



MORRISON ZION EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

www.mzluth.org

March 18, 2012

4th Sunday in Lent

Sermon Text: [Ephesians 2:4-10](#)

Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: [Numbers 21:4-9](#)

Psalm of the Day: [Psalm 38](#)

Second Lesson: [Ephesians 2:4-10](#)

Gospel Lesson: [John 3:14-21](#)

God's Grace Makes the Difference

For eternity

For this life

Grace, mercy and peace...how many times in your life have you heard those three words put together? Probably more than once, right? Grace is kind of a nice shorthand to church folk, right? We use it all the time. Sometimes I wonder if we truly understand what it means. I have to believe that when I read to you this morning, if you're not familiar with the Gospel of Jesus Christ at all and I read to you "it is by grace you have been saved" in Ephesians, you're probably asking yourself, "Who is this Grace? Where does she live? Is Grace this amazing song that I've heard people sing?" We know what the word means as Christians, but we use it so often that maybe the people we are talking to at times don't always understand it. Maybe sometimes we don't understand it. We just use it. It's church language. It's shorthand.

Grace is described for us in what we read. Grace is described for us in that First Lesson where God saved a mumbling, complaining people. He didn't have to save them. God has saved you. God has saved me. He doesn't have to save us. God has clearly said, "The wages of sin is death." ([Romans 6:23](#).) That's the paycheck you and I should cash...eternal death in hell. There is no way you and I could avoid cashing that check except that God has to act to make the difference. What causes God to act to make the difference is grace. God's grace makes the difference. God's grace is his undeserved love. It makes all the difference for eternity, this undeserved love, because it takes away the guilt of our sin.

For a minute, think about that word, the *undeserved* part of his love. Undeserved... what did Paul write here? "Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive... even when we were dead in transgressions." Little babies like Haley (baptized in worship), that's pretty cute and pretty cool, right? Yet as we heard in the baptism, Haley, like everyone else sitting here, is born sinful. We are born dead in our transgressions and sins. That's what he said at the start of this chapter. Dead means powerless. It means we can do nothing. It doesn't mean we have a severe head cold and we're slowed down a little bit but if we try hard enough and work hard enough, we can make God love us. No, we're dead. We're powerless.

So God has to come and act for us because we have nothing to offer him. Even the things that we offer at times are just tainted by sin. We talked about it this morning. When someone insults us... this coming Wednesday, we are going to talk about the

wound of mockery in Jesus, so we were talking about that. When someone mocks us, we often react by saying hurtful words back. If we don't, then we pat ourselves on the back and we're so full of pride that we go over to that ditch on that side of the road with our sin and say "Look at how good I am. I'm not as bad as they are." Or in our own minds we really let them have it and then pat ourselves on the back for not saying it out loud, as though that was something. The fact of the matter is that we are all dead in sin when we are born into this world. We still have a sinful nature and we do what we are. We are sinners, and we sin.

During Lent we've been encouraging ourselves to be honest and to honestly look at our sins and see ourselves for what we are, these sinners who don't deserve anything from our God. When we recognize that and then we see these words, "God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive... when we were dead in our transgressions," we don't just take them for granted and say "Yeah, I know that. Tell me something new pastor." Instead we think "Wow! That's how deep God's love is for me."

The power of this love is that it takes you and I, who are dead in our sins, and this grace saves us. "It is by grace you have been saved." Through faith. Not from yourself. Faith isn't even your decision. Faith isn't your effort. Faith is a gift that God gives. He can give it to someone my age who is dead in transgressions, and just like we saw this morning, he can give it to someone who is Haley's age. He gave that gift of faith through the water and the Word, through the Spirit being poured out in Baptism, in the same way he gave that faith to you and me sometime in our life. That's an incredible gift. That's an incredible privilege.

It says now we are not going to be condemned. We aren't running from venomous snakes like those guys were in the desert. Satan, the ancient serpent, certainly is trying to separate us from our God. He's trying to give us all these reasons why God's grace isn't that important or isn't that necessary, or he distracts us and points us in other directions so that we forget about the amazing nature of this undeserved love that God has for us. It's not by works. It's a gift of God. It's not from yourself. It's all about God. God makes all the difference for eternity for you and for me because he loved us enough to live in our place and then to die in our place.

All those times that you and I lash back at others with sin, Jesus didn't do that. All the times that you and I have lashed out at one another and at other people in sinful, hateful words, Jesus took every last one of them to the cross and took the punishment for them all. That's absolutely amazing! If that doesn't thrill you and amaze you, pinch yourself because you might be dead. That's what our God has done for us. I think sometimes, as Christians who hear this message so often, we can fall into the devil's temptation to take it for granted and no longer be amazed at it. But this grace, this undeserved love makes all the difference for all of eternity... for you, and for me, and for every person in the world. But it isn't just about eternity. It's also about the here and now.

