

Grace to you and peace, from God, the Source of life, and from Jesus the Christ, who is that life in the world. Amen.

My message last Sunday was simple. Instead of thinking of salvation *above*, in terms of Heaven, Jesus, as well as Paul, as well as early Christian tradition, invite us to see salvation *ahead* in terms of the Kingdom of God. The Distribution Hymn accordingly spoke of Jesus “remembering me when you come into your Kingdom.”

Now, this Kingdom is not some nicety where things remain as they are. It is a reversal Jesus invites us to enact here and now, one where status, worldly power, and prestige are turned upside down. We hear this in Matthew 21:31 from last week. Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the Kingdom of God ahead of you.”

This is a great reversal, a transformation of society. While the fullness of God’s upside-down kingdom awaits us at the end of history, we anticipate it whenever we welcome the stranger, whenever we fight for justice for the less-fortunate, whenever we serve meals to those who are hungry, whenever we treat each other charitably and with grace, things that are quite absent in our culture today.

Of course, God’s upside-down Kingdom is not the only great reversal in the New Testament. Philippians 3, our second reading for today, contains another kind of great reversal, one that changed history upon its rediscovery by our guy, Martin Luther. Now in a moment, I’m not only going to explain the nature of this great reversal, I’m also going to explain how it could help us with the challenge of low church attendance following the pandemic. Right now, we’re worshipping at about half of the numbers before the pandemic, and that is typical across the Synod; it is typical across the denominations; and it is typical around the entire United States. The pandemic compelled some to stop attending church. What I’m going to suggest is a way, theologically, we can encourage these people to return.

That’s a pretty tall order. And that’s exactly what I like to do for myself. I like to set impossible goals, not achieve them, and then feel guilty afterwards! So please follow me in this exercise of trying, so that we can make sense of how this great reversal can inform and change the numbers who join us each Sunday for worship.

Let’s get right to it, to the heart of the passage, how it relates to the issue of church attendance. I’d like to highlight two verses. If you will, take a look at the Second Reading, verse 9. So, Paul’s letter to the Philippians, verse 9. Paul writes that he wants to “gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.”

There's a lot in that passage. When Paul, for example, talks about how "righteousness doesn't come through the law," he's saying that our good deeds don't reconcile us to God. They're still good, and they still can make a difference in the world; but it's those deeds themselves that do not reconcile us to God.

Instead, we have a separate kind of righteousness, which we receive **from God in Christ through faith**. Now I want you to look at the most important word of this entire verse: the word "from." That's a preposition. When Martin Luther was attempting to find a solution to the problem of salvation – that is to say, that no one can obtain the kind of perfection God requires – he noticed in Romans and I would say, additionally here in Philippians, that Paul uses a word that's so important and that word is "from." The righteousness we have comes not from our good deeds, but from God in Christ. It's *given to us*. It's the gift of grace that empowers us and enables us, as Paul will say in the Second Reading from last week, "to work and will for others." So that word "from" is the word that changes Western history. When Luther discovered that it's not simply the righteousness of God that we must meet, but rather that righteousness **comes from God** through our trust in Jesus Christ. That's verse 9.

Now take a look at verse 12. Paul writes, "not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own."

If you have access to a pencil, I invite you to underline that. It is not only the most important moment, I believe, in this letter, it's one of the most important phrases in the entire New Testament! "I press on to make it my own," Paul writes, "because Christ Jesus has made me his own."

We see the same thing in Galatians 4:9. "Now, however," Paul writes, "that you have come to be known by God, how can you turn back?"

Can you hear the great reversal in these two passages? It's not about *me knowing Christ*, based on my effort. It's about *God knowing me* through Christ, the same again in Galatians 4:9: it's not that I have come to know God, but rather that I have come to be known by God. *God* is the agent of our salvation. *God* is the one who claims us. *God* is the one who accepts us. *God* is the one who embraces us.

This great reversal means that instead of good deeds leading to our salvation, our salvation has been given to us in Christ. And in response, we perform good deeds for others out of gratitude, which is why the early Lutherans said good deeds are necessary, even if they're not necessary for salvation.

This is where the Apostle Paul and contemporary evangelical Christianity part ways. Instead of insisting you must "accept Jesus as your Lord and personal Savior" – a phrase which never appears in the New Testament – the Apostle Paul says it's *God* who accepts *you* in Christ Jesus. Again, Philippians verse 12, God makes you God's own in Christ.

God makes the first move, which as we heard last week, again in Philippians 2, “enables us (or empowers us) to will and to work for God’s good pleasure.”

Does this sound familiar?

It should. The great reversal we see in the Apostle Paul sparked the Protestant Reformation! Indeed, Luther considers it the chief article of our faith, which is to say the most important or fervently held belief: not that *we* do something to make ourselves right with God, but that *God* has come to *us* by doing something for us in Christ. That great reversal, justification by grace through faith, is the article, Luther says, “by which the church stands or falls.” It is the article or teaching by which, to quote another translation, Luther says “makes or breaks the church.” Without grace, we have nothing.

And guess what? It’s not only the teaching of Paul, or Luther, it’s also our core asset as a congregation. Now, if you haven’t read this [document] already, “Assets of Queen Anne Lutheran Church,” (a very provocative title; probably incites you to read this great piece of literature) it summarizes the core assets or strengths of our congregation based on the input you gave us last spring during our retreat with Pastor Paul Hoffman.

