

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

Sermon March 14th, 2021

Jesus Comes into the World to Save It

Sometimes when we make mistakes, when we say or do something that hurts someone. We are judged. We are condemned. Other times, when we make mistakes, when we say or do something that hurts someone. We are forgiven. We receive grace.

In the former, our guilt can become shame. Hindering our ability to learn and grow from our mistakes. Hindering our ability to love others with grace. In the latter, we can become empowered and moved by grace to do better. To love others with this same grace.

Now, for some, they may think a good scolding and punishment may help them stay the course. At least for a little while. But, for most people, they respond more positively when they feel loved even at their worst. This is why studies conclude that positive reinforcement has always been more of a motivator for getting children to do what they are told than negative reinforcement (***Image: Of a child being rewarded for good behavior***).

For much of history, our relationship with God has been a fragile one. Many theologians have tried to explain God in a way that has led a lot of people to see God as a wrathful God. One who hurts us when we fail. And one who loves us when we do good. At times, our shame from understanding God in this way has impacted us as religious communities negatively. Sometimes leading us to speak and act in unhealthy ways.

Well, in our gospel this morning, Jesus challenges us to think differently about our relationship with God. To see that God is indeed gracious and merciful. In fact, Jesus is sent into the world not to condemn the world, but to save it.

Jesus then goes on to say that if we truly believe in a gracious God, who loves us with mercy, then we will be moved to love others with grace as well. Paul later reiterates this message, as does Luther during the Reformation.

Throughout my life, I have experienced people's judgment and condemnation. And I have experienced people's forgiveness and grace. Without a doubt I can bear witness to what Jesus says to us today. I have felt much more motivated and moved to learn from my mistakes, and to love others, when being a recipient of someone's grace than I ever have when being judged or condemned for making a mistake.

Now I am not saying we should avoid holding each other accountable. In my mind, there is a difference between holding someone accountable when they hurt you versus judging or condemning that person. For example, setting healthier boundaries, or telling the person who hurt you that their words or actions hurt you so that an opportunity for repentance and forgiveness are possible is often good for that person. And good for yourself.

Judging or condemning someone is when we try to hurt them back, or we withhold forgiveness when they are genuinely sorry for what they said or did (***Image: a person pointing a finger towards someone***).

It is a messy world out there, and forgiveness isn't always easy. Sometimes, it is easier to place a judgement on someone or condemn them for hurting you then it is to try and show them mercy.

Yet, Jesus stands before us today, reassuring us that God chooses mercy over condemnation when dealing with our shortcomings. And hopes that this gracious love rubs off on us, so that we will do the same to others.

In the Lord's prayer we reflect this grace when we ask that God forgives our sins against others in the same way we forgive other people's sins against us.

As I hear Jesus' words this morning, I reflect on how our relationship with God, with each other, and with God's creation changes when we see God's grace reflected in these relationships.

We feel liberated to love in ways we never thought possible. We become part of God's healing and redemptive activity in the world.

When we are recipients of God's grace, we are recreated in the image of Christ, to live like Christ. To love God, to love one another, to love one's self, and to love God's creation unconditionally. With mercy and grace.

When we live not worried day to day about being judged or condemned for our failings, we are more likely to put ourselves out there. To get back on our feet and try again when we do fail.

When we live with this grace, we see that God is not punishing us when things go wrong. But, instead, God is walking with us, helping us find the light that shines at the end of the tunnels of our lives. Healing us and redeeming us.

We see that when we love the people in our life like God loves us then our relationships are strengthened. Our relationships are deeper. Our relationships experience healing and renewal when the challenges we face put strain on our relationships.

We see that when we love ourselves as God loves us then we don't get so down on ourselves when we fall short. We don't judge ourselves so harshly. Instead, we heal, get back up on our feet, and try to do better.

During this Lenten season we have been invited to reflect on our relationship with creation. We have been invited to see how God's gracious love works in and through us for the healing and renewal of God's creation. We have been invited to see how God's gracious love helps us learn and grow from our shortcomings, so that we can become better caretakers of God's creation (***Image: Of someone gardening***).

Like we learn and grow into better spouses, parents, children, friends, believers, human beings.

Grace helps us become more loving and gracious towards others.

Graces helps us become people who lift others up when they feel down. Grace helps us become people who listen to and try to understand where people are coming from. Grace helps us become people who are compassionate and forgiving.

Grace helps us become people who do more to love God's creation. From changing personal habits (***Image: of someone picking up garbage from a park***), to creating newer technologies to help us use our energy resources in more sustainable ways, to raising our voice for the health of creation.

As Jesus says, God sends Jesus into the world not to condemn it, but to save it. Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit on us, the church, to continue this healing and redemptive work in all of God's creation. From the waters to the soil to the trees to the air to our loved ones to the other. We are invited to continue this healing and redemptive work in all of God's creation. Knowing that God is a gracious God who loves us even through our growing pains.

Let us pray, gracious God, when we fail to be good caretakers of your creation, when we fail to do good to those we encounter, when we struggle to forgive, to be reflections of your grace in our world, forgive us. Renew us. Move us to do better. **Amen.**

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