St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Trinity 11 – August 16, 2026
Luke 18:9-14 – By Grace Through Faith
Rev Peter Wagner

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

"By grace you have been saved."

Grace. It's a lovely word. Also, it's a beautiful name for a girl. But what is grace? How would you define it? Can you tell me what it means?

Grace has to do with joy, the joy of receiving a gift. In Greek, the word for grace is derived from the word for joy. So grace is the joy of receiving what you never dared to hope for, what you knew you could not obtain for yourself, because someone freely gave it to you as a gift.

The Prodigal Son knew that joy, the joy of grace, when he returned home after squandering all of his father's money. He expected punishment. He only hoped to become a hired hand. But instead, he saw his father, running out to embrace him. That was grace.

The woman caught in adultery also knew that joy, when the crowd was about to stone her. She knew she was guilty, she knew she deserved to die. But she received grace. For when they brought her to Jesus, he told them, "Let him who has no sin throw the first stone."

In Victor Hugo's classic novel Les Miserables, the former convict Jean Valjean stole the bishop's silverware, even after the bishop was kind to him and let him stay at his home. Yet when the police caught him red-handed, the bishop pretended the silver had all been a gift. He even added in the silver candlesticks too, as a gift. So the bishop saved Jean Valjean from life in prison, and he asked nothing in return. That was grace.

In a similar way, today in our gospel reading, the tax collector stood afar off, beating his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me a sinner." He knew he had no reason to claim anything before God. How many times had he selfishly cheated people and stolen, to make himself rich by tax collecting? But now he realized his sin. He was cut to the heart. So at last he cried out to God, and God forgave him. Thus he received the joy of grace. He went down to his home, justified. Forgiven. Set free from all his sin.

Grace is free. Grace is undeserved. Grace is the very last thing we might ever expect, when we come before God's throne. Because we know that God hates sin. We know that we are sinners, that we've failed to measure up. And we know that the wages of sin is death. So we should expect God's wrath. We should scarcely dare to lift our eyes to heaven.

But then, when we do lift up our eyes, when we raise them to the cross, there we see God, the God of perfect grace.

God, rich in mercy, with the great love with which he loved us, gave himself for our sin. He was born as a man like us, so that he might become our peace offering, the atoning sacrifice that makes peace with God for us. That is grace.

Therefore, St. Paul tells us in the epistle reading today from Ephesians 2, "You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world." You were dead, dead in sin, along with all the other sons of disobedience. People like Cain the first murderer. And people like the Pharisee in the gospel parable, righteous in his own eyes, cultivating a public appearance of holiness, but rotten at heart. Along with them, we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and mind, and we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

"But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved."

We were by nature children of wrath, on the road to hell. But instead of wrath, God loved us. He raised us up. He made us alive in Christ Jesus. And not only that, but God has even seated us with Christ in the heavenly places, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. We will live and reign with Christ forever, as adopted sons of God, through baptism into his death and resurrection.

That is grace. That is the joy which is yours, in Christ Jesus.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." By grace alone, through faith.

Now here's another word, a word like grace, that's hard to understand. Faith. Also, it's another beautiful name for a girl, and another pillar of Christianity. But what is faith? How would you define it? Can you tell me what it means?

Faith has to do with trust. In Greek, the word for faith is derived from the word for persuade. If you have faith, then you are absolutely sure, fully persuaded that what you believe is true. You trust God's word. You are persuaded that his promise of grace is for you, even if it's far beyond your comprehension.

So, are you persuaded that you are a sinner, that you deserve nothing but hell and condemnation? Good. And are you ready to confess with the penitent tax collector, "God be merciful to me, a sinner?" Even better. God rejoices, when sinners come before him like that. Not like the bragging Pharisee, who thanked God for making him so good, as if he was already righteous, as if he had no need for grace. But God rejoices in those who do come, and repent, and confess their sins. Jesus loves to comfort sinners like that.

So come like the tax collector, and be forgiven. Let Jesus shower you with grace. Let him sprinkle you with his own precious blood, the atoning sacrifice which paid for all your sin.

And then, believe it. Simply believe that you are saved by grace, by the death of Jesus, not for anything you've done, but purely and completely because of what God has done for you, in his great love. Be persuaded. That is faith.

Do not doubt God's grace. Never tell yourself it doesn't apply to you.

Faith is confident trust. Not trust in yourself, but trust in God, in his grace. Faith is being fully persuaded that God will do what he has promised.

God has promised that sinners are justified for the sake of the blood of Christ. He's promised that through baptism, you are saved, you are a new creation. So take hold of this promise, and believe it. Be saved by grace, through faith.

Don't be like Judas, who thought he could never be forgiven, who gave up in despair.

Instead, when you come into the temple of God, the church, as a penitent tax collector, beating your breast, crying, "God be merciful to me, a sinner," then stand by faith.

Believe the word that God answers you today, the word of absolution. "In the stead and by the command of Christ, I forgive you all your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Lay hold of this promise by faith.

And believe the precious words of grace that you hear so often at the beginning of sermons, "Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." When you hear this greeting, don't let it sail past you. It's not just a nice, pious-sounding phrase. This is the gospel. It delivers exactly what it says: Grace, mercy, and peace.

So treasure these words. When you hear them at the start of a sermon, don't just sit quietly. Give a joyful answer! Say a hearty, "Amen!" Lay hold of these words, by faith.

Dear saints, this is why we go to church. This is why we gather around the words and sacraments of Christ: To lay hold of the objective means of grace, the packages of water and bread and wine which deliver God's promises, to strengthen your faith, and comfort penitent sinners in all their need.

So come. Lay hold of the promised forgiveness of Christ in baptism, that you are truly washed pure from all your sin. And come. Believe the promised forgiveness in the Lord's supper, that this is truly his blood, shed for you, to forgive all your sins. Lay hold of these gifts by faith.

Come receive the gifts. And then, return. Go down to your home today, like the tax collector, justified. Justified by grace, through faith, in Christ. Go home rejoicing, as God's new creation, his workmanship, his vessel of grace.

Depart in peace, praising God, to live a life of faith, to help and serve and love your neighbor, joyfully showing grace to others in all you do, in the good works which God prepared for you beforehand, that you should walk in them. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting. Amen.