

“For by grace you have been saved by faith, and this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God, so that none may boast.”

Where have you seen grace? I have seen it in my family, especially in my father, who has long seen life itself as a free gift of God’s grace, and even more so in these last two decades. At his eightieth birthday party this past spring, he stood up in front of family and friends and talked about how each and every day have been nothing but grace since his massive heart attack nineteen years ago. He specifically avoided phrases like “borrowed time,” “wake-up call,” or “second chance.” Instead he talked about the free gift of God’s grace that his life has been, both before and after his cardiac event.

“For by grace you have been saved by faith, and this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God,” these words had been at the center of his calling for such a long time, and they were only confirmed by the knowledge that that gift extended even after such damage done to a vital organ. As his life continued after that, he seemed even more freed by God’s grace to give himself in service to his neighbor. By joining the little urban church that seemed to need him more than the program church a little closer to home, by offering to preach every so often—for free—to give their part-time pastor a Sunday off now and then. To embrace the gift of new life and new relationship even after surviving the death of his wife of 51 years—having been convinced he would be the first to die. It’s all gift, he said. It’s all grace.

Where have you seen grace? I have seen it in complete strangers from time to time, offering their gifts to me with no strings attached. From the Good Samaritan farmer who lent us his brand new pickup truck when my girlfriend’s car was broken down on the side of the road—and I was late to catch a flight home from college. Or when a homeless busker left his open guitar case unattended to make help guide us to the proper exit from the subway station in New York City, when it was clear that we had no idea where we were or how to get out of there. A free gift, with no strings attached. I’ve seen grace in the grocery store when an immigrant, with a limited knowledge of the host language struggled to figure out how much of what money he needed and the teen-aged clerk waited patiently, gestured appropriately to each of the various denominations, and in simple phrases helped him work out how much he needed, never snatching the money to do it himself, or otherwise challenging the man’s dignity. I have seen grace offered by strangers during this recent spate of hurricanes as people formed chains to rescue one another, shared their warm dry space, loaned their charged up cell phone, donated generously to

the Red Cross and Lutheran Disaster Response, or offered to fly their planes, drive their boats, or forego their airline tickets to get the help where it was most needed. A gift, with no strings attached.

Where have you seen grace? Zacchaeus saw the free gift of God's grace, first from up in a tree, then from his own house. Many of us know—or think we know—all about Zacchaeus from that famous Sunday School song: "Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he. He climbed up in a sycamore tree for the Lord he wanted to see." That song gets right the parts it talks about—like the song, the bible mentions Zacchaeus being short in stature, the sycamore tree, and Jesus going to his house. But it skips over other things about Zacchaeus. The bible says he was a tax collector—the chief tax collector, and a rich man. Encoded in that nine-word sentence is so much. Zacchaeus was a traitor; he was a collaborator in the worst sense of the word. Although he was himself a Jew, he was also an agent of the foreign occupying force. He worked for the Romans, for the enemy, collecting THEIR taxes from HIS people. Which of course, is how, we suspect, he got rich, taking advantage of his official position, using the government tools at his disposal to charging people more and line his own pockets, as he alludes to in his closing words, when he promises to pay back anyone he has defrauded.

But by grace, as a free gift from God, Jesus chooses to go to HIS house, to spend time with this particular child of Abraham, despite the grumbling of the others in the community. He's a sinner, they said. Yes, he is, says Jesus, grace-made-flesh, and I'm going to his house. And, we are told salvation comes to his house as well. By grace, he, too, is saved, set free to serve his neighbors. By grace, he is inspired to pay back four-fold everyone he's cheated, and give away half of his possessions to boot. By grace, the son of Man has come, seeking out the lost, like Zacchaeus, to save them. Salvation doesn't come to his house because of his good deeds, but exactly the other way around: having been saved by God's grace in the person of Jesus Christ, Zaccheaus is freed, empowered, and motivated to do good things with his ill gotten gain. He is freed to serve his neighbor.

