

Gifts of Grace from the Almighty

(Means of Grace) 2 Cor 4:16 - 5:10

I grew up in Taiwan as the son of missionary parents. From grade 7 right through high school I attended a fall youth retreat, a spring youth retreat, and a summer camp. They were highlights of the year because they were fun, and I could get away from my parents. I didn't look to them as times when I could be drawn closer to God. But as I reflect back as to why I enjoyed these camps, many of my memories revolve around the commitments I made to Jesus Christ during those special days.

A bonding took place with my friends at the camps, but a more important bonding took place. I bonded with Jesus. Those "Triple 'C'" camps helped me, and challenged me, and led me to become a believer in Jesus Christ. The Triple C stands for "Christ Can Conquer." They became a ritual for me and many of my friends. Looking back I see those six years of summer camp, fall and spring retreats as times of being on holy ground. They became a holy ritual for me as I always looked forward to the next one. In my memories I see sacred places, special people, and the loving touch of Jesus Christ. Those Triple C Camps were a means of grace to me as a young person. They were special times when God reached out to me. They were gifts from God.

The Means of Grace are those human experiences that we participate in with liturgy and symbolic action. They are times that help us recognize God's continual participation in our lives to keep the relationship alive. The Means of Grace are those special events in the life of the church, where we are touched by God in special ways. Some of these events can be one time events like going to Promise Keepers, or they can be events like retreats, attending a Christian concert, or even regular Sunday worship, Bible study and so on. A highlight for me for a number of years was the monthly meeting of interim pastors where we shared, learned and prayed.

These are times when God actively lives in our human experiences so we can make covenants with his love and power. These sacramental, holy moments, are sacred times when God visits us in special ways to affirm the relationship we are attempting to live. There is no limit on the variety of ways God visits us, but the community of faith has accepted certain "rites" for corporate celebration and individual reflection. These sacred moments are times when we, through memory, have Christ re-presented and have another opportunity to rehearse our acceptance of Christ as our Lord and Savior. They are times when we reach out to God and when the Holy Spirit reaches out to us. They are times when God reveals himself again. They are gifts that are better than Christmas presents.

The church of Jesus' time had two basic rituals, or sacraments - baptism and communion. These are still the two basic rites that most believers in Jesus Christ partake in. These two sacraments were recognized up to around 1341 at the Council of Trent. Then five more sacraments are recognized to help people through different important passages of their lives. If you were raised in the Roman Catholic Church you have probably heard of them and participated in them. They are penance, holy orders, matrimony, confirmation, and extreme unction. They were an attempt to recognize and respond to those times in people's lives where something new was taking place. Today the Roman Catholic Church still recognizes these 7 sacraments as does the Episcopal Church.

Most of the Protestant churches since the Protestant Reformation have returned to the original two - baptism and communion as the main sacraments, some of us call them ordinances. Many of them do recognize the special ceremonies of marriage, confirmation and ordination, but not necessarily to the same degree as baptism and communion. Some Protestants have recognized foot washing as a sacred symbolic act of the servanthood that Jesus teaches. Also today many churches, including the Catholic Church, teach that healing by anointing with oil is scriptural and a special

means of Grace. These are the "official sacraments" that the church today practices. Many of you probably have participated in some of these in some way.

The intent of these sacred holy moments is to make the presence of God more real than in our everyday life. They are special ritualistic times in the life of the church and in our lives. They are gifts from God to help us celebrate and to help us mature. As we go through life they are regular reminders of God's love, of God's mercy, of God's involvement with us. These sacred times are often viewed as times of celebration of God's grace; of recommitment by God's people; and of declaring to all, that we recognize and follow the Almighty God. They remind us who we are and who God is.

The Church represents Christ in the world in its general ministry of reconciliation between God and humans. These holy moments help make Jesus present to the world at important times in our lives like marriage and confirmation. The purpose of the Church is founded upon the divine action of God in the world. These rituals are times when the Holy Spirit reveals himself. They are visible signs of God's love to us. So the church has over time chosen certain rituals as special times, as events where God's grace can touch us in worship. Just as the Israelites had many special days, we have developed some special days in our church calendar to remember, celebrate, and recommit.

