

We Believe: Multi-Colored Grace
Leviticus 25:23-24, 1 Peter 4:7-11
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
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If you know much about me, you know that I love to eat. I love to go out to eat. "Let's have lunch together" are, perhaps, my favorite words in the English Language. OK, I'm exaggerating, but you get the idea.

So I was out for lunch not long ago. Like most of my lunches, I was with someone about whom I care a great deal, and we had some important things to talk about. The server came over, waited for a pause in the conversation, and asked what we'd like. I said, "You know, I'm really focused on our conversation right now. Can you just bring me a ham and swiss, please?" And I thought that we could get on with the conversation. But you know, there's more to the story.

"What kind of ham would you like, sir? Honeybaked, smoked, or chipped?" "Will you be enjoying that with Jarlsberg Swiss, baby swiss, lo-fat swiss, or gruyere swiss?" "White, wheat, rye, Italian, panini, or croissant?" "Seeded or unseeded rye?" "Lettuce, tomato, mayo, mustard?"

For crying out loud, I'm going to die of starvation while she's building my sandwich. Ham & Swiss. Please!

Have you ever been there? Have you ever felt as if there were just too many choices? In a lot of our lives, we want it to be either/or or yes/no, don't we? It's just easier. Less complicated. I don't know about the students in the room now, but I know that when I was in school and had a choice between true/false tests and essays, I like the true/false.

It seems to me as though we sometimes think of our spiritual lives in that fashion, too. What does it mean to be a Christian? I've accepted Jesus into my heart. What does "grace" mean? It means that I'm forgiven of my sin.

In fact, the word for "grace" in the New Testament is the Greek word *χαριτος*. In the secular usage of the time, *χαριτος* meant "what delights" or "joyous being". The people who wrote the New Testament used that word to talk about who God is, about what God has done in Jesus Christ, and perhaps most importantly, to talk about the Gospel – the Good News – the story of the telling of the great things about who God is and what God is doing.

And you might say to yourself, "Self, that's about what I think. I sin, God forgives, and that's Good News, right? That's grace. Amazing grace! Thanks, Dave, that's a great reminder. Looks like we can wrap up a little early today..."

Not so fast, my theological titans. Take a look at the passage in 1 Peter. Verse 10 says that we are to be good stewards of "God's varied grace". In the Greek, that word "varied" is *ποικιλης*, and it comes from a word that means "many-colored". So God's grace is "varied" in the sense that it comes in a lot of flavors, a number of varieties, and is experienced in many ways.

The fact that I am forgiven for my sin is a fact that is totally and completely due to God's grace, but God's grace is more than just a simple 1 to 1 transaction wherein sin is like a debit and grace is like a credit; you sin, he gives grace. It all comes out in the end – no, it's more than that. In some ways, God's grace is like buying a ham and swiss – there are innumerable ways to experience it!

It might help if we think of some of the words in the Bible that are related to *χαριτος*. *Χαρισμα*, for instance, is the word for "gift". *Χαρισματα* is the word for the gifts that the Holy Spirit brings, such as prophesy, speech, and healing. *Ευχαριστος* is a word that we've just lifted from the Greek, and you know it as "eucharist" – it means "Thanksgiving" and it's another word for the sacrament of Communion. So "grace" is about more than just forgiveness; it's about gifts and healing and restoring and building and sharing...One way to express that truth would be to say that there is no part of your life or my life that is untouched by God's grace. Another way would be to say that there is no good gift or beautiful thing that is ours. Every good we know comes from God.

That point is driven home by the very brief reading that you had earlier from the book of Leviticus. I wish that I could have had that entire chapter read in worship, but I sensed a mutiny in the ranks if I tried to lay all 55 verses on you at one sitting. Plus, no one would ever sign up to be lay reader again.

But I have to say that there are very few, if any, chapters in the Bible that have had more of an impact on my life in Christ than Leviticus 25. I dare you to read it and be unaffected by it.

Here's the story. God's people are getting ready to come into the Promised Land. They've been wandering in the desert for a generation, and now, finally, it's time for them to get to the place that God is going to give them. But before they get in there, they have to do the closing. And Leviticus 25 contains some of the "fine print" on the Promised Land deal.

First, God says that the land itself is to be given a Sabbath rest. That is, that for six years, the folks are supposed to plant and care and prune and till and weed and fertilize. But in the seventh year, they're just supposed to let things happen – and not make the land work.

