

Streetsville United Church

Sunday, January 5, 2020

Rev. John Tapscott

“GRACE UPON GRACE”

John 1:16

The new year always seems like a gift of grace. It's like we turn the page and start again with a blank slate. That's why we make New Years' Resolutions. Of course, resolutions are hard to keep. One man has words of comfort for those who make resolutions: "Don't worry about keeping those 2020 New Year's resolutions, you only have to deal with them until March 1 and then you can give them up for Lent."

Today we read the prologue from John's Gospel. Like the overture to a great symphony it sets the theme and hints at what's to come. Chapter 1, verse 1. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the word was God." Now let's jump to verses 14 and 16 of the passage. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth... from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace." I love those words, "grace upon grace." The NIV translates that phrase as "One blessing after another." John is speaking of the undeserved and unearned blessings we have received through Christ. Here are a few of them - peace with God, forgiveness, reconciliation, justification, strength in times of our weakness, love which casts out our fears, a living hope for ourselves and the world, victory over powers and principalities, a refuge in the storms of life, the gift of the Holy Spirit, eternal life and more. From Christ's fullness we have received grace upon grace.

We can broaden that to include the many blessings that God has poured into our lives. It transforms our outlook so positively when we think of life as "grace upon grace." It's certainly been true for me – one blessing after another, all from God's hand. Of course, I've had challenges and disappointments like everyone else, and some things I would have done differently, but the manifold blessings that I have received far, far outweigh the negative things. It's been true in my ministry. Yes, I have grown and learned much along the way, and there have been some setbacks now and then, but for the most part it's been grace upon grace. I know some clergy, some friends and classmates of mine, who've had quite a difficult time in ministry, but I've been fortunate. I've always served good congregations. I have been well supported and encouraged. I have had some deep experiences. I have wonderful memories. I have made many friends and met so many good people. I have been blessed with a wonderful wife who has shared ministry and contributed so much to the churches we've served. My life has been greatly blessed and enriched ever since I said "Yes" to God's call nearly 37 years ago. It has been a grand journey, grace upon grace.

Today I want us to consider three gifts of God's grace. These gifts are suggested in verses 17 and 18. "The law was indeed given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."

First, the law is God's gift of grace to us.

"The law was indeed given through Moses..." given by God, first to the Hebrews and through Israel to the world. John has the Ten Commandments mainly in view here.

Often we consider the law a burden, whereas the Gospel is liberating. But the law was God's good gift to the Hebrews, given in love, to cement their relationship with God and with one another. God gave the law to set the people free, not burden them. When Moses brought down the stone tablets from Mount Sinai, God said in effect, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. I love you. I have set you free from slavery. Now I am giving you a great blessing so you can live joyfully and productively in the promised land. Learn these and live by them and things will go well for them. But if you ignore these commandments or disobey them, things will go wrong."

The Hebrews at their best, recognized and celebrated the commandments as a gift from God. From the Psalms - "Blessed is the man whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers." "O, how I love your law, it is my meditation all the day." Jesus loved God's law. He said, "I have come not to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfill them."

A farmer placed 10 poles around his property with yellow flags on them. When asked about them, he said, "When I first plowed the land my plow snagged on large rocks just beneath the surface. So I set these stakes where the rocks lie. Now I know the areas to avoid."

In a sense that is what God has done with the Ten Commandments. He has said, "These are the areas to watch for in life. Avoid them and you won't snag your plow." The commandments are God's rules of life and those who follow them experience freedom and joy.

Some people say, "These commandments were human creations," but the very first commandment proves they came from God. It says, "You shall have no other gods before me." Humans would never have come up with that one, nor the second, "You shall not make for yourself an idol." Given human propensity to put ourselves on the throne, and to make idols of all sorts, those commandments could not have come from human thought or imagination.

John writes, "The law was indeed given through Moses..." Yes, it was. The law is an undeserved, unmerited blessing from God's great storehouse of grace. "Grace upon grace."

Then John goes on. "The law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." This suggests two more gifts of God's grace.

