



“The Grace of Discipleship”

Ephesians 2:13-22; Matthew 7:24-29

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Third Sunday in Lent

Professor Martin Luther stood at the crossroads of his life. He didn't know it at the time, but it was also a crossroad in history. The personal discovery of an obscure German monk became a pivot point in history.

Luther was a young man, in his early 30s, and already a man of considerable accomplishment. By university training, he was an attorney. By avocation, Luther was a skilled musician. But after a frightful, near-death experience, he entered a monastery to save his soul and to find his illusive God.

By all accounts, he was a monk of outstanding accomplishments. He went beyond his fellow monks in rigor, spiritual and physical discipline and monastic learning. But after years of monastic life, he found himself no closer to God than when he began.

His confessor guided Luther into academic life. He earned his doctorate in theology and was appointed Professor of Holy Scripture at Wittenberg University. Luther still experienced turmoil of soul and a deep sense that God was forever beyond his reach.

His great question is a perennial human question: Is it possible to have a relationship with God? How can one achieve such a relationship? And how does one know when he or she is accepted by God into such a relationship?

For Luther, the question had a biting existential edge. That edge is quite different from most of ours. He was obsessed with being forgiven of his sins. Most American Christians don't think they've done much for which to be forgiven.

When Luther confessed his sins and the priest intoned the familiar words, *te absolve* (you are absolved/forgiven), he wondered “How can you *know* you are forgiven?” He heard the words, but felt nothing. God remained inaccessible. And for Luther, God seemed a terrifying judge who could not be placated, no matter what the busy monk accomplished.

Luther's quest and ours, however, are not fundamentally different. How can anyone find a merciful God? And how do we experience that mercy – make it real, not just an intellectual exercise?

Neither the church nor the monastery provided much help to Dr. Luther. As his confessor hoped, Luther found God in his study and teaching of Holy Scripture. There, in the Bible, he found a merciful God. His discovery – or better, his rediscovery – of that God restored a picture of God lost for over 1,000 years.

Luther discovered the God revealed in the life and teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Christ, Luther found, God identifies with humanity and joins us in our human experience. In solidarity with us in every way, Jesus Christ took on the entire

human experience, including our sin and guilt, and suffered and died on our behalf and in our stead.

Jesus Christ offers us himself and the way to forgiveness and acceptance by God. And God accepts us and forgives us on account of what Christ did for us. Everything necessary to be accepted by God has already been done, independently of anything we do or accomplish.

Being a Christian, having a real relationship with God, is not complicated, Luther discovered. It is simply accepting the gift offered us in Jesus Christ. We reach out with the empty hands of faith and receive what Christ has done for us.

In that simple act of faith, we are accepted by God. We cannot be more accepted by God than we are. All our accomplishments do not earn us God's favor. We don't find God; God comes to us, salvation in hand, and offers himself. We simply receive. That also means God cannot love us more than God loves us. Our efforts to please God do not earn God's love. It's a given.

Luther's crossroad became the crossroad of the Christian church. Salvation as a gift received by faith is the principle of the Protestant Reformation. Humans are set right with God by trusting in Christ's work on our behalf. God comes to us in Christ; we receive the free gift.

Luther described that rediscovery as a dawning – “the gates of paradise opened,” he said. And nothing's been quite the same since. Christian faith was again “good news,” and the church was set free by the free grace of God.

The beginning of the Reformation is no mere historical marker. It is the heart and soul of the Christian faith. And it is easily and often lost.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, another German of exceptional accomplishment, stood at a crossroad in his life four centuries after Luther. A professor of theology and a Christian pastor, Bonhoeffer rediscovered that same good news.

As Bonhoeffer saw it, the great Reformation principle of salvation by grace was buried beneath centuries of religious tradition and layers of Lutheran church practice – to say nothing of German nationalism.

Bonhoeffer declared that salvation by grace through faith had been fatally cheapened by the church. People thought that since salvation is a free gift, they could rest easy. Nothing was required but baptism, confirmation and the sacraments. God's grace was an abstract idea with no existential power. It was no longer real.

He called it “cheap grace.” It is, he wrote, forgiveness without repentance, baptism without confession, communion without accountability, and grace without discipleship. It was, in the final analysis, Christianity without the living Christ. Faith gave everything but required nothing.

Instead, Bonhoeffer suggested that real Christian discipleship is “costly grace.” It is costly because it cost God everything. It is costly because it requires our life in return.

Bonhoeffer was part of a New Reformation still underway in Europe and America. My life as a pastor and theologian has been caught up in that rediscovery of the gospel. There is more work to be done in me and in the churches.

St. Paul sums up God's news, this amazing grace, in a simply profound phrase, “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself...” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

The discovery of costly grace is, like the Reformation itself, no mere theological principle. Christian spirituality hangs in the balance. When we receive God's grace achieved by Christ, at the same time, we receive Christ into our lives. His spirit takes up residence in us. As St. Paul wonderfully summarizes in another place, “Christ is being formed in us.”

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And if that is the case, then the consequences are profound. Jesus Christ is the great revelation of the heart and character of God. That essential character is what Christ forms in us. We become the embodiment of God's character revealed in Christ and formed in us.

If, then, God is a God of justice, we must become passionate about justice. The issue is larger than justice itself – it is a matter of Christian integrity, of Christ's work in us. If God is the God of peace, then we will be peacemakers and peaceable people. It's what God requires and what Christ gives. If God has a heart to forgive, then we will learn to forgive – as God has forgiven us. If God is the God of truth, the church will be a truthful place. Above all, the God revealed in Jesus Christ is a God of self-sacrificing love epitomized in the cross. Christ calls us and the entire Christian community to self-sacrificial service in the name of God on behalf of the world.

Christian spirituality is fundamentally ethical. It is the formation of the character of God in us which, in turn, forms behavior that is like Jesus Christ. When we find ourselves in the grip of a call from beyond ourselves – Jesus' call, "come follow me" – nothing is ever quite the same.

Several years ago, the theme of our church's Vacation Bible School was "Children Under Construction." At the end of the week, the children were given – and proudly wore – t-shirts that read, "Construction Zone: Children Under Construction."

That's not a bad theme for adult Christians. Because God has freely accepted us in Christ and because Christ lives in us, we are people under construction. Not just any building will do; we are called to embody the character and actions of Jesus Christ, the Lord.

When we open our lives to Christ – another way of describing faith – nothing will ever be quite the same. Along the journey, he nourishes us with himself and builds us into something new.

Come to the table of the Lord. He stands here ready to feed his people.

Amen.

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