



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMON

“Stewards of Grace”

Scripture Lessons: *2 Kings 7:3-9; Philippians 2:12-13*

*This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr.
on October 1, 2023, at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church
in Charleston, South Carolina.*

2 Kings 7:3-9

The Arameans Flee

³ Now there were four men with a defiling skin disease outside the city gate who said to one another, “Why should we sit here until we die? ⁴ If we say, ‘Let us enter the city,’ the famine is in the city, and we shall die there, but if we sit here, we shall also die. Therefore, let us desert to the Aramean camp; if they spare our lives, we shall live, and if they kill us, we shall but die.” ⁵ So they arose at twilight to go to the Aramean camp, but when they came to the edge of the Aramean camp there was no one there at all. ⁶ For the Lord had caused the Aramean army to hear the sound of chariots and of horses, the sound of a great army, so that they said to one another, “The king of Israel has hired the kings of the Hittites and the kings of Egypt to fight against us.” ⁷ So they fled away in the twilight and abandoned their tents, their horses, and their donkeys, leaving the camp just as it was, and fled for their lives. ⁸ When these diseased men had come to the edge of the camp, they went into a tent, ate and drank, carried off silver, gold, and clothing, and went and hid them. Then they came back, entered another tent, carried off things from it and went and hid them.

⁹ Then they said to one another, “What we are doing is wrong. This is a day of good news; if we are silent and wait until the morning light, we will be found guilty; therefore let us go and tell the king’s household.”

Philippians 2:12-13

Shining as Lights in the World

¹² Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence but much more now in my absence, work on your own salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Stewards of Grace

Last Sunday, our Parramore Preacher, Todd Jones, provided some sobering statistics regarding the church and our church trends.

You may recall that he referenced the Pew Research Center, that in 1998 asked the question: Is religion important to your life? And roughly 62% of those who were polled responded, “yes.” Fast forward to 2023, and, to that same question, only 39% of respondents said that religion was an important part of their life.

When I graduated from seminary in 1998, the Presbyterian Church (USA) had roughly 2.1 million members. Today that number has fallen to around 1.1 million members. That’s roughly a million less people who call our particular brand of Presbyterianism home than did so 25 years ago. Sadly, declining membership is reality that many mainline denominations are facing.

While on sabbatical, I was able to visit some 10 different churches on Sunday mornings -- and I probably worshipped in at least that many online -- and I can safely say that such a downward trend, while evident in some cases, does not mark the life of every church. Praise be to God it does not mark our life.

Speaking to such realities, albeit in a different day and age, John Calvin said this, “Although the melancholy desolation which confronts us on every side may cry that no remnant of the church is left, let us know that Christ’s death is fruitful, that God miraculously keeps His church as in hiding places.

And so it was said to Elijah, “Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him” (1 Kings 19:18).

Friends, Christ’s Church endures! Jesus said it himself: “The gates of hell will not prevail against it!”

Karl Barth once described the church as “the earthly-historical form of the existence of Jesus Christ,” which I have always taken to mean that we are the hands and feet of Jesus.

Of course, Jesus is the head of the body ... but the body is me / the body is you. The body is, in fact, the church called forth wherever she is found ... and when we hear such Biblical admonitions that we are to live and move and have our being in God; we are designed by God to function – to work ... the hands to hold, the feet to walk.

In his letter to the church in Ephesus, the Apostle Paul said: “And God has put all things under His feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”

Around this table, we experience something of that “fullness” -- not just in our bellies, but in our Spirits, for here is where we experience some of God’s most graceful provision.

And on this World Communion Sunday we are invited to think about that provision within the context of the communion ... of the saints.

Think about it...we who gather here are enjoying fellowship with Jesus Christ ... spiritually, we are communing with Jesus. And those friends of ours who are celebrating the Lord’s Supper across the street, or down the street, or in another state, or in another country ... THEY too are enjoying fellowship with Jesus!

And consider that we are not just talking about the communion of saints living ... those who have gone before us -- the church triumphant -- ah, they are very much alive in Jesus, and so, in a spiritual sense, when we gather around this table and as we commune with Jesus ... we commune with those other members of the Body of Christ.

This spiritual reality is partly why we can speak of the sacrament as a means of grace because it brings us into closer company with God and with one another.

One of the chief ends of the church is that, in our efforts to live as the Church / as the Body of Christ -- we would do our very best to maintain divine worship ... and that includes tending to this sacrament.

You see, the sacrament is not only something that happens to us / it is a grace that we receive ... and it is also a grace for which we are responsible.

The lepers in our Old Testament Lesson came upon an abandoned camp. And in that camp, there was food and treasure.

And what did they do with God's provision? Well, at first, they kept it to themselves ... that wonderful abundance of resources. They took it and hid it here, and there, and everywhere.

But that's not how grace is to be treated. No! Grace is not just about what we receive, it is also about what we are able to give of ourselves, and that's what the lepers eventually did ...

They came to their senses, and instead of keeping God's grace for themselves / instead of hoarding the treasure and waiting until tomorrow and thus depriving the greater community of God's provision, they realized that they had no choice but to share their good fortune with others. Listen again to what they say ... "What we are doing is wrong. This is a day of good news; if we are silent and wait until the morning light, we will be found guilty; therefore, let us go and tell the king's household."

That kind of response -- that better and more faithful response -- we are called to emulate it, because glorifying God / enjoying God / delighting in our salvation ... that involves us running out of our selfishness as fast as we can and telling others / showing others, everything we know about God's loving and merciful and graceful heart!

That is what the Apostle Paul was getting at in this morning's New Testament lesson. He talks about working out our salvation with fear and trembling, and, of course, given what Paul says elsewhere about being saved by grace through faith, we know that he is not talking about works righteousness. He's not suggesting that somehow, we can earn our salvation.

No! What Paul is effectively saying is that we need to figure out how to live with God's grace! It begs the question: when we come upon God's grace, will we eat and drink, and carry off the silver and gold, and clothing -- our time and talent and treasure -- will we hide them and keep them to ourselves?

Or will we say to one another, "Let us go and tell the king's household."

In Justin Holcomb's book, *On the Grace of God*, he shares a poignant little story that comes to us about Abraham Lincoln.

Lincoln went to a slave auction one day, and, not surprisingly, he was appalled at what he saw. He was drawn to a young woman on the auction block.

The bidding began, and Lincoln bid until he purchased her—and after he paid the auctioneer,

he walked over to the woman and said, "You're free."

"Free? What is that supposed to mean?" she asked. "It means you are free," Lincoln answered, "completely free!"

"Does it mean I can do whatever I want to do?" "Yes," he said, "free to do whatever you want to do."

"Free to say whatever I want to say?" "Yes, free to say whatever you want to say."

"Does freedom mean," asking with a palpable measure of hope and hesitation, "that I can go wherever I want to go?"

"It means exactly that - you can go wherever you want to go." With tears of joy and gratitude welling up in her eyes, she said, "Then, I think I'll go with you."

From a spiritual point of view, we would do well to remember that we were more than just slaves to sin, the Bible tells us that we were dead in our sin; that is, until Jesus paid the price and set us free from that bondage.

And yet in our great freedom, there comes the freedom to follow / to go with God ... but if we are to truly go with God, then we must respond to God's everyday banquets of grace – we must respond to God's blessings in our lives by being a blessing to others.

And like those lepers from our story this morning, let us not wait until tomorrow – oh, we are not called to be silent / ours is not the task of sitting on God's grace. We are called to go today! ... And we go with God ... we go as stewards of grace!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*The above sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.