One is saving grace. "Grace came through Jesus Christ."

Sometimes we think of the Old Testament as law and the New Testament as grace. But there are commandments for the church in the New Testament. And there is much grace in the Old Testament. God showed mercy to his people, far beyond what they deserved. In ancient Israel, according to God's instruction, God's people would come to the temple with an animal for sacrifice. The blood of the slaughtered animal indicated both the seriousness of sin and the covering of their sin by God's mercy. When someone brought the sacrificial animal it was a sign that they were trusting completely in God to forgive their sins. And he did. God saved them from the power of sin and death that would separate them from God forever. Yes, the people were to live by the law, but God's grace and forgiveness is there in abundance in the Old Testament. The people could not have lived without it.

But here's what happened. Sin is so utterly sinful and deceitful that that it distorted that wonderful gift called the law. Sin tricked people into believing they could earn righteousness before God by rigorously keeping the law. Paul writes about this in Romans chapters 3-6. Rather than trusting in God's grace people began trusting in their own righteous performance. And the law became a stumbling block. For no one could keep the law as they should. "All have sinned and fallen short..." Condemnation was the result.

So God's saving grace finally had to come through Jesus Christ. In his Son's incarnate, sinless life, his atoning death on the cross, and his resurrection victory, God's saving grace was poured out in full abundance. The Cross of Christ shows us the absolute impossibility of saving ourselves. The Cross shows that you and I must turn away from trusting ourselves and trust only in Christ for our salvation unto eternal life. This sacrament reminds us of Christ's sacrifice for us – his body broken and his blood shed to cover our sins completely. Paul writes, "I have a righteousness not of my own that comes through the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that comes through faith." "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." "Christ is the end of the law" as a means of salvation. The law directs us in the paths of righteousness, but it cannot save us. Only God's grace can save us, and that grace comes in full measure through Jesus Christ. "Grace upon grace."

Here's one more gift from God's storehouse of grace - truth. "Truth came through Jesus Christ." What truth? The truth about God.

Many people today speak about "my truth" as if it is "the truth", the final word on something. But when it comes to God, we cannot rely on human speculations or philosophies. Only God can speak the word of truth about himself. And so he has. God sent forth his Son and said, "This is who I really am and what I am really like. Jesus is the truth." John writes in verse 18, "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." Jesus said, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." The truth about God has come through Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. This truth is God's gracious gift which overcomes all speculation about the nature of our loving God. "Grace upon grace."

I close today with a favorite story of mine which captures the nature of God-like grace.

A boy was at home on the farm one Saturday afternoon. His father had gone to market with some produce. The boy was bored and went into the shed to make a wooden go cart. There was one tool his father had told him never to use – a wooden mitre box used for cutting wood at various angles. Well, the boy did use it but dropped it and broke one corner out of it. He set the piece back in place and put the box on the bench, thinking, “Dad doesn’t use it much anyway. I’ll tell him I found it that way.” But he knew what he had to do. When father arrived home, the lad hurried out to help dad unload the truck with unusual enthusiasm. “What did you do this afternoon?” dad asked. “Not much,” the boy replied. “I was in the shed making a cart.” “What else did you do?” father asked. The boy said, “Dad, you know that mitre box you made, the one you told me never to use?” “Yes, what about it?” “I dropped it, and broke it.” Father fell silent for a time. They walked together towards the house. A lamp from the kitchen window lighted their way. Finally, father said, “I am very disappointed that you did that, especially when I told you not to.” Then his hand reached down and grasped the boy’s hand. “But here’s what we’ll do,” he said. “You can help me, and together we’ll make a new mitre box. And we’ll work on that go cart, too.” The boy said that his father’s hand felt strong and warm and their relationship never felt closer. Later, as an adult, he described the experience as “grace upon grace.”

Today, God’s loving hand has reached down and taken yours and mine. He is saying to you and to me and to the church, “There are new possibilities ahead in 2020. So let’s work together, you and I, in this new year. Let’s make something special.”