

Truth = a person; Grace = a person.

John 1:1-18

A sermon for the Second Sunday after Christmas

In this remarkable prologue, the first 18 verses of the Gospel of John, one of the key points is something we call "grace." What is grace? It can mean many things. "Grace" is a women's name. When we watch Olympic ice-skaters, we are awed by their "grace." When we say they were so "gracious" to us, we mean they were kind and thoughtful.

For Christians "grace" is a key word. Last week we talked about the hymn "Amazing Grace," and noted that despite its popularity, it's quite vague about what grace is and is not.

Luther is famous for saying "grace alone," but what exactly is it?

Among Christians there are basically two conflicting views of grace. First, there's grace that is like a salami. You can slice it into many pieces. We can see this understanding of grace in the Roman Catholic tradition. Grace can be natural or supernatural, created or uncreated, congruent or condign, actual or prevenient. Grace becomes like a salami that can be sliced into helping portions. As a result, grace become like a substance, a thing that we are expected to use and manage.

The Reformation rejected this idea of grace and said grace is Christ alone; grace is the cross alone. This conflict over grace wasn't something novel or new. It had been there from the beginning. It is what is at stake in the first chapter of the Gospel of John.

John, chapter one, is about the grace that comes because something is done. It's a person. In that striking verse John 1:14, it says: "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father."

"Full of grace and truth," what is this about? Grace here is not a thing and truth here is not a doctrine. Rather grace and truth are a person. We can see this by lifting up key verses in John. John 1:1 says: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word as with God, and the Word was God." That echoes in our ears. It's like the first verse of the Bible: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." It is obviously an echo of Genesis 1:1.

Then in John 1:14 we come to this matter of "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth." And in John 14:6 Jesus says: "I am the way and the truth and the life." Truth is a person. The same is true going back into these first eighteen verses of John 1 where it talks about life and light, John 1:4: "In him was life, and the life was the light of men." John 11:25: "I am the resurrection and the life." Grace is a person.

Then John 1:14 talks about glory: "We beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father."

We know about that from the Old Testament: Glory is the shining and the glow and the rightness. But in the Gospel of John chapter 12, Jesus is talking about what is ahead for him, the hour that is coming, and he says in verse 28: "Father, glorify thy name." And a voice comes from heaven answers: "I have glorified it and I will glorify it again." Then he talks about his cross. "Glory" in the Gospel of John is the cross. "Grace and truth" are a person.

The Gospel of John is different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The early church didn't accept the Gospel of John as part of the canon until the last twenty years of the Second Century because it was different in a worrisome way, as if the Gospel itself was about "ideas."

For example, John 1:18 states: "No one has ever God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known." This sounds as if Jesus is revealing an idea.

Another example: In John 1:14: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Properly speaking, it should be "tenting" among us. Did it mean that God didn't truly (he just can't!), he didn't truly become one of us? That's the way some people have tried to turn the Gospel into an idea of love and make grace into a quantity, something that we can manage, because how could God truly, truly become one of us and die?

We have been greatly helped by the Dead Sea scrolls to see what the Gospel of John is about in its context, rather than trying to see it in other contexts, as was done in the past.

It makes a world of difference whether grace is like a salami that can be sliced into helping portions or whether grace is the cross, God himself solving the problem of sin and death.

Two examples: The first one has to do with ordination. In the Catholic and Anglican traditions there is the idea that those who are ordained have more grace than lay people do. Moreover, in these traditions there are levels of grace according to one's rank: A deacon has some grace, a priest, more grace than a deacon, and only the bishop has the fullness of grace. Only a bishop can ordain priests and deacons. Only a bishop can pass on grace, and the bishop does this in the laying on of hands. It's a physical transmission of mystical grace. All congregations must have a priest with this special grace because only such priests can make Christ present in the Eucharist or communion.

For Lutheran and other Protestants, pastors are those with special training and their ordination is a ceremony setting them apart for the work of public ministry. But that ceremony doesn't give the new pastor special grace or power than any other Christian has.

How is Christ present with us? In his resurrection he broke the bonds of time and space. He alone is Lord of his Church, and by the power of his Word alone he is present in his Word and sacraments in every place around the world in every generation. He is not dependent upon the catalytic power of a special priesthood to be with us.

Second example: Grace in terms of what God does in our own lives. Many discipleship programs and Bible study groups are based on the idea that grace is a mystical something that helps us grow as Christians. These programs teach that while you were given some grace in Baptism, now you can experience more grace by following the discipleship program being promoted. The idea is that while we have some grace, we can and should get more of it, whatever way that is done.

Such discipleship programs emphasize certain Bible texts, like Ephesians 5:18: “be filled with the Spirit.” That sounds as if you have some of the Spirit, but there is more of it to be had so you’re in this Bible study to get more it, to “be filled with the Spirit.”

It is important to realize that this use of Ephesians 5:18 is a mistranslation. The phrase “be filled with the Spirit” is in a section of items all in parallel. There are four participles. When it says “be filled with the Spirit,” it means the same thing as “singing and making melody.” It is important to know that it doesn’t mean that there is another grade or level of grace you can get by being part of some discipleship program.

Consider another text, 2 Cor 3:18, where it says: “We are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another.” Ha! It seems as plain as can be that it’s talking about levels of grace and glory: “from one degree of glory into another.” But, of course, Paul also writes in Romans 8:30 that those “whom he justified he also glorified.” In other words, we have already been glorified. Past tense.

To come back to the text in John 1:16, it says: “And from his fulness we have all received, grace upon grace.” What?! That looks again like grace is a substance, meaning that there is grace and then there is more grace. In Hebrew thinking there is that sense of using repetition to express fullness.

This is why it’s useful to know the Greek behind the English translation because in the Greek what is meant is more evident. The Greek preposition “ἀντί” is like “anti,” meaning “against.” Thus, in the original Greek it’s grace against grace, not grace upon grace. You can tell this by the next verse (John 1:17): “The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” The context tells you that it’s not more grace (grace that can be quantified), but that grace is in Jesus Christ, which is an event, a person, above all in the cross, once for all.

Luther writes in the last pages of his commentary on Galatians about what’s at stake in these conflicting views of grace. He looks at the Roman Catholics and notes that they teach grace comes in many distinctions; it is like a substance that can be divided into quantities. Then he looks over at the (Ana)Baptists and evangelicals of his day and notes they teach that grace comes in certain discipleship practices. He concludes (paraphrase):

“The Catholics do not stop urging works and the worthiness of person even today in opposition to grace, giving powerful help, at least in words, to their fellow Christians, the Baptists/conservative evangelicals. These wolves are joined at the tail, even though they have different heads. They pretend to be fierce enemies publicly; but inwardly they actually believe, teach, and defend the same doctrine, in opposition to Christ, the only Savior, who is our only righteousness.” (LW 27:149).

They both view grace as a mystical something that we are supposed to manage in order to be really Christian.

That is the main point: There’s a huge difference between grace that’s like a salami that can be sliced and managed, and grace that is the cross alone.

The right message comes in the first chapter of John, as in Paul and later in Luther. Grace is a person; grace is Jesus Christ, the only Savior, our only righteousness. Amen