

**Proper 9 - 6 Pentecost – Year C – July 4, 2010**  
**2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; Galatians 6:1-16; Luke 10:1-20**  
**Susan E. Wilmot**

Being the Fourth of July, our minds and hearts naturally turn to the greatness of our country and the many freedoms we enjoy. As Christians in America, we are blessed to walk a path of grace that many in the world cannot yet claim. Our right to freedom of religion enables us to boldly profess our freedom in Christ Jesus our Lord. A gift that should be practiced often. In Paul's conclusion to his letter to the Galatians, there are several gifts for us to celebrate today. We have talked often about faith in action – loving God and letting God's love flow out of us in caring for our neighbors as ourselves. This morning, with Paul's help we will begin a closer look at grace in action. After all, this community of faith has embraced a common vocation or calling to *Practice God's Graciousness*. We know and celebrate the many ways we already fulfill this high calling. Paul's letter is also going to help us out with some more opportunities to practice God's graciousness in new and creative ways, always with a mind to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Mark Twain gives us a concise and humorous insight into God's grace when he says, "Heaven goes by [grace]. If it went by *merit* [we] would stay out, and [our] dogs would go in." God's marvelous truth is that our salvation is purely by faith, through the grace of God. Since we cannot earn grace, there is no possibility of finding ourselves in competition, as if we can win the prize by our own merit. We are all equal in God's sight, and so our freedom in Christ is truly the gift of God's gracious liberty. Freedom in Christ brings responsibility and the Holy Spirit empowers us with the ability to respond for the welfare and care of others, not as means of prideful boasting, but in humility. The Holy Spirit directs us first to God in Christ, and then to loving our neighbors. As Paul points out in our reading from Galatians, our first opportunity to be gracious is in exercising the spiritual gift of gentleness with those who have turned away from grace filled lives. Being gracious in reminding others of the gift of freedom is a far cry from gossiping and maligning others. There are many ways that the world can lead us away from God including the prisons of anger or fear, or the overwhelming pressures of family or work. None of us is exempt. We are all susceptible to loading up on worldly baggage that distracts us from our God-given vocations, and weighs us down. This is one reason why we need one another in community, and gladly bear one another's burdens. This generous act is not undertaken out of unseemly curiosity, or a thirst for knowledge and power over another, but out of genuine loving compassion. In turn, compassion is a practical virtue that invokes grace in action, and joy in the spirit. It respects the dignity of others, just as we promise in our Baptismal covenant. In this way, bearing one another's burdens with grace is not burdensome duty, or a controlling deed, but a living example of our freedom in Christ, and grace in action.

In order to take care of others, we have to take care of ourselves. A huge part of every Christian's life is self-reflection. We have become so accustomed to thinking that anything with the preface "self" is not good, that we need to be reminded of how important self-reflection is in order for us to stay spiritually healthy and humble in our service to others. As the bumper sticker says, the mind is like a parachute, it works best when open. Self-reflection is also about practicing God's graciousness because it demands that we open ourselves to God in a spirit of discernment to receive God's gracious direction. When we are intentional about maintaining this most important relationship with God, it helps to keep everything else in perspective. In this way, we are able to avoid the temptation of delusions of grandeur. In other words, daily prayer, regular Bible study, and listening to God keep us grounded in the divine reality beyond self, offering us a clear point of view, and therefore keeping us humble. In C.S. Lewis' book, *The Screwtape Letters*, an experienced demon called Screwtape is acting as a mentor to a junior tempter called Wormwood. The book is a highly perceptive fictional account of the correspondence between the two. While Wormwood is busy trying to get his human 'patient' into serious trouble by inciting him to some outrageous evil behavior, Screwtape's advice is much more in tune with our personal day-to-day experiences. Screwtape knows that the quickest way to

capture a soul is in the small, seemingly innocuous decisions. Screwtape's objective is to "befuddle and confuse" so that we lose our clarity of focus on God and others. Instead, we are encouraged to feed on pride and self-righteousness, greed and gossip, egotism and judgmentalism, and forget the truth and freedom of Christ. When we neglect our spiritual health, we become vulnerable to undesirable influences. Paul's advice is that we take every opportunity we can to work for the common good.

The letter to the Galatians has been prompted because of the influence of a group of agitators who were demanding that the mostly gentile Christians of the church in Galatia conform to the Jewish practice of male circumcision amongst other observances and rituals. Paul's response makes it clear that the Galatians and all other Christians no longer have to demonstrate trust in the Law for salvation, because faith in Christ and God's grace is everything. For modern-day Christians the arguments to conform to the practices of other Christians have taken a quite different route, but nonetheless just as damaging to the Gospel of God's grace. Today we have everything from spiritual pride in the literal reading of Scripture, denouncing all who disagree, to demands of exclusivity defining who is, and is not welcome as a member of Christ's Body. The Body of Christ has suffered schism after schism over everything from the ordination of women, to vestments and candles on the altar. And such diverse practices as whether to drink wine or grape juice at Holy Communion, and accepting only those who profess to be born again. Even if in summary this seems simplistic where such passionate reactions have been invoked, we can never underestimate the tragedy of such a lack of graciousness and discernment, OR overestimate the power of plain old human stubbornness, rigidity, and pride. "God is not mocked." As much as we enjoy worshipping the Lord in our own faith traditions, we are Christians first. Grace says that we celebrate all who know and love Christ. The gospel of grace seeks joy in unity, and is strengthened by diversity.

As individual members of Christ's Body, we will all work out our own path of salvation, as new creatures, transformed by God's grace, and in offering our blessed array of gifts in God's service. As a community we will gather together to extend our practice of God's graciousness in a multitude of ways. Through hospitality, by welcoming the Journey of Hope cyclists this afternoon, and as we graciously welcome a variety of groups into our facility each week, and through many other events. In our outreach ministries, by continuing to offer God's gracious message of love and hope in Christ to all ages, just like we did in our hugely successful Vacation Bible School, and as we will do next Friday evening with our pizza and movie night to name but two. Being a presence for Christ in the community is yet another way we practice God's expansive graciousness. We are all anticipating another fabulous annual rummage sale. Let's not forget why we do what we do. For example, the rummage sale helps the whole community with great bargains, and all the money we raise goes to outreach ministries. Yesterday we invited crowds of people to experience Christ in this place through our presence and participation in the Show Low Fourth of July parade. This is all just a slice of the grace in action in this faith community! As Jesus showed us on the cross, and by His glorious resurrection, we know that God's grace has no limits. Expect to be amazed as we all continue to offer ourselves to God's service!

Eugene Peterson writes that, "It takes a certain bold courage to receive freedom. The free life is a strenuous life... Where there has been widespread confusion, bickering, and uncertainty about what life is, [by God's grace, we learn to live in the freedom of Christ] convinced of what it means to live openly and well... God has a capacity so large in love and purpose that he calls us in order to do something for us – to give us ... grace." (End quote.) All you and I have to do is free-fall into God's arms with trust, and with faith in God's grace and truth. "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Galatians 5:1).

Amen.