

Rev. Robert Wollenburg  
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Immanuel Lutheran Church  
New York, NY

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Grace, mercy and peace be to you from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends in Christ,

This is a special time in the life of your congregation. I am honored and glad to share it with you. Thank you, Pastor Fryer, for your generous welcome.

Thank you all for the opportunity to share worship with you this morning and to express the unity of faith that we have in Jesus Christ. "How good and pleasant it is for us to dwell in unity," says Psalm 133. Surely there are challenges to our unity, but for now gathering around psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God is wonderful. It is wonderful because it helps us "Bear with one another and...forgive one another...so that we may clothe ourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony," as St. Paul passionately and tenderly bids the Colossians to do.

St. Paul described the Christians at Colossae as faithful people who "truly comprehended the grace of God." This surely describes you who worship faithfully here at Immanuel and have for many, many, years. In 1977 Karol and I came here to worship, and we were immediately clothed by you in this grace. We have always been thankful for that and for the 10 years that we claimed

Immanuel as our spiritual home, not as a pastor and his wife, but as kind of spiritual refugees in need of a place to feel the presence of Christ's love. So, thank you for making Immanuel a place of welcome and hospitality, and for continuing to comprehend the grace of God.

That said, we know how difficult it is to truly comprehend the grace of God. Or, perhaps more precisely, how difficult it is to live in this grace of God so that we may truly be bound together in the love of God. St. Paul was very much aware of this because he mentions differences among the Colossians that were difficult to resolve, if they ever were. Yet the church continued.

Unless you are a first time visitor this morning, you know there are differences among us, not only at Immanuel but in the ELCA and in the whole Christian church. Knowing there were practices at odds with each other among the Colossians, St. Paul wrote to them even as he writes over the centuries to us today, "let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body." With great passion, seeking to bring people together in the church, St. Paul pleads that they all "hold fast to the head (speaking of Christ) from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God."

We will have an opportunity after our worship this morning to gather in the parish hall speak to the issues that challenge us. That should be interesting and helpful, and I look forward to it. Bishop Rimbo is here to help us with that conversation and I am glad for that. As we do, we will surely want to speak

together with the word of Christ dwelling richly in us, the Word of Christ teaching and admonishing us in all wisdom, doing everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Those, too, are words that St. Paul offers to the Colossian Christians, words that are accompanied by his urging us to be patient with one another, something he had to learn himself when he addressed the conflict in yet another Christian church, the one in Galatia.

As we continue to discuss our differences, let me ask for your patience in this homily, that you prayerfully consider what may be instructive for us in either resolving or living with our differences. These considerations come from Jesus, from the Bible, from early Christian history, and from our own Lutheran confessional faith.

To begin, consider that Jesus was the bearer of tradition, divine tradition. His family was pious, Bible-believing people, attentive to the teachings of the ancient witnesses. They obeyed the divine law of Moses, received from God. Jesus, with his family, worshipped in the Temple and in synagogues. They observed festivals and seasons. They were faithful.

But Jesus was the one who went beyond tradition. He did this in order to help us to truly comprehend the grace of God. This was his mission, why he was sent by God, so that we could know the truth about God. Grace existed before Jesus, because grace has always belonged to God. But before Jesus it was not truly

comprehended. Jesus lived and taught, died and was raised by God so that we could understand that God is truly a gracious God, full of grace.

A good example of Jesus revealing to us what the grace of God is and how it is lived, is in today's Gospel reading. A pious and righteous man humbly kneels before Jesus and asks for guidance: what must I do to inherit eternal life. His question is genuine and sincere, just as is our hope for eternal life. In response to the man, Jesus cites the traditional answer: believe in God alone as the Good Teacher, and keep the commandments to love one another. The man knew exactly what Jesus was talking about, as do we, because we, too, have grown up on the Ten Commandments.

This is a traditional answer that Jesus gives and he gives it in other instances. Sometimes he will quote the sacred summary of the law: "thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself."

This is good teaching and good tradition. We continue to follow the Ten Commandments. We continue to teach our children to love God and one another. Having kept the law since he was a child, the man must have felt gratified by Jesus answer, that Jesus affirmed his holy and pure life. This is still a good and satisfying way to live, and we should all pray that we might live a more holy life every day.

But Jesus wasn't done with the man. Acknowledging his good life wasn't enough. Because, as Jesus says, being good is not what defines us. Only God is good. The man's hope of eternal life begins to slip away when goodness is taken away as an answer to eternal life. But, Jesus isn't so much intent on pointing out the man's faults to taking away his goodness as he is in explaining to the man that there will never be enough of his good living.

And this is when Jesus goes beyond tradition, and the traditional way of viewing salvation. He says to the man -- and I can only suppose, because Jesus says he loves the man, that Jesus says this hoping the man will comprehend the grace of God that is behind the law -- Jesus says, 'You need to give up your wealth, what you own, everything, even your righteousness, your good deeds, your close observance of the law. Give it away. Make a gift of it to those who have nothing and don't know how to be good. Then you will have the true treasures of heaven, of eternal life. Then, you can come and follow me, and receive eternal life,' says Jesus. This is the instruction and invitation Jesus offers to the man so that he may learn to truly comprehend the grace of God.

Well, you know what happens. The man goes away shocked and grieving, sorrowful as it says in some translations, perhaps even angry and disgusted that Jesus should tell him to go against everything he had learned and worked for since his youth.