“For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works.” Good works don’t save us. So why in the world would we want to put ourselves into that kind of discomfort to do good works? Did you ever think about that? Do you ever wonder about that? You and I are creatures of comfort, right? We like certain things. We don’t want to step out of our comfort zone, do we? Am I right? I’ll be right back...

I have to believe right now some of you are squirming. A pastor at Morrison Zion left the pulpit, walked down and is still talking to us. This isn’t right. The roof is going to fall in. I’m out of my comfort zone. Am I right? I’m doing it for a reason. Listen and bare with me and you’ll see why.

Sometimes we have to get out of our comfort zone. I get out of my comfort zone every week when I put on this white gown. White is not slimming, right? I do it for a reason because I wanted to teach the congregation that you don’t have to wear a black gown. You can wear a white gown. God has not said you have to do one or the other, so I do it.

Our comfort zone... it often has to do with our sinful nature. Whether I’m standing there or standing here or back there, are you still covered by the blood of Christ? Did he live and die for you? Do you live in a state of grace as a Christian? It doesn’t matter where I am. Are you still in a state of grace? Yes. So it’s not your new self, the part of you that loves God, that is made a little squirmy or a little uncomfortable by me being down here, is it? It’s probably your sinful nature, because your sinful nature wants things the way you want it to be, the way I like it to be, and if it makes me uncomfortable, it’s no good. Don’t do it. If you are having those thoughts, is that coming from your new self or from your sinful nature? Sometimes as Christians we have to get out of our comfort zone.

In here it says God has prepared works for you and I to do to reflect the love, the grace that he has shown us. So grace makes a difference for right now. We now live for him, not because we have to. It’s not works that save us. Last week we heard about how we have been set free from the Law of sin and death. So we don’t motivate with the Law. We don’t use the Law as a club as Christians. Now we do it because we love Christ. It’s not obligation. It’s not “have to”. It’s “Man! God loved me that much! I want to show love back to him.”

Think about it. If you were one of those Israelites I read to you about, venomous snakes... you’re cousin Fred got bit and died. Then you got bit and you looked at that brass serpent and lived. Do you think you’d tell someone else about the brass serpent? Or would you just say, “Hey, you’re bit. Tough luck.” You’d be telling everyone about it, wouldn’t you?

Ron, are you still awake? Good. Could you get your ushers up and hand out the sheets I wanted to give to everyone this morning? Now I’m going to ask you to do two things at once. Take the sheet from an usher and still listen to me. Some of you tell me you can do two things at once very well, like listen with your eyes closed, so I’m

asking you to do something a little different this morning. They are going to hand them out and I'm going to keep talking.

I think one of the good works that God has prepared in advance for you and me to do is mentioned in what I read to you. "God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus." That's amazing! God has exalted you and me, sinful wretches that we are, and has set us in the clouds ruling with Christ. We rule with Christ. That's what he is saying. Why does he put us there? If you look in the Bulletin at the text, it says "in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus." God's grace has exalted you and me up so that we get out of our comfort zone and show others the incomparable greatness of Christ's grace. Isn't that what this is saying? One of the good works he has called in advance for us to do is to show the incomparable richness of his grace by telling others about the kindness God has shown us in Christ Jesus. That is one of the good works he has prepared in advance for us to do.

What I'm having the ushers hand out to you is a sheet that helps you to identify your friends, your relatives, your associates, your neighbors who need to know about this Jesus fella. What I would like you to do is sometime today, sit down and actually write down names under these things. Identify people you know that need to know how much God loves them and what God has done for them. They have suggested categories. Identify them. Think about it and put their names down. That's what I am going to ask you to do. You don't have to do this. We operate out of grace, not out of Law, right? So I'm not telling you that you have to do this and you better give me those names back or I'm going to let my foot do the talking. That's not what we are talking about. We do this out of love for God, not out of compulsion. If you don't do it, you're not going to be penalized. I'm just asking you to consider doing this, even if you aren't our member. We want people to be connected to Christ, not to us. So if you belong to a different church, do this and invite them to your church. I want people connected to Christ, not to me. Identify them. Sometime today, put them down.

Then, if you look in the upper right corner of the page, after you identify, it says "Pray." Devote yourself to a week of prayer for this person. Pray dangerously. I don't mean pray with your eyes closed as you drive to work. What I am talking about by praying dangerously is praying, saying "Lord, this person needs Jesus. Lord, use me. Let me be your voice Jesus." Pray dangerously in a way that makes you a little uncomfortable and takes you out of your comfort zone. On the bottom two corners, it has more things that it wants you to do. Invite them to church. That's great.

