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Lent 4, Year B
Grace, River Forest
3/10/2024

Love That Forever Moves In Your Direction

God's grace is not static or stingy but generative. Grace does not protect or hoard. It is Creative. It includes. It makes space.

Yesterday a group of us gathered in the seminar room to hear about the clean slate campaign. There were three different churches represented at Grace.

"90% of Illinoisans with arrest or conviction records who are eligible for sealing or expungements remain in the "Second Chance Gap," meaning that though they are eligible for records relief they have not started the process. Records create permanent barriers to housing, employment, education, and more. Enacting Clean Slate legislation will automatically clear hundreds of thousands of records, increasing opportunities for people who have come in contact with the legal system. These Illinoisans, who are disproportionately Black and Brown, will then have real second chances and the opportunity to become a vibrant part of our society." They long for space that grace provides.

As soon as I heard about this, I knew that if any group of people should be a part of this movement it should be Lutherans. Lutheranism is not a cultural movement only for certain kinds of people who can trace their roots to a European country. It is a global theological movement rooted in the God who comes down to us in Jesus Christ. Lutheranism is all about grace. We are a part of that movement. It is the name of our church.

The insistence on grace- that's Lutheranism's gift to the wider church. A second chance. A new start. A future. Not being defined by our past. Saint Paul talks about God giving the fullness of Christ, not just to those who have done their time or paid their dues, repented, or made a decision to follow Jesus, but who were dead in their sins. Even the faith to believe is not something we muster up within ourselves but a gift we receive with no strings attached.

Despite everything the world proclaims to us, God's grace is free. No sweat needed. It can sound too good to be true. If you are anything like me you probably think, in those moments of existential dread or despair, in the aftermath of another failure, another time we didn't get it right, or when you are stuck in the endless comparison loop, there must be a catch. We ask ourselves, "Is there a footnote offering some qualifications that would just seem right for respectable folks who want to earn our way that got lost in translation?" Don't I have to work at all for this space? Isn't there a price per square foot in the house of God, after all it is big.

I was in AWANA when I was growing up, which was like boy scouts for Christians. We earned badges on our vests for memorizing Bible verses. I was probably around six or seven when I started. We met in the Sunday School classroom at a church out in Aurora. These verses from Ephesians were among the first we were taught to internalize. I already knew about my own weakness, struggles, and failures. I had become familiar with those feelings of not being good enough, smart enough, holy enough, competent enough, wealthy enough, coming from a normal enough family, or having a normal enough body to know that I could never measure up to all the world's demands or my own. I still know those feelings. I knew this was the word I needed from outside of myself.

“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, so that no one may boast.”

Today you are encountered by this God who saves you single handedly. It is all a gift of this God of outlandish generosity. The God who is not stingy but rich in mercy. The only work that is required for our salvation is the work of the triune God. In the light of this salvation all human boasting is seen for what it is. Empty. For God so loved the world that God gave the son to you and for you and still does today fully and completely in word and promise, bread and wine. Not because we earn it or deserve it. Just because it is what God does. This is God's word to you. You belong. The tree of the cross reaches out to you in welcome and holds you forever. You are forgiven and there is nothing you can do about it. For God so loved the world. This love is wide enough to include you and them too. Grace: God's unilateral acceptance of us apart from any human effort or lack of effort for the sake of Jesus Christ has a way of messing us up and setting us free. Remember, no price per square foot in the house of God.

I was sitting in the backseat of my step-dads truck. We were driving up to Wisconsin for the day. I had gotten upset because we didn't get as early of a start as I had hoped and I knew it wasn't my fault. I did not respond with grace. I had been ready for an hour. I was morally superior in this situation. I was in the right. I was judging them and was upset. I held tightly to my upright position and my anger. It was my stepdad and mom who relentlessly did not care. They responded with grace. Unconditional acceptance out of deep and abiding love that does not care about what has happened a second or a millennia ago. In grace it is all taken care of. Eventually I felt the weight I had placed on my chest lift off. I could breathe again. I had space to move. It was like a cold glass of water in the desert of my self-obsession.

What has grace sounded like for you? What has grace felt like for your body?

Having already died and taken our place in the risen life of Christ all our vocations are transformed. We have been created in Christ for good works. With nothing left to prove, this cruciform love is our way of life. The capaciousness of grace is our home. It is where we live.

Grace is not static or stingy but generative. Grace does not protect or hoard. It is creative. It always makes room because it was never about us in the first place. What a relief.