

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, Jan 2, 2011
Rev. John Tapscott

"A GRACE FILLED NEW YEAR"

John 1:16

On this first Sunday of a new year, I'm going to talk about grace. John writes in 1:14, 16. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, the glory as of a Father's only Son, full of grace and truth...from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." What is grace? Well, it's not like wages which we get in exchange for our labour. Grace means something that is given to us without our earning or deserving. Grace refers to something that is freely given to us, a gift that meets our needs or fulfills our deepest longings. Christ himself is God's ultimate gift of grace to us, and from Christ's fullness we continue to receive grace upon grace, free gift upon free gift. They just continue to pile up.

When I was between the ages of about 12 & 18, winter was my favorite time of the year. That's because I was a snowmobiler, or as we used to call it, a ski-doo-er. Growing up on a farm, surrounded by farms, we had lots of fields and bushes and small hills and valleys. I had a ski-doo as did most of my buddies. There is a great sense of freedom in tearing over fields at 40+ miles per hour and exploring new areas, and even going over the same trails again and again. I loved it, and it was only by God's grace that I survived in one piece. But there is one necessity for it - snow. I'm not nearly so enthusiastic about snow now, but by early December I would be checking the weather forecast, watching the clouds, looking at the thermometer, waiting for that first good snowfall of the season. But it was something I had no control over. I couldn't order it up. I just had to wait. And sooner or later that first snowfall would come. And when it did, it seemed like a gift, a blanket of grace. Then would come the second snowfall and the third. It was like grace upon grace. For me it meant winter freedom and fun.

John writes, "From his fulness we have all received grace upon grace." He was speaking about the gift upon gift we have received and continue to receive from God through Jesus Christ. Let's think about these gifts as a new year begins.

One gift we receive from God's grace is time itself. One person wrote that as we enter a new year we are gifted with a new bundle of time. In fact, most people are graced with more time on earth than ever. They live well into their 70's and 80's and even their 90's . Not that long ago life expectancy was much lower. The modern retirement age of 65 began in Germany and the Kaiser

chose that age because most people had died by then, and the country's treasury wouldn't have to pay much out. One of the problems Canada will face in years to come is meeting the pension entitlements of our large and long-lived retired population.

In any case, right now each of us has received the gift of time. Right now 2011 stretches out ahead of us. It seems like a long time in which we can do what we plan to do. But this year will go by very quickly. Yes, there will be some days when we just have to hold on and get through. But most days in 2011 will be much better than that. They will bring opportunities to accomplish good things, to work and to grow and to achieve, to work for God's purposes, to love and serve one another. Let's make it our goal every day of this year to accomplish one thing positive thing for God and to perform one positive act of service for another person.

Yes, God has graced us with a new bundle of time. And no matter how long or short our lives here on earth are, most of us are given the time we need to do what is necessary. One of those necessities is making our peace with God through faith in Jesus Christ. Leslie Weatherhead, the preacher, was called to visit an elderly man whose health was going down rapidly. Death was not far off. The man was very hard of hearing, and Weatherhead had to speak loudly to make himself heard as he offered the Gospel of Christ. It was a frustrating experience. Finally the man waved him off and said, "I've led a very busy life. I've never had time for that kind of thing." Well, he'd had eighty years, plenty of time, wouldn't you say? The Bible says, "Now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation." We dare not let the opportunity slip by. Knowing and trusting Christ now as Saviour means we have nothing to fear when we meet him in the valley of the shadow of death. In fact, that will be a time of joy and blessing and victory as he brings us home. As we receive this sacrament we are given a great opportunity to enter this new year with our faith fixed firmly on Christ. This is a great time to renew your faith in Christ and your promise to serve him.

"From his fullness we have received grace upon grace." **A second gift we receive from the fulness of God's grace is a new beginning.** The beginning of a new year always feels like we've been given a fresh start.

In verse 17, John writes, "The law was indeed given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." The law itself was God's gift to Israel. By obeying the law Israel would be greatly blessed, and they would become a great people. But the people of Israel often failed to obey the law and to walk in God's way. Now God could have abandoned his people and left them to perish. But he didn't. In grace, God stayed with his rebellious people, even in exile, giving them

one new start after another, not because they earned it or deserved it, but because God loved the people and was determined to be their God.

