

**Weekend of Sunday, June 20, 2021**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 12/Proper 7/Year B**  
**First Reading: Job 38:1-11**  
**Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 6:1-13**  
**Gospel Reading: Mark 4:35-41**  
**Sermon Title: “Cheap Grace”**

**Theme**

*Paul and his fellow workers experience great hardships and even rejection while carrying out their missionary work. Nevertheless, Paul continuously proclaims that God has not rejected us but is graciously working for our salvation.*

**Text**

<sup>1</sup>As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. <sup>2</sup>For he says,

“At an acceptable time I have listened to you,  
and on a day of salvation I have helped you.”

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! <sup>3</sup>We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, <sup>4</sup>but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, <sup>5</sup>beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; <sup>6</sup>by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, <sup>7</sup>truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; <sup>8</sup>in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; <sup>9</sup>as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; <sup>10</sup>as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

<sup>11</sup>We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you.

<sup>12</sup>There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. <sup>13</sup>In return—I speak as to children—open wide your hearts also.

## **Sermon**

During June, I am preaching a short sermon series based on the Readings from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians. Along the way, I intend to teach you a little bit about the apostle Paul the author of the two letters to the Corinthians, Corinth the city and its people, some surprising theories about the two letters that are in the New Testament, and some of the issues that Paul faced with the Corinthian fellowship. So let's get started:

### **Paul**

I mentioned last week that the pre-conversion Paul, known as Saul, was a Pharisee who somehow deluded himself into thinking that it was his job to seek out, round up, and persecute, even to the point of death, Christians, whom he saw as infidels, and corrupters of the one true faith of Judaism. Interesting to note here that in the First Century there were two main denominations of Judaism, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees, and they didn't get along with each other either and often persecuted and killed each other all in the name of God. So killing Christians must have seemed like righteous work to Saul.

I also mentioned last week that the risen Lord Jesus must have seen Saul's misguided drive and ambition as tools the Lord could use to expand the Good News of the Gospel. However, I believe that sometimes post-conversion Paul resorted to his pre-conversion self in the way he dealt with his Christian converts. The Corinthians, for example, were not his children, or his employees, or his subjects and so he constantly needed to relearn how to tone down his intensity and rhetoric.

That is one of the biggest adjustments I had to make coming from manufacturing management to the church. I can't boss you around and hold your paycheck over your heads to get you to perform. I can tell you, instruct you, inspire you, and even exhort you to do spiritual disciplines like prayer, Bible study, worship attendance, and participation in good works, but you will do what you want without any concern for whether that disappoints me, or even hurts my feelings.

### **Corinth**

I mentioned last week that Corinth was an important commercial and military community because of its location. Generalizing, of course, the Corinthians thought a lot of themselves. They were likely upper-class folks with means, which meant they had options. And like people with options in our society, if they don't

like one thing, there are other options to choose from. Paul was a poor itinerant tent-maker. Probably not a very impressive man to the Corinthians. And the Holy Spirit had driven him to Corinth of all places, to preach the Gospel – Corinth, the city of many pagan temples.

### **The Letters**

In one of those lost letters I mentioned in the last couple of weeks, the one Bible scholars call the "Letter of Tears" we find Paul back-peddling for some harsh words that have created ill-will between himself and the Corinthians. Paul may have miscalculated the devotion of the Corinthian Christians, because when he attempted to demand them to live a life worthy of their calling as Christians, well, he had asked too much. There was some serious immorality going on within the Corinthian fellowship and Paul demanded that it stop. 'Really Paul? You now feel like you can tell us how to live and judge our behavior' the Corinthian Christians must have asked.

This is the tension that was building as Paul wrote them again in the passage we have today from Second Corinthians 6, in a sermon entitled, "*Cheap Grace*" Let's get started.

### **Sermon**

In verse one, Paul got right to the point. He wrote,

<sup>1b</sup>we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.

What Paul is asking is, how can the Corinthians toss aside all that he has taught them? Now some false teachers had infiltrated the fellowship and were teaching another Gospel that was contrary to what Paul had taught them. Maybe that was it.

Maybe those false teachers maligned Paul and his teachings – gave room for the Corinthians to question his authority – remember, Paul could be demanding, irritating, and intollerant. The Corinthians wanted a more *manageable* life of discipleship – can you relate to that?

But Paul reminded them of the urgency of the moment when he quoted Isaiah and then wrote,

<sup>2c</sup>"*Now* is the acceptable time; see *now* is the day of salvation."

By that he was saying, 'You aren't contemplating buying a new car. You don't need to shop around for the best deal. There is no other deal! I preach and teach the one true Gospel of Jesus Christ!'

Paul was further frustrated by their reluctance because he brought the Gospel to them at such a great personal cost. I'm not going to read it all again, but being an evangelist for this new Christian movement was not met with Palm Sunday-like enthusiasm.

And while some look at Paul's litany of troubles as whining, Paul used it to remind them of his authority. Paul's authority is not based on superior personal wisdom, or his winsome personality, but rather upon his willingness to surrender comfort, safety, and personal ego in service to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

On the contrary, Paul listed all those troubles so that the Corinthians could see that through his suffering he was being depleted so that he could be filled up with the power of God. In other words, Paul was demonstrating *servant leadership*. And isn't this what Christ did on the cross? Endured much, allowing his own ambition to be emptied, so that the power of God could fill him up, so that he could complete his mission to save the world.

True joy in life grows not from the absence of hardship, but from knowing God's grace even within hardship. If you think about it, you know this is true. Faith is easy when all is going well. But faith is purified when we have to walk through the crucible of life.

### **Raisin' the Bar Challenge**

I think it's pretty clear from the beginning of this passage that the Corinthians have a commitment problem. Paul and his disciples have done their level best to bring the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to them, and while they may have called themselves Christians, Paul was concerned about their sincerity, the integrity of their faith. He wrote to urge them "not to accept the grace of God in vain".

"Cheap grace" is another way of putting it. According to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer,

"Cheap grace is:

- the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance,
- baptism without church discipline,
- communion without confession,
- absolution without personal confession.

Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Cost of Discipleship"*

Paul's concern is that the Corinthians are in love with a Jesus of their own making. They love him for his forgiveness, and his acceptance, and his mercy, they just don't want their comfortable lives to be disrupted by discipleship. And they don't want to be reminded of the great cost of that grace.

Sometimes I wonder if that is our problem too. Attendance is good on Palm Sunday – we sure are glad when Lent is over. And we look forward to Easter with all its finery. But that Holy Thursday, the night in which he was betrayed, and Good Friday, the day he suffered, crucified, died and was buried, well that is just too much.

Paul warned the Corinthians that there is no such thing as cheap grace. He would not tickle their ears with it. He would teach them the unvarnished truth, and would teach them an appropriate response. He had suffered mightily for the high honor of being one of Christ's apostles, and he hoped his work with them was not in vain.

The same thing can be said about us. As I said to you at the beginning, I can't *make* you do anything. I will give you my best, and layer it in prayer, and hope that the Holy Spirit will convict and convert and convince, but in the end, it is up to you.

## **Prayer**

God of grace and mercy, we give you thanks for the life and ministry of the apostle Paul, whose stubbornness and intolerance you used to help spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ around the world. Let his teaching live on to teach and inspire us to live godly lives holy and devoted to you. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen