

Sunday, June 24, 2018 – Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
“Grace Unimpeded”

2 Corinthians 6: 1-13

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Text/Application

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

One of my favorite things about God is that He never lies. In a world where facts are in the eye of the beholder, where perception is reality, God simply speaks truth. The truth He speaks today is an uncomfortable one that we all know as true to experience deep in our gut – life is hard and God gives us reason for hope, joy and endurance in those hardships.

Starting with the stark, unsettling truth that life is hard is difficult because so often we'd rather it be anything but that. Every gone through a rough patch? Everything is humming along just great and then in the space of a week or two a few things break down on you, at the same time as some family issue, or some massive health concern and you think it's some aberration. It's not.

And it's in exactly that space of discomfort that our life as disciples of Jesus is lived. Yes, Paul today encourages us to commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, 5 beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; 6 by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love.”

I'm far from a neuroscientist, but I'm play one for just a moment. When people endure stressful situations their rational, compassionate adult brain, the neo-cortex – which is the bulk of our human brains, the part God gave us that is so much more advanced than what animals have, gets overwhelmed by more primal areas – chemicals release, brain cells fire like crazy in areas governing survival instinct and emotion. Palms sweat, heart rate increases, adrenaline courses. And then those classic stress responses of fight, flight or freeze kick in. These are powerful forces and it's a good thing we have them – it gives us awareness to protect ourselves from danger – but often these responses come at times we'd rather not have them, which perhaps explains why so often loathe and regret what we think, so and do when we're triggered.

Yes, life is hard – which gets us to something critical that Paul says about the grace that we receive from God – do not receive the grace of God in vain.

How could we receive God's grace in vain? That grace, that unexpected, undeserved gift of God has an eternal, ongoing effect, that God sees us as His people in spite of our sin, people loved and died for by Jesus. Jesus' death for you was certainly not in vain, nor was His promise to save you. Let's make that real clear from the outset.

1. Now is the favorable time, now is the day of salvation. God's grace isn't only for your forgiveness but it's also for your difficulties here and now. With ample, neverending supplies of God's grace coursing over us in every moment, God has something better available for us than despair or discouragement, rage or fear – whenever we forget that, the grace is in vain, like a homeless person with a million dollars left untouched in the bank – the gift is yours but you're not getting everything out of it God wants you to have.
2. There's another purpose to God's grace – that as disciples of Jesus we bear up under all of life as an example, not putting up a stumbling blocks so that others find fault in our ministry, but as an example for others, bearing up under life in all its challenges, even as our neocortex disengages from those more survival oriented parts of our brain and everything in us is yelling to fight, run or freeze.

Commending yourself to endurance, afflictions, hardship, pain is such a challenge. That whole thing about bearing up as an example is true of all disciples – it's one I'm especially aware of as a pastor. It jives with other sections of Scripture, like Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus talking about the qualifications and life of a pastor. I'm hyperaware to those questions of not putting up a stumbling block, too. I'll as Paul says speak freely, my heart open up wide to you – I hate conflict. I'm a recovering people-pleaser. Recovering meaning I'm very aware of and working on it, and I work hard having tough conversations, making the right decisive moves – because that's commended, because it's important for a pastor to do those things to be able to speak truth, because it is an important leadership quality and it benefits ministry – but my first instinct is to worry about what people won't like, or who's going to be mad, or to rehearse the difficult conversation over and over again. We are commended to all kinds of discomfort and challenge in this world and the grace of God – that unexpected, undeserved gift is not only for that day when Jesus returns, not only to

promise you forgiveness and eternal life, but to remember that now is the day of God's favor and salvation.

A few practical ideas, when your adrenaline is pumping and your emotions are getting the best of your neocortex:

1. Remember that God never lies – He tells us life will be hard and commends us as disciples of Jesus to lean into the hardships, knowing His grace is for you in such a time as this
2. Pray for strength to be used as a positive example, so that grace can flow unimpeded – as you struggle against your own instincts and as you live as an example to others
3. Take a deep breath. Before you send that email or post that comment, write it out somewhere else, walk away for 10 minutes and come back and read it – does it really need to be said? Could it be a stumbling block? Before you say something you'll regret, do you need to take a break and come back when all of those brains God gave you are doing what they're supposed to do?
4. Remember purity, kindness, patience, the Holy Spirit, genuine love. The others in conversation with you are eternal beings, whose salvation is bought in the blood of Jesus. These gifts of grace are the very tools God gives us to endure hardships.
5. God's grace can overcome any obstacle. We can put up tripping hazards so that our experience is one of not experiencing the full potential but that doesn't take the grace away. Yes, all day I can compel you to let God's grace flow unimpeded. See how poorly we use this unexpected, undeserved gift of God? And God just keeps giving it, nothing can get in His way. In Jesus' name, Amen.