

The First Sunday after Christmas Day – John 1:1-18
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church – Sedona, AZ

Grace and Truth.

“From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.”

For those of you who were here on Christmas Day, today's Gospel reading probably sounds very familiar: “In the beginning was the Word. . .” And while today's reading begins as it did on Christmas Day, this morning we hear the full prologue to John's Gospel, all the way through the last four verses of what has become known as a poem or hymn to God's Word. While the majority of today's reading concerns God's creative power in all life, and God's expressive being becoming flesh and living among us, the closing verses of the prologue connect us with the testimony of our holy ancestors. These verses reaffirm God's covenant with God's people through the prophetic witness of Moses and John the Baptist. They acknowledge the unearned and undeserved favor of God toward us that is God's grace.¹

Grace is hard to describe except as our appreciative response to the glimpses of God's blessings in our lives. Often we may respond to certain situations in retrospect using the expression, “by the grace of God.” But the fullness of God's grace is beyond anything we can imagine and describe. John, the gospel writer, tells us that from God's fullness, we have all received grace

¹ *The Book of Common Prayer*. New York, NY: Church Publishing, Inc. (2007), 858.

upon grace. From the fullness of God's unconditional love for us, God blesses us with grace and truth through Jesus Christ.

One imagines that in receiving the fullness of God's unconditional love, our fragile selves could not withstand such a wondrous gift. But God's grace is offered to us in ways that our mortal flesh can best receive. Sometimes God's grace is presented in ways that enlighten all of our senses, such as in the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. These two great sacraments given by Christ to his Church are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace.² Outward and visible reminders that, by Divine Grace, we have been wonderfully made in the image and likeness of God, and we are beloved by God who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

As God's beloved creatures, we are blessed to receive God's grace in the offering of free will and in the forgiveness of our sins – which some may think of as two sides of the same coin. But for the faithful who rejoice in community through prayer and worship, the offering of free will and the forgiveness of sins is fully present as two sides of the same Communion wafer, or all the intricate surfaces of a piece of Communion bread. God's grace is fully present in this small gift we receive at the Eucharist – the Gift that is both host and nourishment of the Body of Christ.

² Ibid, 857.

As Christians, we believe that in receiving this outward and visible sign, we receive God's grace in the forgiveness of sins, in the enlightening of our minds; in the stirring of our hearts, and the strengthening of our wills.³ The grace imbued within each celebration of Holy Communion expresses God's desire that we be made one with God and with all God's creation. This sacramental act of grace and blessing brings light and life to God's dream that we honor the interconnectedness of all God's creation. In all that God creates there is nothing that exists in isolation; everything that God creates is wonderfully interdependent and is an expression of God's desire to be in loving relationship with us.

We witness God's activity in the world when God does a new thing through us; when God inspires and empowers us to do something we think wasn't possible. Sometimes when we hear the word "us" we actually think of the word "I." But being wonderfully interconnected with all God's creation, the "us" that God inspires and empowers really means "us." Really means that, we may think we have been individually inspired to do or be a certain way, but we are always living, and moving, and being through the grace of God in relationship with God and all that God creates. So when God inspires and empowers, God's action and activity is always lived out in solidarity with others.

³ Ibid, 858.

As first world people, with much power, privilege, and agency we often like to do things our own way and in our own time. But if we are honest with ourselves, our power, privilege, and agency exist because of how we relate to others. We may think of these qualities of life as coming from the grace of God, but God's intentions for our lives are much greater than we can ask for or imagine. And God's intentions for us, all of us, often come to us through gentle nudging; through the calming of our minds and hearts; through the quiet grace of a whisper; and sometimes through a beautifully handwritten letter.

I recently read an article about how a small group of individuals came together to help transform the hearts and minds of our nation, at a time when social upheaval was transforming our communities; back in the 1960s when our country was struggling with the impact of the Vietnam War on families in both countries; and wrestling with how to honor the civil rights of more than just a portion of our society. The news article was not about making some major change to public policy. It was about making a small but deeply meaningful change to a comic strip called Peanuts. In the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., a Los Angeles schoolteacher named Harriet Glickman wrote a letter to Charles Schulz, the creator of the Peanuts comic strip.⁴ She noted that, although the Peanuts characters such as Charlie Brown, Lucy, Linus, and Snoopy were beloved by much of the nation, there

⁴ <https://mashable.com/2014/11/26/franklin-black-peanuts-character-history/>

was something missing. There was something that did not honestly reflect the issues that Americans were deeply upset about; and specifically relational issues among people of different races.

Harriet Glickman noticed that the Peanuts comic strip, like most other comic strips of the time, were predominantly white. Glickman believed that the Peanuts comic strip could help influence American attitudes on race, and help people to consider racial and social integration in a different light. Over a period of three months in 1968, Schulz and Glickman exchanged several letters about how the comic strip could address not only the topic of integration, but to help people recognize the face of God in each other. How might something as simple a comic strip help Americans be more loving, and kind, and accepting of each other's differences? And how might celebrating those different gifts bring us together as communities and a nation?

Although Charles Schulz initially responded to Glickman's letter with concerns that in addressing the topics of racial segregation and discrimination he might come across as "patronizing to our Negro friends."⁵ But Glickman did not give up on the idea that Peanuts was the perfect place to address these concerns. After showing Schulz's letter to some African American friends who were parents, as well as Peanuts fans, they in turn strongly encouraged the

⁵ Ibid.

cartoonist “to create a character that depicted racial amity.”⁶ A few months after Glickman first wrote her letter to Schulz, the cartoonist decided to introduce a new character to the Peanuts gang: a black boy named Franklin. “Franklin became a regular character in the comic strips. He attended school on the other side of town with Peppermint Patty and Marcie, despite letters from critics and editors urging Schulz not to show the characters in school together. But Schulz ignored the criticism, and eventually Franklin even made his first animated appearance in the 1973 television special *A Charlie Brown Thanksgiving*.⁷

While we now may take for granted racial integration in our comic strips and holiday specials, we know that this small but transformative act could not have happened without the persistent efforts of a small group of people. And we know that the systemic racial discrimination still needs our attention and action. But it is in such types of seemingly ordinary life situations that extraordinary transformations can happen. Could it be that in the ordinary circumstances of our lives, God is working in and through people like us? Could it be that things that we think are nearly impossible become possible by God’s grace? Could it be that the things that we wrestle with internally and with our neighbors are actually invitations to receive God’s

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

grace? May we who desire God's goodness and grace, be alert to God's incarnation within us, and be gracious with one another and all that God lovingly creates.

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