These rituals can be formal as we have been talking about, or they can be informal. But they are times that we have chosen to call "sacred" where through sight, sound, smell, emotion, feeling, insight, tradition, intelligence, and action, we recognize and receive God's grace. They help us get in touch with God, with the vertical, so we can live on the horizontal, with others. They help lift us up to God and bring God to us.

Baptism is the first specific means of grace that we will look at. God touches us through the rite of baptism and confirmation. Baptism is the

entry point for Christians. It is the invitation. It is the initiation rite. It is the public declaration that I am a follower of Jesus. When someone is baptized they are accepted into the community of faith. The parents and the community promise to surround and nurture and protect and teach that person about the love of Jesus Christ.

The importance of Baptism is that it is a means of grace that God has given us. It is the recognition of the human need for divine love. It is the recognition that we often feel unwanted, unloved, and uncared for - but God wants us, loves us and cares for us. The church wants us, loves us, and cares for us. Baptism is the public declaration to the whole world that the individual and the community have declared their faith in Jesus Christ. Baptism is the sacred moment of invitation, acceptance, and declaration that Jesus is my Lord and He is Lord of a particular body of believers. He is Lord of all who believe in Him as Savior and follow the Holy Creator.

Baptism does not make one a Christian. Baptism without Jesus is just getting wet. The act itself does not convey salvation. It is just the beginning. That is why churches have confirmation classes. That is why all believers are urged to study and grow in the faith. That is why we encourage parents to teach and train their children. That is why we have Sunday School and Bible studies. Baptism is the act where God recognizes our repentance. Baptism is when I publicly say, "I am not worthy, and need Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior." Baptism is the act of public declaration that I recognize what God did for me on the cross; I know myself as a sinner and I repent; I choose to turn my life over to Jesus through a change of heart and attitude; and I will now act on my commitment to Jesus Christ."

Another means of grace, another gift that God has given us is **prayer**. Prayer is the spiritual dialogue between our souls and God. Prayer is not asking God to do things for us, but is the communication of a relationship. It is talking and listening to God. Most of us I suspect do too much talking. I think we need to slow our brain

waves down every once in a while and clear our minds out and just listen. Prayer is an opportunity to practice the presence of God. To slow down and listen. We've had lots of opportunity over the last few months haven't we?

One of my favorite ways of praying is going into the church during the week and spend some quiet time. I pray for people, myself, the church, my family and sing. I sometimes sit - trying to let God speak to me, or answer some questions. Listening for God to speak through our mind, emotion, memory, imagination, and dreams is an important part of prayer. Today, I have fallen into the habit of walking, – partly to keep myself awake but really to stretch my muscles as I pray.

Another means of grace God extends to us is **ordination and commissioning**. All Christians are called to minister, with whatever gifts they have, in the name of Jesus Christ. Some are ordained to the task of caring for souls and for administering the sacraments. Others are ordained for the task of evangelizing - defending and sharing the faith to those outside of the church. The task of ministry not only implies the teaching of the community of faith, but also the speaking of the prophetic judgement in the church and society.

In the community of faith all are called to minister. We have teachers, prayer warriors, deacons, counselors, Bible scholars, cooks, maintaining the facilities, leaders and people equipped with many other tasks. I think it would be great if every church each year commissioned each church member for the task they are best equipped for. This would emphasize the means of grace that God gives us when he chooses us by ordination or commissioning. It's also valuing people's contributions.

Marriage is another means of grace. The New Testament draws several parallels between the marriage bond and the relationship which exists between Christ and the Church. Just as the relationship between Christ and the Church is full of grace, so too do marriages need grace.

And Jesus Christ helps provide God's grace between two individuals. As well as within families.

Healing is an important means of grace in the history of the church. It was central to the ministry of Jesus. It was central to the mission of the twelve disciples. Often today healing is used to help people understand the power and love of God in a personal way so that they commit themselves to follow Jesus Christ.

