

March 2, 2022
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Ash Wednesday
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Costly Grace”

“As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.”

The Antiques Roadshow is a popular program on PBS (American public television) in which people bring items they have inherited or that are lying around the house to be appraised by experts. The highlights of these episodes are where people are informed that something they have taken for granted is a precious antique that can be worth thousands of dollars. Of course, I am sure that a lot of the items that do not make it on air are of little value, but the possibility that something we found in the attic or picked up at a yard sale can be of great value is a possibility that stirs the imagination of many people.

It is easy to take something that is familiar to us for granted, especially if it is old and little used. That painting that hung in your grandmother’s house for decades may be an original masterpiece; the clock on her mantle that rang out on the hour may be the work of an expert craftsman. The possibility that something can be of great value reminds us that we should indeed never take anything for granted, since what may be of little importance to us may be highly prized by someone else.

As we begin the season of Lent on this Ash Wednesday, we hear the words of Paul calling upon us to “*be reconciled to God*” (2 Corinthians 5:20). These words are a part of the second letter that Paul writes to the church in Corinth, a community with which he has a troubled relationship. The first letter was the result of his receiving a communication from “*Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.*” (1 Corinthians 1:11). Unlike other letters written to communities where Paul is not widely known (like Romans), the Corinthians letters are addressed to people with whom the Apostle lived for some time. Hearing of divisions and other issues in the Corinthian church provide an occasion for Paul the Apostle to address those “*who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours*” (1:2) in the hope that these issues might be resolved so that they might they might live in the blessings of the Lord Jesus Christ who “*will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” (1:8). The fact that a second letter exists means that these issues were not

resolved – in fact, the situation became worse, and many of the Corinthians began to attack Paul and his ministry, which resulted in what is sometime called Paul’s “difficult letter.” Paul writes the second letter “*out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.*” (2 Corinthians 2:4). Paul’s goal is not to seek payback or revenge, but that there might be forgiveness and reconciliation that will restore this relationship that has become strained. When Paul entreats the Corinthians to “*be reconciled to God,*” he is also implying that they should be reconciled to Paul, the ambassador who has brought the gospel of reconciliation to them in the first place and thereby been the occasion for the end of their enmity with God (“*For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.*” – Romans 5:10). To be “reconciled to God” is to be justified or made righteous, “*so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*” (5:21), righteousness that comes from God and is characteristic of God. Paul reminds the Corinthians of their having been brought from sin to righteousness in Christ by God’s grace and by Paul’s having been given the ministry of reconciliation.

One aspect of the reconciliation that Paul seeks with the church in Corinth is to restore their relationship as fellow workers who serve as ambassadors of the reconciling gospel of Jesus Christ. Confident that this reconciliation is possible, Paul encourages them that “*as we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.*” (6:1). This warning against taking the grace of God for granted, accepting the gift of grace that is freely given to all through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ “in vain” (*eis kenon*), is a common expression in Paul’s writings that reckons on whether a person’s life has honoured the life-governing grace of God:

- “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards me has not been in vain.” – 1 Corinthians 15:10.
- “I went up in response to a revelation. Then I laid before them (though only in a private meeting with the acknowledged leaders) the gospel that I proclaimed among the Gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain.” – Galatians 2:2.
- “It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labour in vain.” – Philippians 2:16.

Paul’s word of caution to the Corinthians is a reminder that while the gift of God’s grace is freely bestowed upon all who believe in it, it is by no means a cheap gift or

a gift of little value. The gift of forgiveness and reconciliation is a most precious gift that comes at great cost; it is “costly grace” because it is a gift that cost our Lord Jesus Christ his very life “*for us and for our salvation*” (Nicene Creed). Martin Luther teaches us in the *Small Catechism* that our Lord Jesus Christ “*has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death.*” In his book “*The Cost of Discipleship*,” Dietrich Bonhoeffer warns against “cheap grace,” which he describes as “*grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.*” The grace that frees us from the bondage of sins and reconciles us to God in Christ is “costly grace,” in that it cost our Lord his life for our sake and that it requires us to never accept it “in vain” but value it for the precious gift it is for us:

- “Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it cost a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: ‘ye were bought at a price,’ and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace, because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.”