That makes for sound agricultural practice. Resting the land like this will allow the soil to restore itself. It also is helpful economically, because everybody knows that *something* will grow there anyway – and the stuff that grows on its own is to be shared with the poor. If every year, 1/7 of the land is available for the poor to be sustained, then the poor will be, well, not so poor. And that idea of one year in seven as a land-sabbath is also rock-solid theologically. It's a way to remind the people once or twice a decade that God owns the lands, and the people are merely tenants.

Leviticus 25 goes on to say that God's people are to count out seven of these Sabbath years, and after the seventh seven – in the fiftieth year – the whole community is to enjoy a Jubilee. In this year, all debts are forgiven. All slaves are freed. All land that's been sold reverts to its original occupants. It's crazy talk. And the people recognize it as such: hey, hey, hey, who does this

God think he is? Oh, yeah, He's God. It's all God's. It's not mine. I'm just a tenant.

If God's people had ever followed the teaching of Leviticus 25 (and unfortunately, there is no evidence that they ever did), they would have known forever who is the giver of every good and perfect gift.

In recent weeks, we've been talking about what Presbyterians believe. Our denomination has been, and will be, in the news, and so it seemed appropriate that we who worship as Presbyterians understand a little about what makes us the way we are. So in that vein, I've read you a portion of our church's Constitution, *The Book of Order*, which is printed on the insert in your bulletin.

We've talked about most of that, but look at point number (3) near the bottom. One of the defining aspects of what it means to be Presbyterian is "a faithful stewardship that shuns ostentation and seeks proper use of the gifts [remember, the $\kappa\tau\sigma\mu\alpha$] of God's creation."

Presbyterians believe and teach, then, that one essential part of following Jesus means that we are people who take care of what God has given us – and we use it in ways that will reflect His intentions for the world. That's what "stewardship" is.

Sometimes, when we're in church, we hear the word "stewardship" and we reach for our wallets, because "everybody knows" that stewardship is just a fancy way of saying that the church needs money. Stewardship is about money, sure, because we have an economy that is based on money. The word "steward", though, is connected with an old English term, "stye-ward" – one who looked after the pigs. A "stye-ward", like a steward, is someone who cares for something that does not belong to him or herself, but rather is entrusted to that one for safe keeping and appropriate use.

And so in church, we'll ask from time to time, "Are you using your money the way that God intends you to? Are you making 5%, 10%, 15% available for God's purposes in the world?" Because a part of what God has given you is economic strength. But that's not all that God has given to you, is it? God has given you your YOU, and asks that you make that YOU available for his purposes.

Do you know who Rachel Carson is? You might know that the Ninth Street Bridge is called the Rachel Carson bridge, named in her honor. She was cited as one of the 100 most important people of the 20th Century by *Time* magazine, and essentially started the modern environmental movement. Where did she learn to love the world like that? I'm sure it came from a variety of places, but I would suggest that none was more important than the Sunday school classes she attended at the Springdale U.P. Church on the Allegheny River.

Fred Rogers intended to be a pastor. But then he walked into his parents' living room and saw a television set for the first time. He later said, "I went into television because I hated it so. And I thought there was some way of using this

fabulous instrument to be of nurture to those who would watch and listen." And he allowed God to use his gifts, interests, and skills in such a way that several generations of people know more about being neighbors because of Mister Rogers' faithfulness.

Closer to home, some of you in this room have met Dr. Norval Christy. He was raised here in this congregation and was blessed with the gifts of creativity and education. He became a medical missionary to Pakistan, where as an eye doctor he brought the gift of sight to more than 100,000 of the world's poorest people.

Rachel Carson, Fred Rogers, Norval Christy. What do they have in common? They were each nurtured by a Presbyterian congregation and challenged to be good stewards of their gifts for their entire lives. But they are not alone. Do you know these names? George Washington Carver, Madeliene L'Engle, Woodrow Wilson, Anne LeMott, John Glenn, William Henry Shepherd, Steven Curtis Chapman? All of these are people who have come to follow Christ as Presbyterians. And they have used, or are using, their gifts of scholarship, artistry, education, curiosity, aptitude, opportunity – to change the world. With the exception of Shepherd, who was the among first African-Americans to be sent as a missionary, none of these people are pastors. But each has used the blend of challenges and opportunities that have come to them as God's grace in their entire lives.

Where is the evidence of God's multicolored, extravagant grace in your life? Has God given you the forgiveness of sin? Outstanding. But don't be limited there. How will you use your whole life to demonstrate God's ownership of the entire world? How will you use the gifts, the grace, the *χαριτος* that God has placed in your life to shape this world according to God's purposes? You have so many gifts. The world has so many needs. There are a LOT of choices out there. There is a LOT of grace. Thanks be to God! It is a thrilling adventure to follow Christ at this point in history. Amen.