In John 13 we find another means of grace. It is the grace of **foot washing**. Jesus taught that if we as disciples want to be great in the kingdom of God, we need to become servants. This is hard for us. We all want to be number one. We all want to have the most attention, to be the top dog, to be on the top of the ladder. But Jesus tells us, "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." (14-15)

I think the ritual of doing footwashing is an important one. It is a gift to us to remind us. It reminds us of who we are to be as followers of Jesus Christ. It reminds us that our attitude is to be that of a servant. It reminds us that we are to be helpful. We so often need this reminder because we like things our way.

Jesus shared **Holy Communion** with his disciples. This is another gift of grace from God. The risen Christ celebrated communion with the two at Emmaus. Communion was a practice of the early church. In Communion there are outward and visible signs, the bread and the wine, of an inward and spiritual grace. God's love as grace is offered to us in Communion. There is the recognition of the relationship between God and humanity. The presence of Jesus Christ is in Holy Communion. Communion was given to us to remember Jesus and to draw us together in unity, not uniformity.

When we proclaim the death of Jesus Christ, through communion, as the apostle Paul teaches,

in I Cor 11:26, we are saying to the world that we are disciples, followers of Jesus. I am saying that Jesus has my ultimate allegiance, before anything else. It is a means of grace so sacred, so special that we are warned to not take it unworthily. It is given to us to celebrate our new life in Christ. It is a time for reflection and self examination. It is a time to audit how healthy is my relationship with God and the people around me.

We don't know all that happens in the act of communion. There is a lot we don't understand. There is mystery. But we do know somehow the risen Jesus Christ, Ruler of the earth is present with us. We do know that the Son of the Almighty God reminds us that his death was a death to self on our behalf. Communion is the participants saying - I recognize what Jesus has done for me and I choose to die to myself as a disciple.

At the Last Supper Jesus chose to share this means of grace with his friends. He chose to share it with the community of believers. We too as we partake are sharing Holy Communion with friends in Jesus Christ. Jesus called a group together to follow him. To deny themselves and take up their crosses. To lose their lives for Jesus' sake and for the sake of the gospel. To be servants. We have the same call today.

I've shared with you the basic formal gifts God gives us to help us throughout each year of our lives. There are others that are not so formal but may even be more important. We are given the gift of **confession**. We are given the gift of **forgiveness**. We are given the gift of **love**. All of these gifts from God, and many others, are means of grace to us. They are events and actions God has provided to help us, nurture us, grow us, strengthen us, mature us and even protect us. Even congregational surveys and meetings are an act of Grace to help us reflect, process and plan.

An example of a gift from God for me is in Brasil we had all night vigils. This was not something I naturally got excited about. I like

my sleep. I need my sleep. But this is a cultural thing and after several of these vigils, I began to look forward to them. I actually miss having an all night time of fellowship, prayer, fun, Bible study, and games, from time to time. I discovered that when I stopped, slowed down, and spent some time with God's people, and some time by myself during these vigils, my spiritual life improved. It got strengthened. Healing of emotional hurts took place. And sunrise on the beach with other believers after a night of praise, study and worship, is something I miss. But I suspect because of my age, it would be difficult to do now. It would take days to recover! So there are gifts of grace that develop us, heal us, and steady us for a period of time.

A means of grace can also be any principle or command of scripture that connects God to people and people to people in God's presence. For example the gift of **hospitality** is a means of grace where we extend God's love through ourselves to others. **Fasting** is a gift when God's grace can touch us. God touches us through formal events and he also touches us through informal events. And I have to say something about **music** as well as the **Bible** and **devotional and inspiring books**.

God has gifted us with so many types of ways to build us up – that we have no excuses for not being saints of Jesus Christ.

Often I think I have been touched in ways I don't even know about. You probably can think of times and events and places where God through people or his creation or an event, touched you in a special way that gave you what you needed at that time. There are many means of grace. They are all from God. They are free gifts. I hope today you have realized again how loving and gracious our Creator is. The Almighty doesn't just provide salvation and leave us on our own. He reaches out to us in many ways. He gives gifts of grace to us. God really loves us doesn't he?