Bonhoeffer points to Jesus’ teaching in the Gospel of Matthew in which he compares the Kingdom of Heaven to a priceless gem: “*Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.*” (Matthew 13:45-46). Pearls in Jesus’ day were considered more valuable than gold; Jesus uses it as an illustration of the urgency of responding to Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom of God, the most precious gift that one should never accept “in vain.”

- “The one who discovers the kingdom joyfully gives up the things he has treasured in the past in order to obtain it ... the merchant reflects Jesus’ first disciples, who left everything to follow Jesus, and he beckons us also to prioritize the kingdom above everything else.” – Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri.

Paul emphasizes the urgency of his message by citing Isaiah 49:8: “*At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.*” The prophet’s words of promise are not used by the Apostle as a rallying cry for the Corinthians: “*See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!*”

(6:2). Paul emphasizes that the Corinthians are near the time of fulfillment and must act accordingly. If they continue to take the gospel for granted or accept God's grace "in vain," they risk cheapening the grace that came at the cost of Jesus' life and failing to fulfill Jesus' invitation to discipleship which means following our Lord in the way of the cross that is the only means of liberation for all people.

- "These verses from 2 Corinthians ... offer comfort by reminding us that reconciliation ultimately comes from God. It is not something we earn or achieve, but something we receive as a gift when we embrace the spirit of Christ, who knew no sin. Christ, who became flesh and who dwells eternally with God, becomes our companion and compass, leading us towards God." – Holly Hearon.

The season of Lent is a time in which we are called to never take the precious gift of God's grace for granted or accept it "in vain." In all the busyness and distractions of daily living, it may be easy to put this precious gift on the shelf or pass by it without appreciating how precious it is to us. Lent is a call to repentance, which literally means we are called to "turn around" and heed the call of the prophet Joel to "*return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing*" (Joel 2:13). It is a season of renewal in which we call upon the Lord to "*wash me through and through from my wickedness, and cleanse me from me sin ... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.*" (Psalm 51: 2, 10). It is a season in which we confess that "*we have not loved you with out whole heart, and mind, and strength. We have not loved our neighbours as ourselves. We have not forgiven others as we have been forgiven.*" (ELW Ash Wednesday Service). Lent is a season of solemnity, but it is also a season of renewal (the words "Lent" comes from an old English word meaning "spring") in which there is the hope of restoration and forgiveness that is rooted in the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, the "costly grace" that is freely given to us "*so that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is rise from the dead and lives and rules in eternity. This is most certainly true.*" (Small Catechism).

- "Only the sufferings of Christ are valuable in the sight of God, who hates evil, and to him they are valuable chiefly as a sign. The death of Jesus on the cross has an infinite meaning and value not because it is a death, but because it is the death of the Son of God. The cross of Christ says nothing of the power of suffering or of death. It speaks only of the power of him who overcame both suffering and death by rising from the grave." – Thomas Merton.

The Antiques Roadshow has inspired many viewers to look upon the old items they have taken for granted in their lives, to see them as precious heirlooms that are of great value. May the call of this Lenten season inspire us to never take the good news of Jesus Christ, the steadfast love of God that claimed us as God's children in Holy Baptism, for granted or to accept it "in vain." May we always value to gift of renewal and reconciliation that is ours in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ; may this gospel message be the "pearl of great price" in our lives as God's holy people; may our Lord and Saviour be our "*priceless treasure,*" giving thanks to God as we journey with our Lord in the way of that leads us to the cross and resurrection, the assurance that "*if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.*" (Romans 6:5). May we be reconciled to God and to one another, and may we be renewed through the precious gift of God's gracious love that is holy and precious because it is the gift of eternal grace that abides with us always through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.