Then we are going to give you something next week. We have 1,000 postcards coming for inviting people to the Easter Festival Service. They should be here this week. They have a beautiful portrait of Christ and beautiful message on them. We've also ordered two signs to put out in front of the church, road signs that have that same picture and advertise our worship times. We are going to give you those postcards next week and ask you to share those with someone. If you don't want to, don't. Again, it's not a have to. It's a, God loves us this much, don't you want to tell someone else about how great,

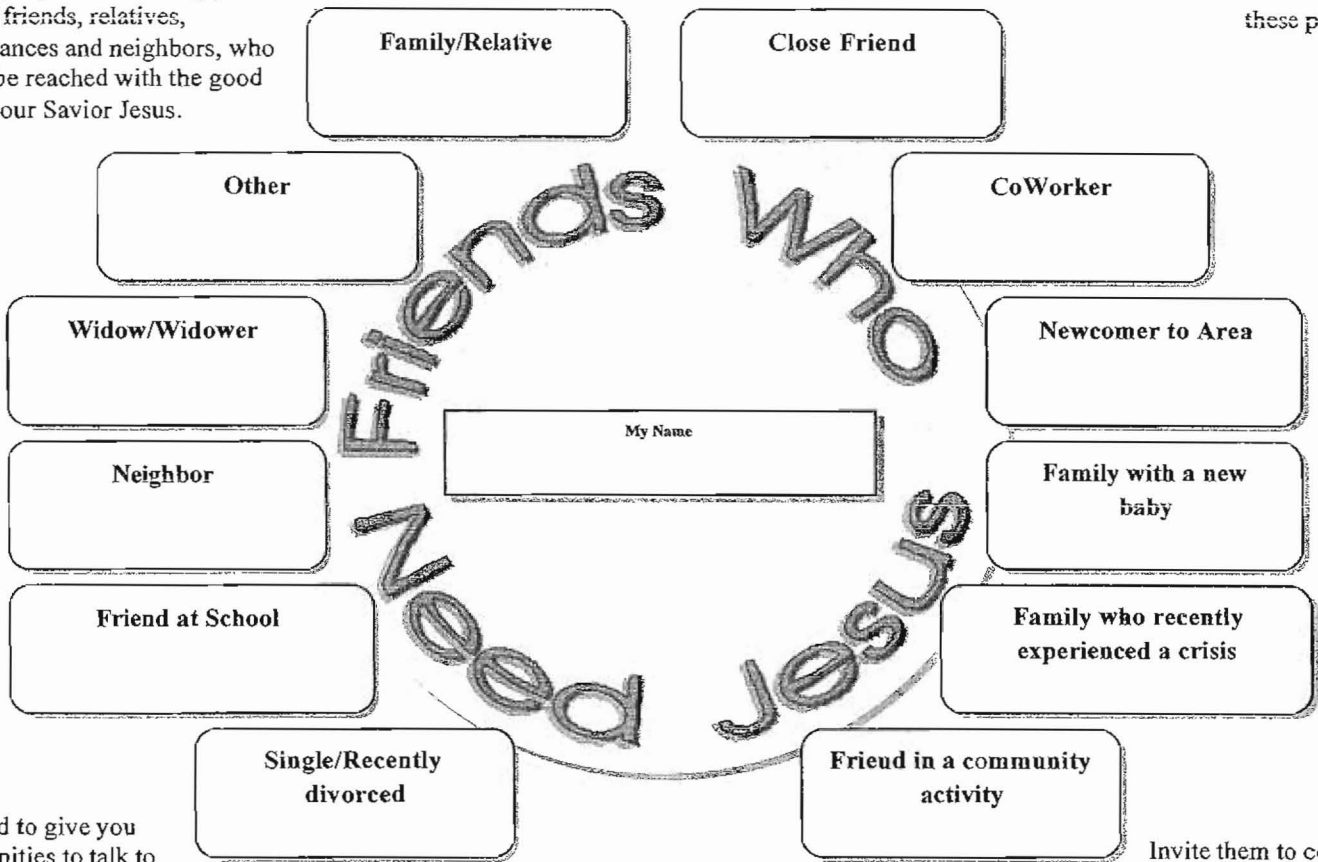
how cool and how awesome our God is? It's pretty straightforward. It's pretty self evident? But am I putting you out of your comfort zone?

Whether you're in your sinful nature's comfort zone or whether you're not, it is by grace you are saved, through faith—this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God. You are covered by the blood of Christ. The blood of Christ will enable you to do things outside of your comfort zone that you never thought you could do.

Ask my speech professor in college. The first time I ever had to stand up and read a Psalm, just read a Psalm in front of class, I was shaking like a leaf. You could hear it in my voice. He said, "Randy, I bet you'd be a lot happier if there was a 6'8" 280lb. Defensive End across from you." I said "You bet." But by God's help and God's strength, we can do things that are outside of our comfort zone. The fact that I love preaching so much now is evidence of God's power. That's the power he has for you that was connected to you at your baptism as well.

Identify people from among your circle of friends, relatives, acquaintances and neighbors, who need to be reached with the good news of our Savior Jesus.

Pray for these people.



Ask God to give you opportunities to talk to them about Jesus.

Invite them to come to worship with you.