

The 'Much' that Is Required

A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
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Text: Philippians 3:1a, 4b-14

In seminary they told us that every preacher has one sermon, and every sermon you preach is simply a variation on that core theme. If that's true, I hope you can identify what mine is. Care to guess? It's grace—that unmerited, abounding gift from God that brings us goodness, love, truth, purpose, transforming possibilities, and abundant life in this sweet and terrible old world, as well as an eternal future.

I hope you've heard something of that in every sermon I've preached from this pulpit these seven and half years. In some ways "grace" is a garden-variety theme of the Reformed Christian tradition, as the foundation for the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. We Presbyterians value the creeds and confessions that the Church throughout the ages developed to express its essential beliefs, and grace might well top the list. Scripture is filled with rich testimony to the grace by which we are saved through faith, not works. The notion of grace is before and alongside me in every word of every sermon I write—and I pray this is not a revelation to you. But I also hope that apart from my words from the pulpit, you can see something of how grace is operative in my life and personal faith. The primary reason my clergy colleagues and I decided to share our faith stories during worship in August was to show how we translate God's Word into a guiding word for the super highways, city streets, and unmarked paths of our own lives. So today I want to tell you how this theological concept becomes "good news" for me, how it shapes who I am and what I do, and why I have bet my life on its truth.

I knew that I had found my spiritual home at Fairmount not long after my arrival here, when former pastor Hank Andersen told me that the unofficial Bible verse of Fairmount was "To whom much is

given, much will be required." That's the way he said it, and that's exactly the way my father used to say it to my siblings and me throughout our youth-- his deep, authoritarian voice ringing forth: "To whom much is given, much will be required." It went without saying that Dad regarded us as among those to whom much had been given. He quoted it to us often: on the first day of school, for example, or laced throughout the annual birthday congratulations. It was a standard he held himself to first of all, which explained the 80-hour work weeks he regularly kept and the Type A personality he exuded till the day he died, not surprisingly of a heart attack at age 62. Somehow I heard in his voice Divine judgment that I could never, ever give back enough. The story of my faith has been shaped in some ways by my attempts to do so, to fulfill the impossibly high expectations of one who has received much, and to pay for the privilege of receiving God's love and blessing.

The seduction of that reading is, quite simply, that it works a lot of the time. My fear of not living up to requirements motivated me to pursue excellence, work hard, go the second mile. My hunger for approval has honed my pastoral skills of listening and reaching out beyond differences. My understanding of God's grace as reward for patience and cheerful effort inspired me to strive to overcome barriers to women in ministry and break through the "stained glass ceiling." Yet even amid joys of family and friends and purposive career came a persistent nipping at my heels and the whispered message, "You are not eloquent enough, you are not glittery enough, your voice isn't deep enough, you are not enough." And for many years, I responded by working harder, getting another degree, serving on another board, "doing" more in hopes of "being" more.

I've had good company along the way. In fact, most of the people who have made up the congregations I've served resonated with this gospel. They understood from personal experience that "the best never rest." If they had any sense of entitlement it came the old fashioned way: they had earned it. They were willing workers, the folks who showed up and served up and cleaned up and then re-upped. Congregations like this one who gave generously to projects and ministries and organizations that ministered to the poor.

Churches who held high expectations of their leaders—as high as they set for themselves. After all, to whom much is given, much will be required.

The morning text is from a letter the apostle Paul wrote to the churches in Philippi, congregations he had organized and for whom he had great affection. He wrote the letter while in prison, isolated, and under threat of death. Yet the overriding theme of this letter is joy and thanksgiving in the simple affirmation of relationship with God, especially as Paul has come to know the wonder of it through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He begins by reviewing his achievements, all that he has done and given and even sacrificed. But instead of offering it in the manner of an impressive resume, Paul describes it as “loss” in light of a surpassing, and surprising economy—the calculus of God’s grace. Listen for God’s Word to you and me in the reading from the letter to the Philippians, in the third chapter, selected verses.

