

8.13.2023 Time after Pentecost, 11

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

1 Kings 19:9-18; Psalms 85:8-13; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33

“Why did you doubt?”

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

Martin Luther very clearly distinguished between the legalism of the law and the grace of the gospel. For Luther, this clear distinction between law and gospel was at the center of Christianity. The medieval church had placed legalism at the center, requiring that we must do certain things to earn God’s grace. The trouble is that grace ceases to be grace when we must to earn it.

In the *Heidelberg Disputation* of 1518, Luther wrote, “The law says ‘do this’ and it is never done. Grace says, ‘believe in this’ and everything is already done.” This is what Paul is talking about in this morning’s reading from Romans: when we believe all is done; the law is fulfilled by faith. St. Paul writes, “*But what does it say, ‘The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart’ (Deuteronomy 30:12, 13); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*”

The “doing of the law” happens in the believing of our hearts and the confession of our lips. The doing of the law is nothing more and nothing less than believing and confessing the faith. After that, God does everything. Indeed, God has already been in your heart giving you grace to believe. The confession of our lips and the faith of our hearts begins with the grace of God.

Paul quotes Isaiah, writing, “*No one who believes in him will be put to shame*” (Isaiah 28:16). Notice the two words, “no one.” This includes everyone, no matter who you are. This is why Paul proclaims, “*For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.*” The universality of God’s grace for all people continues to be provocative today.

God’s grace is clearest seen in Holy Baptism, where it is God at work in the water and the Word. Grace is God’s work for all people without distinction between people. In the well-known baptismal passage in Galatians, St. Paul writes, “*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus*” (Galatians 3:27-28). Paul is proclaiming the unity of all people in Christ through the grace of Holy Baptism.

Yet just as in the medieval church, some churches and denominations today continue to place roadblocks and checkpoints upon God’s grace. Some denominations say they will have nothing to

do with you unless you completely agree with them. They make themselves the arbiters and dispensers of God's grace. They say God's grace is only given to certain people to proclaim God's word or to serve at the Lord's Table. Yet, Paul makes it abundantly clear that grace is given to all who believe and confess with their lips. All people, Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free – no matter your ethnicity, gender or identity – you are saved by believing in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead and by confessing this faith with your lips.

This is what makes the gospel pure dynamite: it explodes every boundary, limit, and roadblock that we seek to place upon God's love for and acceptance of others. God's grace frees all people to proclaim God's love for all people in every context.

The grace of Jesus alive on Easter morning freed Mary at the tomb to become the Apostle to the Apostles. Jesus said to Mary, "*Go and say to my brothers, I am ascending to my Father and your father, to my God and your God*" (John 20:17). Jesus' words, "*Go and say*" are a commission to Mary to proclaim the good news that Jesus is raised and alive. Mary is the first messenger of the resurrection.

This is why we ordain women to proclaim the good news that God raised Jesus from the dead. This is why the communion rail is open to all the baptized who believe and confess that Jesus, raised and alive, is the ascended Lord of all. Grace is open to all people; God is never closed to anyone who calls upon God's name. Grace is out of our control, and that is what makes it *God's grace*.

This is why St. Paul quotes the prophet Joel, "*Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved*" (Joel 2:32). God's free promise of grace is a promise to cling to throughout your life; because there will be storms and challenges in which you will be afraid, and your faith will be challenged.

Today's gospel picks up right where we left off last week after the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus had traveled by boat to go to a deserted place to pray, but the crowds had followed him. After feeding the crowds, Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him while he went up the mountain to pray. The disciples were in the boat because Jesus had sent them. Jesus knew they would be tested without him.

The gospel says that the wind was against them. However, Jesus the living Word, came near to save them, but they were afraid. Jesus spoke grace to them, "*Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.*" There are times when faith is a courageous matter, when in the storms of life, we must get out of

the boat to walk with Jesus by faith.

This is just what Peter did. Peter courageously got out of the boat to walk with Jesus in the storm and wind, and he soon became afraid, crying out, “*Lord, save me!*” Anyone who has called upon the name of the Lord for help in the storm of life will understand this story. We know Jesus is nearby, yet we feel we are sinking, and so we cry out, “*Lord, save me.*” It could be the challenges of marriage, parenthood, grief, rejection, addiction, illness, loss of work, discrimination, or any of life’s many storms. Like Mary at the tomb and Peter getting out of the boat, Jesus comes to us with grace to believe and courage to confess his name to others.

You are here today because you know Jesus is in this place. Like Peter in the storm, we come here with our fears and doubts. Like Elijah running for his life in wind, fire, and earthquake, God continues to come into our hearts with gentle stillness, calming us in life’s storms.

Jesus is near to us and yet we may doubt. Jesus’ words to Peter are also words for us, “*Why did you doubt?*” Jesus the Word is near to you, on your lips and in your heart, encouraging faith in God’s grace, sending you out for others.

Paul writes, “*And how are they to proclaim unless they are sent?*” Each week, we are fed with grace in word and sacrament, and sent from this place to proclaim God’s unconditional grace and love to all we meet.

Faith in Jesus comes from hearing the good news, and Jesus commissions every Christian to go and tell.

*Why did you doubt?* In your moment of need, Jesus came to you so that you might go to others with good news. Amen.