

## **Grace ~ March 22, 2009**

**Numbers 21:4-9; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22**

I know I have told you, probably far too many times, that I grew up in a church in which the concept of “grace” was rarely discussed and never sung about, “amazing” or not. It was a “works” sort of church where we earned some kind of “merits” by doing good deeds. This approach to Christianity worked quite well in this almost 2000 member congregation. Almost everyone volunteered to do something throughout the year to help keep the church’s many programs moving along. I volunteered to do things from helping prepare and serve dinners to 300 plus for our Annual Meeting, to chairing an annual rummage sale ( like tag sales here), to providing adult education, to teaching Sunday school and Confirmation Class to chairing the Christian Education Board and serving on the Church Council.

When I arrived in seminary in Chicago in my late 30s—not the late 1930s as some of you think—I met a man named Lilton Marks. Lilton, from the South Side of Chicago, was into God’s grace in a big way.

While already a preacher in his own right, he wanted to be an Army chaplain and had to earn his Master’s degree and be ordained before he could be considered for such a position. He achieved his goal in a big way. He is now a retired colonel who was the Command Chaplain of the military forces in Iraq from June 2005 to June 2006.

Because of Lilton’s strong conservative theological viewpoint, many a discussion was enlivened by his presence. My seminary was progressive in theology but has always prided itself on accepting a variety of students with great theological and cultural diversity. This enriched all of us and led us to an understanding and appreciation of the many faces and facets of our Christian faith even if they differed from our own.

Throughout the three years my classmates and I studied beside Lilton, we were introduced, over and over again, to the concept of God’s amazing grace granted freely to all of us.

Yes, all of us. This is not just a “Christian thing,” but a “God thing.” It was God’s grace in that rather odd story, from the book of Numbers, that healed the Israelites who gazed upon the bronze fiery serpent. Life was given back to those who believed in the power of God.

We might wonder why a snake was the creature raised up. Serpent worship occurred in the ancient world and snakes were believed to have healing power. So, those who realized that they had committed a sin against God by complaining about their condition, and who repented, were saved. It really is a powerful story.

One so powerful that we find it referred to in the gospel of John. The healing power of Jesus, for those who believed in him, is paralleled with that of the story in the Hebrew Scriptures. If one believes in the healing power of God, channeled through Jesus, one is saved from his or her earthly life and goes on to eternal life. The familiar words, “ For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life,” sum up the entire message of the life and teachings of Jesus for many. We often see reference to these words in the gospel raised high on placards at football stadiums and in other venues.

This reading also goes on to say, in effect, that by our deeds it will be known if we are on God's side or not. So, "works" enter in as an important element for us along with the grace of God. It is a blend of both that identifies us as Christians. Paul touches on this in his letter to the church at Ephesus. God's grace raises us up but we do good works because of what we understand as the mission of Christ to the world.

Jesus was a living example of this for all who followed and who follow him. He did not just sit around and wait for the grace of God to save him. He preached and he taught and he healed and moved among all people bearing his "good news" with him. He refined all 614 Jewish laws down to the basic two—"To love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength and our neighbor as ourselves." This made things simple for all to understand. In living these commandments, he revealed the nature of God and the grace of God to all who would see.

We need to stop every now and then in our busy dance of life and try to contemplate the role grace plays in our lives. Do we think that because we have the assurance of the grace of God, through Christ, that we can live any way we want to, have any thoughts we wish, act in any manner to achieve an end, whether for good or ill? Living in ways that are counter to the way Jesus led his life gives people, who look at us as representatives of the body of Christ, the wrong opinion of Christians. We all slip and fall from time to time. It is simply human nature. But if we truly understand the way of Christ, our failures become fewer and farther apart. One of the best things in our journey through life is that we are able to learn from our past mistakes and resolve to refrain from making them again. The even better news is that the grace and graciousness of God always promises us that we have another chance.

As long as we draw breath, we have another opportunity to try again to make all things new. Anyone who has raised or worked with children understands the need to be patient with them as they try to learn their pathways through life. This is a never-ending job. We learn by trial and error if we are wise.

In the manner of Christ and in reflection of our Creator, we, too, give others a second chance and a third chance and a fourth chance.... In doing this, we need to remember to give ourselves a break, to understand that we are not perfect beings and to give ourselves another shot at getting life right.

While we sit in judgment of others, we also sit in judgment of ourselves. In this role we play in regard to our lives, we are often the harshest judges of all. We suffer over wrongs we have committed that have long been dismissed by others. We work over old wounds that we refuse to let heal for once and for all. We dwell on past memories that lead us nowhere. We don't take the time to gaze on the One who was lifted up for us, as was that serpent in the wilderness. We do not sense the healing power of grace.

Jesus came to show us the way to live life—a way of love and forgiveness, joy and hope. A way of a "peace that passeth all understanding" found in the gift of grace and the ability to do good and positive deeds using all we know about the Christian way of life.

Our days of Lent grow short as we approach the wonder and puzzle of Easter. It is a good time to reflect on the meaning of God's grace and the way it touches our lives and the lives of others.

*--Amen*