

“You Shall Love your Neighbor as Yourself”

Galatians 5:13-15, 22-26; 6:2

As Lutheran Christians, we follow Martin Luther’s lead in quoting St. Paul often. “We are saved by God’s grace through our faith in Jesus Christ”.

How do we receive God’s grace? What are the means of grace?

From Harry Wendt’s Bible Study, *The Divine Drama*, he uses this diagram on the cover of your bulletin to illustrate how we receive God’s gifts of grace and forgiveness.

God’s means of grace are the Bible (upper left), Holy Baptism (the drop of water), and Holy Communion (the bread and cup).

A cross passes through all three “means of grace”, because all three proclaim God’s good news. God has rescued fallen humanity through the life, death, and resurrection of God’s son, Jesus the Messiah.

The core of the message is the forgiveness of sins through faith in all that Jesus accomplished for us, which in turn calls us to “put off” our former sinful way of life and “put on” Jesus’ way of life.

The arrow that comes from the black and white circle at the top symbolizing God and the dove symbolizing the Holy Spirit, passes through the means of grace, the Bible, baptism, and Holy Communion, to the two persons below.

The two persons have circles above their heads that symbolize turning in on ourselves, being self-centered and indifferent to God. They are subject to the power of sin.

Through the means of grace, through the Bible and the sacraments, through Christ's self-sacrifice on the cross, God seeks not only to redeem or rescue fallen humanity, but also to restore people to God's original plan. God seeks to change people from their old way of life turned in on themselves in the lower left corner, to God's new way of life so that we live to praise and serve God and serve others.

In the lower right corner, the man and woman are in a posture of praise with arms uplifted and the arrows passing through each one to the other, to serve the other. The arrow also goes back up to God because when we love and serve one another, we are loving and serving God.

In the middle, Jesus is the kneeling servant king who is crucified on the cross, to be raised from the open tomb 3 days later, ascends back to God and then comes back to us through the Holy Spirit passing through the means of grace, the Bible and the sacraments to be present with us.

That's a good summary, a good depiction of how we receive God's grace. There have always been those folks who have said that God's grace is too easy, God's grace is too free, God's grace is too cheap. Then they wrongly conclude that good deeds or good works or obedience are not an indispensable part of the Christian life. This is a huge mistake and a misunderstanding. Paul addresses this misunderstanding in several of his letters including today's second lesson from his letter to the Galatians.

St. Paul writes in Galatians 5:13-15 . . . ¹³For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. ¹⁴For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

“Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence”.

So the means of grace is coming down to us through the hearing of God’s word from scripture, through Christ’s presence in baptism and Holy communion, and yet we continue to turn in on ourselves, we continue to put our needs first, we continue to act like we are the center of the universe, or as Paul puts it, “we use our freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence”.

Instead, Paul reminds us that “through love we become slaves to one another!” Then he quotes Jesus in verse 14 . . . “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, you shall love your neighbor as yourself”.

Out of gratitude for the gifts of grace and forgiveness, we become slaves to one another and love our neighbors as ourselves.

Jesus said in Matthew 5:16 . . . “Let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your father in heaven”. John 13:14 . . . “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

When we're together in that bottom right corner with the Holy Spirit passing through us to another whom we're loving, serving, and forgiving; then we become a means of grace as God works through us individually and as a church to give away again; to pass on God's gift of grace through every single one of our ministries.

Paul reminds us in verse 26 that there will be times when we find ourselves in that bottom left corner. He wrote . . . "Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another."

In verses 22-25, Paul describes the contrast between being turned in on ourselves and being turned outward to serve others and God . . . ²²By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. ²⁴And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

Guided by the Spirit to do good works out of gratitude for the gift of grace and salvation. Guided by the Spirit to live the fruits of the Spirit. Just imagine what our world would be like if our world leaders starting with our own leader, became just a little less conceited, competed less against one another, and stopped envying one another.

In the midst of all the turning in on ourselves that we experience everyday out there in our world, we have a place and a congregation where we can come and receive God's grace through scripture and the sacraments that turns us outward to live by the fruits of the Spirit.

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control”.

When we live by the fruits of the Spirit, it is contagious. We connect with one another and we connect with God. As God is serving, we serve. As God is unselfish, we are unselfish. As God is gracious, we are gracious. As God is forgiving, we are forgiving.

As God is encouraging, we are encouraging. As God bared our burdens on the cross, we bare one another’s burdens.

In his book *The Easy Yoke*, Doug Webster tells a story about an idealistic college student who ended up on a mission trip to one of the more dangerous housing projects in Philadelphia. A brand-new Christian, this wide-eyed urban missionary didn’t have a clue how to evangelize the inner city. Frightened and anxious to share his new faith, the young man approached a very large tenement house. Cautiously making his way through the dark, cluttered hallways, he gingerly climbed up one flight of stairs to an apartment. He knocked on the door, a woman holding a naked howling baby opened it. She was smoking and not in any mood to hear some white, idealistic college boy tell her about Jesus. She started cursing him and slammed the door in his face. The young man was devastated.

He walked out to the street, sat on the curb, and wept. *Look at me. How in the world could someone like me think I could tell anyone about Jesus?* Then he remembered that the baby was naked and the woman was smoking. The plan forming in his head didn’t seem terribly *spiritual*, but . . .

He ran down the street to the local market and bought a box of diapers and a pack of cigarettes. When he knocked on the door again, he showed the woman his purchases. She hesitated and then invited him in. For the rest of the day, he played with the baby and changed its diapers (even though he had never changed diapers before). When the woman offered him a cigarette, even though he didn't smoke, he smoked. He spent the entire day smoking and changing diapers. Never said a word about Jesus.

Late in the afternoon, the woman asked him why he was doing all this, and finally he got to tell her everything he knew about Jesus. Took about five minutes. When he stopped talking, the woman looked at him and said softly, "Pray for me and my baby that we can make it out of here alive", so he did.

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Today we celebrate Allan Severin's 100th birthday and 100 years of memories. One of Allan's favorite memories was watching a beautiful young lady walk by his house. Allan jumped in his car to follow her and drove around the block until he saw her sitting on her front porch with really cool looking bobby-socks. When Allan got out of the car, Arline thought he had stepped in a hole, he was so short, but according to Allan, she flew into his arms anyway. Allan and Arline were united in marriage on August 8, 1942, just before Allan was drafted into the Navy in 1943.

That front porch coming together is literally, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

May the peace of God . . .