” and “You’re a terrible cook!” are all over the internet, and everywhere in our



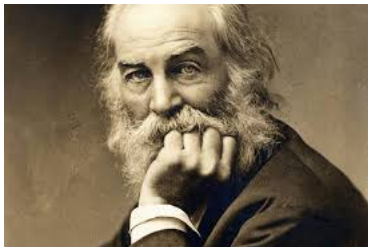
society where such judgments are final. Liberal, do you seek and listen to conservative voices?

Conservative, do you seek and listen to liberal

voices? Or are you just eating the same predictable gruel among like-minded people all the time?

Where's the grace? Where's the generosity of spirit? The generosity of grace, grace and generosity, are what generate meaning and joy. Lewis Hyde, in his classic book *The Gift*, makes this case for the exchange of gifts like grace and generosity are what create meaning. He writes: "Gifts, given or received, stand witness to meaning beyond the known, and gift exchange is therefore a transcendent commerce, the economy of recreation, conversion, or renaissance."

Poet Walt Whitman (1819-1892) told from his own life how this



works. During the Civil War, when he was safe and secure in his home, Whitman made daily visits to Carver Hospital in Washington, D.C.

There he dispensed gifts from his own resources to the young soldiers, some of whom were from the “wrong” side — small gifts of money, peaches, ice cream, clean shirts, and handkerchiefs, as well as the gift of his interest, concern, care, and poetry reading. When he looked back on

his life, Whitman remembered these days of graciousness and generosity as the happiest times in his life.

I keep preaching on Christian character and virtue because while I have you for only a half-hour on Sunday mornings, a fearful, angry culture has you the rest of the time — 24/7. And we will end up doing one of two things: accepting that toxic culture or rejecting it. So I stand before you at this brief moment to guarantee you this: You give grace this week, you show graciousness this week to people you don't agree with — you be generous with people you don't know, and in those exchanges of grace and graciousness, generosity and gratitude you will find a depth of meaning you hadn't known before and even knew existed.

Grace truly received from God leads you to give grace to others, leading to more grace received unto you.

That's a renewed moral, spiritual, and kingdom delicacy that's well-worth praying a blessing over and then sharing forward.



Amen.