

What Lutherans Believe About Grace

Proper 6 2007 | Galatians 2; Luke 7

Series Intro

This summer,
we're exploring your responses
to the sentence: What Lutherans Believe about . . ."
It's not too late to make your suggestion
on a yellow communication card!
This morning, we're going to tackle
what Lutherans believe about grace.

Grace Makes us Unique

Many years ago,
a group of theologians and other deep thinkers
met at a conference to discuss
what makes Christianity different
from all the other religions of the world.
Some of the participants argued that
Christianity is unique because of the incarnation,
the teaching that God became human.
Others in the group suggested
what made Christianity unique was the resurrection.

English author C. S. Lewis
joined the discussion a little late;
he came in, sat down,
and asked what the commotion was all about.
When he learned that it was
a debate about what makes Christianity unique,
he immediately commented:
"Oh, that's easy. It's grace."ⁱ

On the one hand, we know a lot about grace.
We say it at meals . . . at least, sometimes!
When watching figure skating or ballet,
we may remark that the performance was 'graceful.'

Karen and I will name our daughter from China
Amy Grace.

At least in some respects,
we are very familiar with grace.

But on another hand,
grace rightly understood is a difficult gift
to get our minds . . . and hearts . . . around.

Let's start with a quote from
Christian author Frederick Buechner:

*Grace is something you can never get
but only be given.
There's no way to earn it or deserve it
or bring it about any more than you can
deserve the taste of raspberries and cream
or earn good looks or bring about your own birth.
A crucial eccentricity of the Christian faith
is the assertion that people are saved by grace.
There's nothing you have to do.
There's nothing you have to do.
There's nothing you have to do.*

We live in a culture that is automatically suspicious
of something for nothing.
You know the old saying,

There's no such thing . . . as a free lunch.

Pollster George Barna,
tells us that more than half of all adults (54%)
inside and outside the church believe that
if a person is generally good,
or does enough good things for others
during their life,
they will earn a place in Heaven. (2006).

About one-third of born again Christians (33%) believe that if a person is good enough they can earn a place in Heaven. (2005)ⁱⁱ

We live almost every day of our lives, in school, at work, in our families, being judged for what we do or don't do. We're evaluated, measured, examined, and sometimes, found wanting. Affection, praise, support and encouragement are all doled out sparingly; often, conditionally.

And yet, into our faith lives comes this amazing fundamental assertion:

there is nothing we have to do to earn God's unconditional favor.

In fact, there's nothing we **can** do to earn God's unconditional favor. God's love comes to us, not because of anything we could ever do, but only through Jesus' life, death and resurrection on our behalf.

What is God's grace?
Lutheran pastor and author Martin Marty puts it this way: Grace is

*the generous outpouring of all that is good, all that we need, issued from the very heart of God, with no strings attached.*ⁱⁱⁱ

Grace Changes Us

Sometimes, though, this healthy emphasis on our inability to do anything to earn God's favor becomes twisted to an unhealthy bent, with the argument that since we can't do anything, we don't have to do anything and we can simply live however we please.

Someone once confronted Martin Luther on this very issue with the remark, "If this [teaching about grace] is true, a person could simply live as he pleased!" "Indeed!" answered Luther. "Now, what pleases you?"^{iv}

Grace, rightly understood and experienced, changes us.

It changes how we see others and it changes what pleases us.

We see this life-changing grace at work in our gospel reading today.

This woman who crashes the Pharisee's dinner party apparently had an encounter with Jesus before.

At that time, he had forgiven her sins.

Her faith response was to come to the dinner party and to say thank you to Jesus publicly.

Her actions are a beautiful example of grace at work.

We can look around and see how the power of grace can make a profound difference in people's lives, and how it can cause them to behave differently.

Perhaps you recall reading or hearing several years ago about Eugene Lang. He was a successful businessman,

a corporate executive, a wealthy man.
It had not always been so.
He grew up in a working class family
in Public School number 121 in Manhattan,
which is on the edge of Harlem.