We don't keep the law any better, actually not as well, as the people of Israel did. So if we think we are going to gain heaven on the basis of how well we obey the law, we are mistaken. We gain heaven on the basis of God's amazing grace poured out in Jesus Christ, his life, his atoning death, his resurrection victory. Through Christ by faith we receive our salvation and also the gift of a new beginning. Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. How often we need a fresh start. Almost daily sometimes. And certainly at the beginning of a new year.

A favorite story of mine was told by Rev. Clarke MacDonald, a former moderator of the United Church. It happened on the family farm in Nova Scotia. Clarke was eight years old. One dull Saturday afternoon his father was away at the market and Clarke went into his father's tool shed to make a cart. There was one tool his father had told him never to use - a wooden mitre box he had made for cutting pieces of wood at different angles. As Clarke worked at making the cart, he knocked the mitre box off the bench and broke one end off it. He was very apprehensive about what would happen when his father returned. So Clarke placed the tool back on the bench and set the broken piece in its place. The crack could hardly be seen. Maybe he will never notice it, thought Clarke. He doesn't use it that often. Clarke could tell him that he picked up the piece off the floor - and that was true. But deep inside he knew what he had to do.

When father arrived home that evening Clarke ran out to help unload the wagon. At some point in this burst of exuberance at being a dutiful son, Clarke started a conversation that went something like this.

"I was working in the tool shed this afternoon."

"Were you?"

"Yes, I was making a cart."

"How did you get along?"

"Not too well, I never finished it."

"Well, maybe another time - what else did you do?"

"You know that new mitre box you made?"

"Yes, you mean the one I told you not to use?"

"Yes - yes - that's the one."

"What about it?"

"It dropped and it broke."

"You mean **you** dropped it and **you** broke it."

"Yes - I'm sorry."

There was a long silence. They walked slowly towards the house. A lamp in

the window lighted their way. Then a farmer's calloused hand reached down and took a boy's small hand. Firmly but kindly he said, "I am sorry you did that, most of all I am sorry you did it when I told you not to - that box took a long time to make and came in mighty handy - so - you can help me and together we'll make a new one."

Clarke MacDonald writes, "The calloused hand felt warm and strong. The relationship of father to son and son to father never felt more secure. Love was in action and it was sheer grace." And he concludes, "So God in his mercy looks upon us, his children. The law, given by Moses, we do not and cannot keep perfectly. The image of God in us gets marred and sometimes broken. Then the father's voice says, "I am sorry you did that - I know you are sorry too, so - tomorrow, today, right now - let's start together and we'll build a new one. It is grace heaped upon grace."

Today at the beginning of a new year God reaches out with a nail-pierced hand to you and to me, indeed to the whole world and says, "Here is a new beginning, a fresh start. Take my hand, and walk in my ways. Together let's build a new thing." From the fullness of God's grace in Jesus Christ we receive a new beginning.

Finally, from God's grace we receive the assurance of God's presence.

Norman Vincent Peale recorded a boyhood memory of his beloved father. It was almost exactly 100 years ago. December 31, 1910. He asked, "Dad what do you think 1911 will be like?" His father replied, "Son, 1911 will be just what God and you make of it."

It may be simplistic, but don't miss the truth. God and you! We do not travel alone, not one step of the way into 2011. Jesus Christ, who walked the road that we must walk from cradle to grave is the risen, living Lord and he pledges to be with us all the way. "Keep close to me," he says. "I am the Way."

The Bible scholar T. W. Manson writes: "The living Christ still has two hands, one to point the way, and the other held out to help us along. The Christian ideal lies before us not as a remote and austere mountain peak, an ethical Everest which we must scale by our own skill and endurance; but as a road on which we may walk with Christ as our Guide and Friend. And we are assured, as we set out on our journey, that He is with us always, even unto the end of the age."

March on my soul, with strength,
 March forward void of fear:
 He who has led will lead; while year succeedeth year:
 And as you go on your way, His hand will hold you day by day.