Listen closely: Our core asset is the Gospel. That is to say, the good news of God’s unrelenting and unconditional love for us. “Called to proclaim God’s love in Christ for every person.” That’s our mission. Queen Anne Lutheran Church, whose most important asset is the Gospel of Grace, that is, the good news of God’s absolute, unconditional love as the source of our full and total acceptance by God through and in Jesus Christ.

And there’s still more! The second bullet-point under Core Assets says this: “Informed by the Gospel of grace, Queen and Lutheran, to quote the words of my predecessor, Pastor Wayne, is a “place of grace,” a place of grace that refuses to be conformed to a world mired in the judgment of others. We offer help fellowship and service without conditions, without terms, or the expectation of anything in return.”

Now, I see this weekly when it comes to dispensing the funds in my pastor’s discretionary account. If I’m helping somebody out with rents or car repairs, I will often hear things like, “I’ll pay you back.” “I’ll come to church.” And what I say in response is, “Nothing is required of you. Nothing is expected of you. This is a pure gift.”

“We provide, as well, a receptive environment to those we greet in worship and fellowship, as well as to everyone who uses our building. And we accept and affirm differences among us, including race, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation in response to this Gospel of Grace.” That is our core asset. Without that, we’re just another social club.

Now, let's step back for a second and summarize what we've discussed so far. (This is so teacher-y of me and I apologize if it sounds too professor-ish, but especially to our SPU and high school students: I don't mean to sound like a teacher. It's just that I *am* a teacher, who, again, is hyped up on caffeine and has slightly neurotic sensibilities!)

Instead of the impossible burden placed upon us to turn to God and accept Jesus Christ, the Apostle Paul, Martin Luther and Queen Anne Lutheran Church place salvation entirely in God's hands. God accepts us. God in Christ – again, to quote Philippians – "makes us His own."

Ideally, then, we respond to this total gift by giving thanks, welcoming and accepting others in the name of Christ Jesus, just as God in Christ embraces and accepts us, "warts at all," to use the language of Martin Luther.

You can see the same pattern of gift and gratitude in the writings of the popular contemporary astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson. I quote Tyson to show those of you who are uncomfortable with the language of God, those of you who struggle with the language of God, to see it from a different perspective. He writes, "Somehow, life sprung into being through some sheer fluke of science, or perhaps the hand of God, against a cold and dark universe. Each of us breathes and pulses with millions of chemical reactions, with trillions of cells, all working to keep us alive." (I often consider my own body an unhappy marriage of molecules.)

Yet humanity still finds goofy, superficial reasons to fight, judge and hurt each other, as we're seeing right now in the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians. People forget that we share this one incredible thing. To use the words of the atheist Richard Dawkins, "We won the cosmic lottery simply by the fact that we exist."

"So as you go out into this world," Tyson continues, "remember the gift of life you have been given and that you share with your peers. It is a truly rare phenomenon."

Notice the parallel between Paul and Tyson. Paul and Tyson are both talking about a gift that comes to us undeserved. That gift is the brute fact of our existence, our life, which inspires in Tyson as it does for Paul, the spirit of gratitude. And I for one think going through life with the spirit of gratitude is one of the healthiest things we can do for ourselves, and one of the most powerful motivators for inspiring and helping others.

Now, if you think this way of life, this attitude of gratitude, is worth living, you have to cultivate it, right? But how? How do you cultivate this attitude of gratitude? You can maybe take a walk in nature? Study science and marvel at the complexity of being? Perhaps... Go to church and hear it every week? Absolutely!

One of our parishioners put it like this. He said, "I don't go to church to earn points with God. I go to church because I need to be reminded constantly that in spite of my inadequacies, I am loved." Those aren't my words. Those are powerful words from one of you. I love it. I don't go to church to earn points with God. I go to church

because I need to be reminded constantly, that in spite of my inadequacies, of which our culture reminds us constantly, *we are loved*. That God, as the Apostle Paul says, has made us his own in Christ Jesus, and that, like life itself, God's love is a gift that inspires, or should inspire, gratitude.

Dear Friends in Christ, if you experience grace, real community and fellowship by attending worship, or by being part of this community and other ways, if you benefit from being reminded that God and/or the universe brought you into being and sustains you each moment by grace, and if you believe that God loves every person in Christ, including you and me, insofar as God gives us life and renewal and Christ Jesus, *then my God, why wouldn't you want others to share in this fellowship, to hear this message?*

Maybe the best way to refill our pews on the other side of the pandemic, is to call others out of isolation and into fellowship to reach out and invite them in light of our mission of "proclaiming the love of God in Christ for every person." Why? Because we want them to experience what *we* hopefully experience here in our life together. We want them to share our spirit of hospitality, of help, of welcoming, as well as the attitude of gratitude for the life we have from God, and for the love we have from Christ. The kind the Apostle Paul could know when again, he says, "Christ Jesus made me his own."

And so I challenge you, I dare you, I invite you: See if this week you can invite one person to join us for worship and/or our next forum, or the choir, or one of the women's circles, or our new young adult Bible study, or our new Saturday morning seekers group. See if you can invite one person to join us this week. Share with them your experience of our life together, so that they can experience it too!

And all God's people said "Amen."