[3:1, 4b-15]

This summer as usual I planted tomatoes in my backyard garden bed. I’m a fanatic about tomatoes, and pride myself on the heirloom varieties I’ve grown almost every summer I can remember. Memorial Day weekend found me toiling away, preparing the ground, working the soil, applying fertilizer (the “green” variety of course), and setting out the young plants in tomato cages. In due season lovely green tomatoes appeared on the vine, portending a bountiful harvest. But then environmental disaster struck—the tomatoes caught the eyes of my animal neighbors, the chipmunks, raccoons, and skunk, who in one night of backyard bacchanalia stripped the vines of all the tomatoes. All ruined! And herein lies the inadequacy of an achievement-oriented view of life. Sometimes the measure we give is not matched by commensurate outcome. After laboring over those tomato plants in the hot summer sun, I deserved to enjoy their succulent ripeness. Where’s the grace in that?

And where is God’s grace when we encounter the unfairness of the universe? The tears and tears in relationships, the career blow that seemed to come out of nowhere, the unexpected illness? My own

faith has been tested by the deaths of loved ones, through divorce and relationships that didn't last, professional disappointments and challenges to my ministry. And I have come to reject the notion that the measure we give will be the measure we receive. My understanding of grace has grown in those times when the scales toppled and I was standing alone with a bunch of chewed-up green tomatoes.

We live in a world ruled by a gracious God, in which sweet tomatoes, lofty mountain grandeur, and summer sunsets are ours to enjoy. We are blessed with companions---family and friends and a faith community---with whom to share life in all its beauty and complexity. All these are gifts to us from God—given regardless of our goodness, regardless of our praise or even acknowledgement of their divine origin.

But there is another reality that sometimes overshadows our perception of the goodness. Call it hungry beasts or rotten luck. Call it separation from God, estrangement from one another, alienation from our truest selves. Call it evil. Call it sin. What I find lacking from some popular spiritual guides is the realization of the power of this reality, how thoroughly it infects and disfigures human hearts and minds and communities. The world is good, but it is broken. Its healing takes more than positive thinking or even earnest endeavor. Along with the gift of life God gives us new life, a way to live that leads to wholeness, personally and as communities.

The apostle Paul—never known for his modest assessment of his attributes—contrasts his achievements with the surpassing value of the grace of God and finds them tiny in comparison with the joy and strength of God's presence. He insists on locating the meaning of human life in relationship with God, and God's power to transform even death into life. In Jesus Christ we discover that God reaches out to us no matter what circumstances engulf us, no matter our goodness or niceness or dazzling skill. Grace abounds. We are accepted in glory and in defeat; when we're noble and other-regarding and when we're little and self-absorbed. It's not finally about us, but about God.

Life is so fragile. Everything can change in a moment, with a phone call, a medical test, an accident. We are all breaking or broken from time to time, and stand in need of God's grace, forgiveness, and healing. God keeps faith with us even when we have broken faith with God and with one another. And through every time, all time, God does not abandon us. God is there, pouring out grace to mend what is broken, restore goodness, produce joy.

For me grace didn't make a lot of sense until I acknowledged my vulnerability. For someone who has worked hard to secure life against weakness, this is not a one shot deal, but a process. I'm still learning how to walk by faith. I'm coming to understand that verse not as a standard I'll never live up to, but as an invitation to rest in the grace of God. The God from whom all blessings flow invites you and me to trust, and trust completely, come what may—that's the 'much' that is required of us.

This morning [we will baptize][we have baptized] a new baby, Alaina, daughter of Kristin and Charlie, splashing some water on her head and proclaiming brave and true things about her origin and destiny. I always marvel at this sacrament, because not one of us knows what lies ahead for her—or any of our children—or ourselves.

And yet in a way we do.

In a world shimmering with the grace of God, we can entrust what we hold most dear to its author and giver. Love begets love. We love, because God first loved us. We give, because God has given to us in abundance. As recipients of grace, we are moved to become bearers of grace.

You are my teachers in this gracious truth. I can smile now about my spoiled garden, because you have shared your tomatoes with me. I have tasted goodness through your hands. Again. And not for the last time, I'm absolutely certain. The abundance of God's gifts to us all inspires trust---much trust!-- that all will be well. All will be well. It's as if I can hear my father's smiling affirmation.

And guess what? I returned from study leave this week to find new blossoms on my tomato vines, and with a little luck—no, grace!—there will be a harvest.

Thanks be to God!