That was many years ago,
perhaps back in the 1930's.
At any rate, Eugene Lang is no doubt
the most successful man who ever graduated
from P.S. 121.
And so they invited him
to come and deliver a commencement address
for the graduating 6th-grade class.
The principal explained
that they tried to have a nice ceremony
because it was the only graduation
most of these children would ever experience.
In the late 1980's,
three out of four of the graduates
of P. S. 121 dropped out
before they made it through high school.
It had been many years
since even one P. S. 121 student had gone to college.

So Eugene Lang came to speak to that class.
There were only 52 of them that year;
some who had started kindergarten with this group
had already dropped out before 6th grade;
others had been victims of drugs
or crime or family disintegration.
Eugene Lang wanted
to urge these children to stay in school.
"You can do it," he said. "You can go to college!"

But he suddenly realized that none of them
were really listening to him anymore

not the students, not their parents.
They lived in that community.
They knew what the reality was.
This big shot executive could talk all he wanted;
he didn't know what was real.
They lived there.
They knew his words didn't apply to them.
He hadn't really thought this out ahead of time.
He had no plan, no sense of doing anything other
than making a speech that day.
But he could read in their mocking eyes
the hopelessness, and he had to do something.
Suddenly he folded up his speech
and walked away from the lectern,
toward the front of the stage.
"I really mean it," he said, "You can do it.
I'm here to make a promise to you.
Any one of you that graduates from high school
with good enough grades to get accepted to college,
I promise you that I will provide a generous scholarship so
that you can go to college."
Now they were listening!

Do you remember this story?
It made a splash when he did it.
Eugene Lang, wealthy businessman,
promising college scholarships to inner city students.
It was on the national news the next night.
But did you ever hear how things turned out?
In that class of 52 6th-graders,
in a school where
the high school graduate rate
was running about 25%,
48 of those students graduated from high school.
That's 92%.

Of the 48 who graduated,

40 of them went on to college
on scholarships arranged by Eugene Lang.
And of those 40, 37 received their degree.

When people believe a promise,
lives are irrevocably changed.
It can happen in the secular world,
in a school like P.S. 121.
And it can happen in your life, too.
That's the power of God's grace.
Once we're touched by God –
in the waters of baptism,
at the Lord's Supper,
in this fellowship of believers and seekers,
our lives are irrevocably changed.

Grace is about freedom;
not the freedom to do anything we want,
but the freedom to be
the person God intended us to be.
By grace, we are freed
from the power of sin and evil,
and we are freed **for** service and ministry.
By grace, we are freed **from** death
and eternal separation from God,
and we are freed **for** a life-long fellowship with God
and with God's people, the Church.

All of this is a gift from our living and loving God.

The Pharisee in our gospel reading this morning
didn't get it.
Neither did the older son
in the parable of the prodigal father in Luke 15.
Sometimes we get it, like the woman who crashed the dinner
party got it.
And sometimes we're more

like the Pharisee and the early Christians in Jerusalem with James that Paul talks about in Galatians 2.

Wherever we find ourselves this morning,
know this:

God's love and unconditional acceptance
of us is here, for us
in the bread and wine
and grape juice of communion –
touchable, taste-able examples
of the lengths to which God will go
to draw us into an eternal love relationship with him.

May it be true for us as well.

Amen

ⁱ *10,000 Sermon Illustrations*. (electronic ed.). Dallas: Biblical Studies Press, 2000.

ⁱⁱ Downloaded from The Barna Group [<http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=Topic&TopicID=4> and <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=Topic&TopicID=8>] on June 16, 2007.

ⁱⁱⁱ Martin Marty, *Lutheran Answers to Lutheran Questions* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2007).

^{iv} *10,000 Sermon Illustrations*. (electronic ed.). Dallas: Biblical Studies Press, 2000.