

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“The Vocabulary of Faith: Grace”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Romans 5:6-11

In this bag I have what some people believe to be one of the most destructive forces in modern American society. I Googled social concerns about this abomination and it turned up more than eleven-million possible articles or references. Cable news programs have spent countless hours speaking out against its evil influences. According to many, it destroys the very inner souls of children and youth and keeps them from striving to be their best. I can't believe that we had one in the house, but as I was digging through our daughter's boxes of stuff buried in our basement, there it was. And it was not alone. There were, in fact, more than one, hidden among the decent memories of her childhood. I would ask parents to shield their children's eyes from this golden-calf of corruption, but they need to see it. So here it is, a participation trophy. Yes, your pastor's child had a participation trophy that she received in her very first year of playing soccer where she preferred to pick flowers rather than kick the ball. As Cindy says, she was in it for the uniforms and the snacks. Not for victory at all cost. I realize that many of you may be shocked that I brought this into this sacred space...but I do so for a simple reason. If participation trophies are bad, why does God not only give us one, but actually goes one better in that God gives us a pre-participation trophy.

Yes, that is correct, God gives us a pre-participation trophy and this is it (take cross out of the bag)...let me explain. Today our vocabulary of faith word is grace. Pastor Bethany mentioned it at the end of her sermon last week, but today we will take a deeper dive into what it means. To begin with, a simple of definition of grace is the gift of God's unearned love and forgiveness. Meaning, that all of God's love and forgiveness are offered to us without conditions attached. This is what the Apostle Paul is referring to in his letter to his friends in Rome. He writes, “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” What this means is that while we were on the wrong side of God, when we were on the losing team, when we had not done anything worthy of being loved by God or Jesus or the Spirit, God poured out God's love and forgiveness upon us. God handed us that that trophy that said you are a beloved child of God. God handed us the trophy that said you are forgiven. God handed us the trophy that said you are beloved. Grace tells us that even when we had nothing to offer God, God offered us everything.

Grace, this unearned love and forgiveness of God, has been at the heart of the Biblical message from the beginning to the end of the scriptures. It is supposedly also at the heart of who most Christians in this world claim to be, people saved by grace. Yet, we have often hedged our bets. Just as many are suspicious of giving participation trophies to those who did not win it

all...they are suspicious of giving God's love and forgiveness to just anyone. Surely, they say, we must do something to earn it. For some, grace comes when we are baptized in a particular way by particular people in a particular church. For others grace only comes when we believe particular things about God, Jesus, baptism or communion. For others grace comes when you do particular actions or don't do other actions. What this means is that if grace, defined as the unearned love and forgiveness of God, only comes to us because we have to say, do or believe certain things, then it is not free and thus it is not grace. Yet Paul reminds us that before we could earn God's love, Jesus gave his life for us so that we might be enveloped by the love and forgiveness of God.

To show you what grace looks like, I want to go back to one of the stories Pastor Bethany mentioned last week, and that is the story of Cain and Able. If you recall the story, Cain and Able are the twin sons of Adam and Eve. They each make an offering to God and for some reason, God accepts Able's but not Cain's. Cain is understandably upset. God tells him to hang in there and ultimately his offering will be acceptable. Unhappy with this response, Cain plots his revenge upon his brother. Cain invites Able into the fields and there kills him. As the story continues, God asks Cain, "where is your brother?" The uppity answer is, "How should I know. Am I my brother's keeper?" Needless to say, God knows where Able is. He is dead, and Cain killed him. Two things then happen. First God makes sure that Cain suffers consequences for his actions. God sends Cain out to wander the earth alone, a fitting punishment for the one who killed his brother. Cain's response is to cry out to God when he realizes that by being alone he will have no one to protect him (as his brother had no one to protect him) and he might suffer the fate of his brother...this is, by the way, the definition of irony. It is in this moment that the second thing happens. God, without being asked, places a mark upon Cain to ensure that no one kills him. In other words, God's grace, God's free gift of love and forgiveness comes to Cain, when Cain has done nothing to deserve it. This is grace.

How many of you here this morning have ever watched an awards ceremony like the Oscars or the Emmys? If you have, I hoped you noticed how the winners held their statues. Usually at first, they had one hand under the base and another around the statue itself. What I want you to do this morning is to hold your hands like that (one flat the other as if grasping what your other hand is supporting). Now I want you to imagine that in your hand is God's trophy of grace, God's trophy of love. Feel its weight. Feel the weight of God's love and forgiveness in your hands. Then, slowly feel it become lighter and lighter as the effects of that love and forgiveness lighten your burden and fill you with peace. Feel it? I hope so because that is your challenge for this week. It is, every morning, to hold your hands in that fashion, for just a couple of minutes, and say to yourself, "I am a beloved child of God, loved and forgiven by the free grace of God."