What I think is sad about this story is that the man does not stay and try this new way of understanding the grace of God, to trust this grace, to give up his life so

that God can give it to him for all eternity. This is how Jesus lived from the time he was born in poverty to the time when he let himself be put to death. He gave up his life. He did it so that God could raise him up and give him eternal life.

What Jesus says is hard for the man. The disciples have just as hard a time trying to understand this nontraditional way of entering eternal life. They understand wealth and possessions, that everyone needs them in order to live. They understand the value of the Ten Commandments and how it helps us to live together in unity. All of this wealth enables us to organize our lives, to plan for the future, and to love one another. It leads us toward salvation. In other words, no one can expect to live in this age and in the age to come if one is to do what Jesus commands. Although in not so many words, Jesus agrees that we cannot give it all up, as though he is contradicting himself. But then comes those wonderful words of grace, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

I wish the man had stayed long enough to hear Jesus say this. It is what we now hang our hope for eternal life on. "For God all things are possible." Who can comprehend this word of grace or live by it when it makes no sense of what we learned and worked for from youth.

Comprehending this grace and living in this grace may seem impossible but God makes it possible. Whether it was immediate or took a long time, Peter says to Jesus, "Look, we have left everything and have followed you." They had left their

nets, their old way of life, their homes and families. Following Jesus, some of them had stopped being kosher.

But, it isn't just a statement that Peter makes; it is also a question. We have left everything, now what is to become of us?

Without backing away from his call to leave everything and let God do the impossible, Jesus promises something beautiful. He promises a whole new life, an abundant and happy life. A new family, new friends, new possessions, and yes, new troubles - persecutions, Jesus calls them. And all of this you get now, says Jesus, in this age and eternal life in the age to come. In other words, grace does not only change the future, it changes the present way of living.

None of this is easy, or immediate. When Jesus says the first will be last and the last first, maybe he was thinking of the first Christians who thought they comprehended God's grace but were the last to truly comprehend it.

It was hard to live in this grace in the days after Jesus ascension. There were many unanswered questions. And, there were any number of conflicts that occurred among the Christians as they tried to work out their new tradition of living in grace, in the Gospel that Jesus taught.

I'd like to mention briefly one conflict that involved St. Peter and St. Paul who were among the first to follow Jesus, Peter being way ahead of Paul, as you know, in coming to know Jesus as the Saviour of all.

In the first days of the Christian church, most Christians had grown up Jewish, like Jesus. When Paul was called to follow Christ and began his evangelism journeys, Gentiles started coming into the church. Conflict arose because some of the first Christians thought that following Jesus was a continuation of the old way, and so even Gentile converts should follow the Jewish traditions. Circumcision was the test case for this.

St. Paul said, no, circumcision, and all that includes, is not necessary to be a faithful follower of Christ. Be observant, if you wish, St. Paul would say, but do not think that this is the way to eternal life. St. Peter, on the other hand, said, yes, circumcision is necessary and to enter the kingdom of God requires one to be observant.

This debate went on for a long time, and it was extremely challenging to the unity of the church. If you want to read and study it, you can begin first by reading the Book of Galatians. This is where Paul emphatically says, "There is no other Gospel than the one that I taught you," and where he teaches us about Christian freedom.

Peter and Paul eventually resolved their differences. At first they simply agreed to disagree and chose different mission fields in which to work. But a far better solution was reached when Peter, in a vision (recorded in Acts), learned that what he considered unclean food was not, and so opened the way to the Gentiles without reservation, even though it doesn't mean that Peter had to stop eating



kosher. Paul, for his part, seems to have allowed for certain ritual observances, without compromising the Gospel. He says, for example, in Colossians, “Do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.” Certain things are not required; but it is required to adhere to the substance of Christ’s grace.

I mention that there were conflicts among the early Christians not in order to give us an excuse of any kind. But rather with the hope that it will deepen our comprehension and reliance on the Gospel, and give us relief from our worries about what is the right answer in every instance. Martin Luther, in his commentary on Galatians, says, “We find no rest for our weary bones unless we cling to the word of grace.”

Clinging to the word of grace, clinging to Christ, is the way for us to cling to unity in the midst of differing traditions. In the New Testament there are many different traditions, one of the reasons that we have four Gospels and not just one. The Book of Romans and the Book of James have different ways of looking at grace alone, as St. Paul says; a faith without works is dead, says the Book of James.

There are many issues that if they are not competing traditions, they have at least caused us down through the centuries to form differing views. The role of women as leaders in the church is one. Slavery is another. When the world

discovered life insurance, we in the church discussed what it meant to truly trust in God, and so some decided life insurance was a sin.

We may snicker about one thing or get angry about another. But the fact is that we do not have clear answers to every question, and this has been true since Jesus told his disciples that he was going away. At that time he said, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth." Our Lutheran Confessions help us to tighten our unity but they do not answer every question. Only the Holy Spirit will guide us into all truth, and I believe the Holy Spirit is still guiding us in all truth, as tedious and slow as that may be. We need, I believe, to trust this Spirit, a Spirit of grace.

Only as we stay around Jesus will we find unity, one of the very last things that Christ prayed for when his life on earth was going to an end.

So, unity in the midst of diversity? Grace in the midst of changing traditions?  
Patience while the Spirit guides us to truly comprehend the grace of God?

"For God, all things are possible."

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.