

Pastor John Schwehn  
Sermon on the Means of Grace  
October 8, 2017

John 1:1-5  
Galatians 3:23-29  
Luke 24:28-35

It's our second week lifting up some of the gifts of our Lutheran identity this October as we, together with people of faith all around the world, mark the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation.

Last Sunday we heard the good news of Christ that is at the center of who we understand ourselves to be: we are saved by grace, through faith. In Christ, the love of God that is unconditional comes to us as a gift. We are not climbing a spiritual ladder up to God; it is not up to us to earn God's favor. Instead, our faith is in a God who comes down to us: to love us, to forgive us, to set us free from sin and evil and death. Good news indeed!

And then, later that same Sunday, a man on the thirty-second floor of a hotel in Vegas shot into a crowd of thousands with several semiautomatic weapons. 59 people were killed, more than 500 wounded.

The grief and outrage and confusion that has followed feels all too familiar to us by now. And it's when acts like these happen that the good news of God's grace suddenly feels so...well...powerless. Sure, we're saved by grace...but what are we saved for? Senseless violence and terror? Where is God's grace to be found in all of this?

And, actually, in this second week of October, we're talking about what Luther called "the means of grace." The means of grace are the particular places where we Christians confess that God's grace and presence is meeting us within the mess of our lives. Just like God's grace itself, the means of grace are also gifts for us – they anchor us in God's grace amidst the tumult of life.

So what are the means of grace? Well, for Luther, they are the Word of God, baptism, and communion. In these places, God is reaching out to us in ways that he has promised: through the wisdom and stories of scripture, through water, and through a meal shared.

And it's significant, my friends, especially in light of the horrible shooting last weekend, to pay attention to how God chooses to show us grace. God's grace comes *not* through acts of might or power; nor does it come through fancy golden relics or strict rules we have to follow or acts of retaliation. God instead promises to show up in the weakest, most commonplace of things: in words, bread, wine, and water.

The means of grace connect the most ordinary of earthly elements to the wide and mysterious mercy and grace of God. And there, God promises to be with us.

When I was a junior in college, I spent a semester abroad – travelling through Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. While in Nicaragua, I got sick. Dengue fever. For weeks, around 7 pm each night, a terrible fever would overwhelm me, followed by a full body achiness. I lost my appetite. I lost a lot of weight. Finally, I was checked into a hospital where I was cared for by Nicaraguan doctors and nurses who performed tests on me that I could not understand.

I developed a painful bacterial infection in my throat. It was awful. I felt scared and confused and sicker than I'd ever felt before – all in a strange land, far from the comforts of home and from family.

One day, another student in my class stopped by to see me in my hospital room, and she brought her parents, who were visiting. Because of the terrible pain in my throat, I couldn't really talk to them...but they understood. So, instead of talking, they formed a circle around my hospital bed, laid hands on me, and prayed. Then we shared communion with simple hospital food ingredients.

The grace of God washed over me in that moment, catching me completely off guard. All that I needed were some prayers, some caring human touch, and some saltines that contained the promise of Christ's presence. This is the great gift of the means of grace – you can't escape them!

The means of grace are to be found all around. Because we share a meal at this table, *all* tables become places where we might encounter Christ. Because we wash our little ones in the waters of baptism, all waters on this blue planet bespeak the divine.

Wherever you go, there is some water to remind you of your baptism, of your belovedness as a child of God.

Wherever you go, there is food, and people to share it with; there are relationships that draw you deep into your sense of purpose and call. Around tables (like the one in our sanctuary), there is love, there is joy, there is storytelling, there is truth.

Grace is found in the ham sandwich and potato salad you have eaten in grief after the funeral of a loved one.

It is in the shower you take after a long day of work or a long, sleepless night, a cleansing water that washes you clean, refreshes you, returns you to some sense of yourself.

Grace is found in words shared between strangers and friends, or in words on a page that come to you at the exact right time in your life, that offer comfort or reassurance, that expand your imagination and compassion. A light that the darkness cannot overcome.

Word, water, bread and wine: means of grace, places where the mystery of grace can sneak back into our lives.

Especially today, when there is again nothing but violence on our minds, we would do well to remember the meal that Jesus shared with the disciples on the night in which he was betrayed. You see, Jesus – God’s Son, our savior – he too was a victim of violence. Raised within the Roman empire, Jesus daily saw the power of what at that time was the largest, strongest army the world had ever seen. And it was this same empire that nailed him to a cross. Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, in all of his innocence, died unjustly and violently.

And, on the third day, when he rose again, he appeared to these same friends with empty hands. He did not come armed, bearing a weapon of retaliation. He did not teach us the way of an eye for an eye. He did not even bring harsh words of judgment to the friends who abandoned him in his moment of need. He came instead preaching peace, with wounded hands. And he broke bread with them.

The gospel lesson from Luke that we heard finds the risen Jesus meeting up with some friends on the road. At first, these friends do not recognize Jesus. And, at the moment that he meets them, they are fleeing the city of Jerusalem (or, today, we might think of Las Vegas), where they witnessed in horror the violence that was done to their friend. So they ran away.

But just as they were parting ways, these friends invited Jesus – the stranger on the road – to share a meal with them. Jesus, we are told, “took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.” Suddenly they recognized him, and they realized that their hearts were on fire all along, burning within them with love, with peace, with the promises of God.

On the cross, God in Jesus Christ was a victim of our violence. But the story does not end there, thanks be to God. Instead, Jesus is raised from the dead and appears to us, unarmed. Instead, there is a meal. There is forgiveness. And the friends turn around and return to the city they had left, transformed by the means of grace they encountered at the table.

So where is grace to be found in such a violent world? My friends, God is with us – God is with *you* – in the tender, vulnerable, commonplace relationships of your everyday life. Grace is to be found around tables, in relationships, in the waters of creation. It is in stories of courage, love, and truth that we tell to one another. It is in the touch of a neighbor, the taste of bread and wine, the splash of water on the face. It is in the beautiful creation that surrounds us.

The means of grace are not strong and mighty things, inaccessible or difficult to possess. And there is good news in this – because, the truth is, that in Christ Jesus, the grace of God is everywhere. And it is all a gift.

So today, have a little bread and wine. Dip your fingers in some water on the way out and make the sign of the cross on your forehead. Trust in the promises of God, and let them set your heart on fire. On fire with love. On fire with justice. On fire with the grace of God that will never let you go. Amen

## CHILDREN'S MESSAGE

Pulpit – reading. Do you like to read? Do your parents or another adult ever read books to you?  
What are your favorite stories?

Table – Do you ever have meals? What's your favorite thing about dinner time?

Font – Do you like getting wet? Swimming? Do you think the world is beautiful?

### Joanna Shores/Langton Place worship

Welcome

Greeting

Prayer of the Day

Hymn: Great is Thy Faithfulness

Word

Galatians 3:23-29

Psalm 23: The King of Love My Shepherd Is

Gospel: Luke 23:13-35

Sermon

Prayers

Closing hymn:

For the Bread Which You Have Broken