

7.2.2023 Time after Pentecost, 5

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Jeremiah 28:5-9; Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-43

“The free gift of God”

Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

A blessed Independence Day to you all. In two days, we will celebrate the 247th anniversary of this country. For some reason the words of the folk song, “*This Land is Your Land*,” have been on my mind. The words were penned by Woody Guthrie in 1940, and are words of sisterhood and brotherhood. They are words of welcome:

This land is your land; this land is my land, From California to the New York Island, From the redwood forest, to the gulf stream waters: This land was made for you and me.

There is also perhaps a divine voice in the song: “All around me a voice was sounding: This land was made for you and me.” Words of enduring welcome for all people.

I suppose the words to this song have been on my mind because they remind me that God’s welcome and gift of grace are free. All around us God’s voice of grace and welcome is always sounding. As Jesus says, “*Whoever welcomes you welcomes me*,” God’s grace and welcome are for you and for me. All we can do is but reach out with hands of blessing to embrace and welcome one another. “*Whoever welcomes you welcomes me*.” You have been welcomed by Christ so that you might also welcome your sisters and brothers with the free gift of God’s grace. A gift is by definition free because it is offered freely as a sign of someone’s love and care for you.

Today’s reading from Romans highlights God’s free gift of grace for each of us. Paul is contrasting death and life under the law and under the free gift of grace. Paul is reminding us that however hard we strive, we are unable to fulfill the law. Because the law always seeks to restrain us through fear, so we never really come to trust God. The young Martin Luther wasn’t the only person who mistakenly thought that God was fearful, and that he needed to earn God’s gift of grace.

Almost like a folk song, Paul’s words ring out with welcome as he writes, “*the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*.” Paul is, in a sense saying, “God’s grace is your grace, and God’s grace is my grace.” The gospel is nothing more and nothing less than the profound gift of grace welcoming all people.

Yet as a pastor I hear it so often, people speak of their works as if they’re going to earn their way into the grace of eternal life. So often, all around me, I hear voices sounding: “Do this and be like that or you won’t be saved.” So often rather than words of welcome, I hear voices of division and

fear about others. We praise God for grace and eternal life, but often at the exclusion of others.

Human beings live with a sort of exchange mentality – that our works will earn us the gift of grace, and no one, your pastor included, is completely free from this. Though we know we should welcome all sisters and brothers unconditionally, we also draw boundaries around God's welcome of grace for all people.

The faith of a Christian does not fear what God might do to me or to my neighbor, but rather trusts in what God has *already done* for me and for my neighbor by the free gift of grace in Jesus Christ. Faith reaches out and grasps hold of God's free gift of grace. Faith leaves fear and all bartering with God behind. Faith accepts God's welcome of us with open arms. Faith welcomes our sisters and brothers in the same way as we have already been welcomed by Christ.

So far so good, but people are complicated. They really are. In order to describe our human complexity and contradiction, Paul uses the plural word "members" to describe all the parts that make up a human being. With the word "members," Paul is speaking of our physical needs and desires, our appetites, our temperament, our intellect, our emotions, our need for community, our longing for self-expression, our desire to create, our need of self-justification, and even our sinful use of religion to hold our neighbor at a distance.

When Paul writes, "*No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as instruments of righteousness,*" he is recognizing that human beings are always tempted to use their gifts and abilities for themselves first and foremost. Grace, however, frees us to use our entire being for goodness, allowing us to welcome and serve others.

What Paul spends so much time trying to describe is that we have already been given God's free gift of grace. In Jesus Christ, we have already been welcomed, moved from sin and death into newness of life before God. The question for each of us is do we reach out over and over to embrace others with the free gift of God's grace? Paul is describing a process which he calls "sanctification." Sanctification is not a completed state of perfection; rather, we are still saints and sinners, but we are forgiven sinners who walk by faith and not by sight.

Someone welcomed you. Someone welcomed you with God's free gift of grace. When you welcome someone as Christ has welcomed you, you are also welcoming Jesus Christ. When you act with mercy and compassion, giving the gift of water to someone who thirsts, you also welcome Jesus. With our faith active in love, we are to welcome others.

Yet this is what is so hard: we must rely upon the welcome of Jesus for you and for me. We

can never turn away from Christ and still expect to be able to serve him in the vulnerable, the weak, the outcast, the maligned, and rejected. For if we reject our neighbor, we reject Christ and the free gift of God's grace.

The present moment is where we always welcome the future of eternal life. The present is where we welcome our neighbor as we live into the free gift of God, eternal life in Christ Jesus. Eternal life is the presence of God's kingdom of grace drawn near today. It is God's future in the present. The free gift of grace is a vision of a land for you and for me. It is a vision of heaven on earth, God's kingdom drawn near, where all people are sisters and brothers, the beloved of God.

In 1964, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech of "the audacity to believe" in "the dignity, equality, and freedom" of people everywhere. He closed his speech with these words,

This faith can give us courage to face the uncertainties of the future. It will give our tired feet new strength as we continue our forward stride toward the city of freedom. When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds and our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, we will know we are living in the creative turmoil of a genuine civilization struggling to be born.

Like Dr. King, I refuse to accept the cynical notion that we cannot welcome all people because we think some are inherently different. Jesus Christ welcomes us all equally, freeing us to live into God's gift of grace.

As a Christian, I believe that the welcome of Jesus is for you and for me, for the little ones, the vulnerable, the outsider, and the rejected. Grace frees us to stride toward the city of freedom.

The present is where glimpse the city of God as we welcome our neighbor with the free gift of grace. As Christ has freely welcomed you, freely welcome your neighbor. Amen.