

SERMON – March 11, 2007
Luke 13 “Repent and Know Grace”

G&P

Once upon a time I lived in California and attended the First Lutheran Church Parochial School. It was there that I went to school from 2nd grade until the middle of 5th grade. This particular story takes place in 3rd grade as we were eating our brown bag lunch outside on the picnic tables. I was sitting with all of my buddies, we were just joshing around. We were having some fun when I said something to one of the guys at our table.

It was a word that I had heard from one of the kids in the neighborhood the day before. It sounded like a good word. But alas it had only four letters. As it turned out, it was a big four letter word, the meaning of which, I did not have a clue. Apparently, the boys at my table had heard of the word and soon had ratted me out.

The lunch area monitor grabbed me by the arm and pulled straight out of place. I had only said one word, but apparently it was a doozy. I was to be taken to the Vice Principals office which sat at the corner of the main hall way to all my the classes. Now all the hallways in this school at open to the outside, there are no walls as every classroom opens to the inside court yard.

The Vice Principal was the Rev. William R. Hampton, a rather tall man with dark hair. He was a Chaplain in the Marine Reserve who would later serve at Khe San, South Vietnam during the 1968 Tet Offensive. He was the law in that school. We were all afraid of him. Well, I rotted outside his office for what seemed like an eternity. The word had traveled to all of the teaches like the fast fuse on a stick of dynamite and I was sitting on it ready for it to explode. The looks of judgment seared into my soul.

You could hear them almost say:

“He was such a good little boy. Why did he have to die so young.”

I was going to my death. I still didn't know what the four letter word meant. I had just repeated a word that I heard in the neighborhood, and now it would cost me my life as I knew it. Then as I sat there I remembered that it was my Mother's birthday. I get sent to the Vice Principals office on my mothers birthday. If I survived this, I was surely going to meet my maker when I walked in the door to tell my mother the wonderful events of the day. And oh, happy birthday.

It was one of those apocalyptic moments in your life when you know that God is not on your side. God is on the side of the Rev. William R. Hampton. God is on the side of all of those teachers who kept looking at me:

“He was such a good little boy. Why did he have to die so young.”

The time came as I saw Pastor Hampton confer with my third grade teacher. They kept glancing over at me, no doubt deciding whether I should be burned at the stake as a heretic of the church or just hung at high noon. I had been watching too many westerns. My mind had ended my life too many times.

Pastor Hampton directed me into his office. This was not a good place to be. This is where the bad guys meet their fate. I sat in a steel chair across from his chair. I looked for the electrical cord that was surely attached to this electric chair.

“What did you say to Richard.?”

This was no time to lie so I came clean and blurted out that word, O, why did I say that word to that boy. In the saying of the word, Pastor Hampton did not flinch. His cold stare with his dark blue eyes were judgment enough.

“Where did you hear that word?”

I told him about the guys in my neighborhood and they had said it.

“Do you know what that word means?”

As he said this, he opened the bottom drawer of his desk. The big drawer.. I stared at it. This was the drawer that others had talked about. It was filled with paddles. Not ping-pong paddles, no these were hitting paddles made for paddling the rear ends of the greatest of sinners who dare to say words that they don't even know the meaning of.

There were paddles there with different size holes in them that would no doubt make different size welts on the bottoms of the guilty sinners. I just stared at them knowing that I would soon have to choose the device that would end my life as I knew it.

“Do you know what that word means?” He said again.

“No.” came the feeble response. I could not take my eyes off of the drawer, I can see it still.

“What did you learn?”

“Not to say that word to anyone.”

“Good”

Then he smiled for the first time. He closed the drawer with all of the weapons of punishment. It shut like that door to a dungeon. Too many horror movies lately.

He put his hand on my shoulder as he opened the door to outside. Smiling again. I remember these words:

“Be good to others.”

I went to the classroom with a spring in my step, grace in my heart, I was a changed person. I sat down

and then remembered it was my mothers birthday. Indeed, death still awaited me.

But I had my first lesson in grace. I expected swift judgment of the paddle. Unexpected Grace is sweet when it was rescued you from the depths of your own mistakes. I expected judgment in the mistake I had made. Unexpected Grace is sweet when it causes you to see that you can overcome your failures and begin a new. I expected the bitter taste of Judgment. Unexpected Grace is the nectar of life when it moves you from the sins that have been committed to the life in which sins are forgiven.

This is where Jesus takes us this morning in this story from Luke chapter 13. He points to the deaths of many who have been judged as sinners because of the severity of their deaths. They are no more sinners than anyone here. But unless you repent, you will suffer the same fate. In other words, don't be judging whether that person is a greater sinner than you.