Where have you seen grace? Martin Luther saw it in the bible—even when he was looking for something else. As a young monk, Martin Luther was nearly obsessed with finding out how he could appease the wrath of an angry God. How he could satisfy the demands of a god of punishment and penance, a god of penalties and purgatory. While trying to extract the formula for getting things right with such a God, Martin Luther's eyes were opened to the reality of just who this God was and what this God was up to. "For by grace you have been saved by faith, and this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God," he read. And then it hit him like a ton of bricks: that the message of the Gospel was in fact, this

free gift of God's grace. The gospel is "a word of salvation, a word of grace, and word of comfort, a word of joy," "given to us without any merit on our part."

What was revealed to Luther was that everything is grace, a gift freely given to us. We don't deserve it, we can't earn it, our good works are a response to having received it, not the condition by which we receive it. Grace frees us from eternally struggling to be good enough, strong enough, smart enough, righteous enough. The free gift of God's grace reminds me that it's not all about me, and the working out of my own salvation. That's at the heart of those theses Martin Luther posted at the church in Wittenberg 500 years ago this very month: that grace can't be saved up like treasure in a treasure chest to be redistributed later on. Christ has already paid the full price—there's nothing left for us to pay or the church to charge us. God doesn't need our good works. God wants our faith; it's our neighbor needs our good works.

Where have you seen grace? For a minute, consider this question not a rhetorical one, but as an actual question being asked of you. Where have you seen grace. Where in your life? Where in your neighborhood or community? Where have you seen grace here at Christ the King? Think about this for a little bit—write it down if you find that helpful. Then, share it briefly with someone sitting near you (I'll give you a couple of minutes to share).

Where have you seen grace? I have seen it here at CTK. It is a gift of God's grace to sit with the kids here, week after week, as they explain to me what a google-plex is, or honestly and earnestly remind me that Jesus' love is everything, in everything, for everyone, at all times. I have seen grace received as a gift from God and offered again as a gift to others—in elders who make the most of their retirement years by being a reading buddy to an elementary kid, or packing food at Feed My Starving Children, or mentoring a confirmand, laughing that at times it is kind of like the blind leading the blind, then wondering at how God has opened both their eyes to so much. I see grace here as we share our gifts with the wider church—hosting a local mission gathering, sponsoring missionaries in Tanzania, providing scholarships to ELCA colleges and seminaries to train our next generation of leaders, responding to disasters in the US and abroad. I see grace as we build on the solid foundation of faithful discipleship over the past 55-plus years, and as we look into an uncertain future and recommit ourselves to walk into that future together, and by God's grace. I see—and hear!—grace offered in our ministries of worship and music, as folks who have literally been singing together for thirty or forty years make room for new members, even invite new singers to join in the song. I see grace in the line up of people waiting to get their flu shot, free of charge, thanks to our own faith community nurses and the caring ministry they provide. I see grace in the

giftedness of being practically debt free as a congregation—being able to marshal more of our resources for mission and ministry than mortgage payments. I see grace on a pledge card offered by a member on a fixed income, which includes what I would call a generous offering, along with the words “I wish I could give more.” I see grace as I sit by the bedside of a member who’s asked me to bring him communion, who’s uncertain about when his life might end, but not about to whom his life belongs. I see grace every day as I hear people say to each other “we’ll be praying for you,” or asking one another “how can I help?” Veo gracia en las personas que se identifican “Somos Cristo Rey.” I see the free gift of God’s grace offered in the passing of the peace, in laughter at coffee hour, in serious discussions at BTD and SALT, in prayer chain emails, a circle meetings and breakfasts at Denny’s, on long van rides to Montana, and bilingual yoga out behind the choir room.

Where do you see grace? Do you see grace here at CTK? Have you noticed grace in the world around you? How have you experienced this free gift of God’s grace? Take some time to notice the way God’s grace can be seen and experienced in the world around you. And keeps your eyes open: where do you see grace?

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