

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Psalms 46

Colossians 1:11-20

Luke 23:33-43

Sermon November 20th, 2022

God's Grace Is at Work When We Least Expect It

In our gospel this morning, Jesus is being mocked, abused. He is suffering from one of the worst forms of execution known to humanity.

One of the two people hanging beside Jesus calls him to use his power to get down off the cross and seek out his revenge. One might think this is an opportune time to do just that (**Image One**: *two people fighting*).

And yet, we see God's grace at work on this cross where Jesus hangs. Jesus chooses to forgive the soldiers who are mocking him. The soldiers who are abusing him. The soldiers who have nailed him to this cross. Jesus resists the temptation to act out in vengeance. Knowing that God's love will prevail. God's grace will prevail.

Jesus doesn't stop there. The other person who is hanging beside Jesus, honestly admits wrongdoing, declares Jesus' innocence, and humbly asks Jesus to remember him. In response to this person's repentance, Jesus forgives, and invites him into paradise with thee (**Image Two**: *someone forgiving someone else*).

A criminal is welcomed into paradise with Jesus. A criminal who, we more than likely, would struggle to welcome into paradise with thee.

So, not once, but twice, we see God's grace at work on this cross through Christ Jesus. Not once, but twice, we see that God's grace is at work in us when we least expect it (**Image Two**).

Many of the early believers experienced this unexpected grace, feeling moved by this grace, to live out the gospel in their daily lives. For example, Saul, a person who was using all of his energy and resources to track down Christians to arrest them. Who stood over Stephen, a devout leader in the early church, as he was being stoned to death (**Image One**). Stephen who with his last breath forgives Saul and those who are stoning him. Saul, the persecutor of Christians, has an unexpected grace experience when he listens to Stephen's forgiving voice (**Image Two**). Saul, the persecutor of Christians, has an unexpected grace experience when he is chosen by Christ to share the gospel with the Gentiles.

If you recall his testimony. He is struck down, and blinded when he was on his way to Damascus to arrest some Christians. Then Jesus appears to Saul, and calls him to

change his ways. Saul who becomes Paul, becomes one of the most influential Christian leaders in the early church.

We see in Paul's story that God's grace is at work in us when we least expect it.

Do you have a story like Paul's, like the soldiers, like the criminal who is repentant? Have you ever been a recipient of God's grace when you least expected it?

For example, you said or did something terrible to hurt someone you love (**Image One**). You crossed over that line of no return. You can't take it back. You have to live with this grievous error in judgment. Your first thought is the relationship is forever severed. You feel terrible. You don't deserve to have this person in your life.

Then, shockingly, this person forgives you (**Image Two**). This person chooses to love you. This person sees that you feel terrible for what you did or said. And chooses forgiveness over revenge. Love over resentment.

Have you ever been a recipient of God's grace when you least expected it?

Sometimes the example is less obvious. Like, you are heading down a very destructive path in life. And something unexplainable happens in your life that helps you change course. It could be the loss of something or the kindness of a stranger. It could be something that happened while you were in a program. It could be you miraculously survived a near death experience.

Have you ever been a recipient of God's grace when you least expected it?

And what does this grace do to us when we experience it?

For Paul, it transforms him into a passionate leader who proclaims the gospel throughout the Gentile world.

For the criminal, he will be in paradise with thee.

Maybe even some of the soldiers who stood at the foot of the cross were transformed by this grace, and became passionate followers of Christ.

For many of us who are touched by this grace, we feel empowered through this grace, to love others in this same way.

Because we know how uplifting it is to feel loved when we feel unworthy. To feel welcome by someone after the door has been slammed in our face by others (**Image Two**). God's gracious love changes us. It moves us to let go of the anger, resentment, and fear that comes with being judged. That comes with being excluded. God's gracious love changes us.

When we live out this grace as Stephen does, as Jesus does (**Image Two**). Then others experience God's grace when they least expect it. Changing them into people who live out the gospel, the good news, that states that through Christ Jesus, God's grace does prevail. God's love does prevail.

Today is Christ the king Sunday. Today we recognize Christ as the one who reigns over our lives with grace and love. Today we celebrate that Christ's grace and love will prevail over the Empire's judgment and violence we experience. That though Jesus will die on the cross, he will rise from the tomb. That though the criminal has made some mistakes he will be with Jesus in paradise. That though Stephen is stoned to death that his last words of grace offered up to Saul helped him get off the destructive path he was on. That though Saul persecutes the church, he will become Paul, a prominent leader who spreads the gospel to the ends of the Earth.

God's grace works in and through us in unexpected ways in unexpected places to change us. To change others. To change our world in to a place where God's grace and love will prevail. Where God will breathe new life on us. Where God's kingdom of peace and hospitality will reign. Where Christ our King will reign over us with grace and love.

Let us pray, loving God, thank you for forgiving us when we fall short. Thank you for letting us be recipients of your grace when we least expect it. You are indeed gracious and merciful. Slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. May you help us live out this same grace, patience, and love with one another. **Amen.**

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