Simply, repent. Open your eyes to God in your life. God is here.

Then he tells us the parable of the fig tree. A fig tree that had given no fruit. A fig tree that was wasting ground. A fig tree that had angered its owner. A fig tree that had not lived up to its purpose on this earth.

But the vine dresser says, to let it grow one more year, put some manure around it and let see if it gives fruit in the following year. The vine dresser did not want to condemn the tree to death, but to prune it back wake up its roots, feed it with nourishment. Grace the tree.

Grace the tree, give it another chance. But a second chance with some nourishment from the boss. So that it would have a chance to make good on it life purpose. Grace, pure grace. That is why I remember that moment of grace and the moment that the pastor became a friend who saw more in me than I saw in myself. He wanted to see some fruit come out of my life. Just the look of the paddles had struck absolute fear had gripped me. I expected punishment, not grace. Now grace had set me free.

Grace has a purpose in Jesus. Grace transforms us and changes us. It opens our eyes to see the power of grace and forgiveness in our lives together. Grace changes the world one grace moment at time.

But grace remains foreign in our world today. As I was watching the State Hockey finals last they kept playing several commercials, over and over again. The first was a plea for money to help wounded veterans from the war, which is an interesting commercial in light of the present disaster for our troops in the VA Hospital system. The second was about a Judge who brandishes around a baseball bat with justice carved out in the barrel of the bat. In the commercial you see people hurting each other, people hitting a car with a baseball bat, a person standing in the middle of a group of people who are spraying her with a paint, sounds of judgment fill the air as the name of the show comes on:

“An Eye for an Eye.”

This is the way the world works. If someone hurts you, don't talk to them about it. Take it to someone else in judgment so that more people can hate you. In this world hate is the sweet drink of hemlock, easy to go down but deadly in its digestion.

Jesus does not want his world to be at war with one another. Jesus wants this grace to come and changed the world. The world expects judgment, and in fact we demand it. We want justice for those sinners out there. But Jesus does the unexpected and the radical thing. He goes to the cross so that we can taste grace in our lives. He goes to the cross that we might dare to know and live forgiveness in our lives. He goes to the cross so that enemies might become friend, and the weapons that destroy people, weapons of words to the gun, might be transformed into life giving events.

In reality, we all want grace for us:

What will the Vatican give for the Pope's name? Rogers Cadenhead sought an answer. Upon the death of Pope John Paul II, this self-described "domain hoarder" registered [www.Benedict XVI.com](http://www.BenedictXVI.com) before the new Pope's name was announced. Cadenhead secured it before Rome knew they needed it.

The right domain name can prove lucrative. Another name, PopeBenedictXVI.com, surpassed \$16,000 on eBay. Cadenhead, however, didn't want money. A Catholic himself, he was happy for the church to own the name. "I'm going to try and avoid angering 1.1 billion Catholics and my grandmother," he quipped.

He did want something in return, though. In exchange for the name, Cadenhead sought:

- 1. One of those hats;**
- 2. A free stay at the Vatican hotel;**
- 3. Complete absolution, no questions asked, for the third week of March, 1987.**

Makes you wonder what happened that week, doesn't it? It may even remind you of a week of your own life.

Max Lucado, *Facing Your Giants* (W Publishing Group, 2006), p. 131-132

We all want the forgiveness that will save our lives. We may not want it for our enemy. But want it for ourselves. But that is not how Jesus works. He gives grace to all so that they might be able

to give the fruit of the kingdom. That we might be nourished with the word of Jesus and see people with new eyes and new hearts.

In 1978, Peter Greave wrote a memoir of his life with leprosy, a disease he contracted while stationed in India. He returned to England, half-blind and partially paralyzed, to live on a compound run by a group of Anglican sisters. Unable to work, an outcast from society, he turned bitter. He thought of suicide. He made elaborate plans to escape the compound, but always backed out because he had nowhere to go. One morning, uncharacteristically, he got up very early and strolled the grounds. Hearing a buzzing noise, he followed it to the chapel, where sisters were praying for the patients whose names were written on its walls. Among the names, he found his own. Somehow that experience of connection, of linking, changed the course of his life. He felt wanted. He felt graced.

- Whats so Amazing about Grace?" Phillip Yancey pp45

God knew his name and his life. Just as Jesus knows your name and your life and the grace that sets all of us free to love and to forgive in His name. Live that life. Be Fruitful in your life. Share the unexpected grace of Jesus.

AMEN