

First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan

Talking Points – Grace
Sunday, November 8, 2020
Rev. Ashley Smith Ashley

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell – Welcome & Announcements

Good morning and welcome to worship on this Lord's day. Today is Sunday, November 8th. Today is a day that, here in the church, we have been waiting and praying for, for the last year and a half, because today is our Candidate Sunday! This is the day when the Associate Pastor Nominating Committee's candidate Ashley Smith Ashley is here preaching for us. And following the service, at 2:00 PM today there will be a congregational meeting via Zoom for the purpose of voting to extend a call to Ashley Ashley to be our next associate minister. If you have not registered to vote in our Zoom election at 2:00 PM today, there is still time. You can register via our church's website. Alternatively, you can phone in your vote between 12:00 and 2:30 today. You simply call the church's phone number. You don't need an extension, as a member of the APNC committee or a designated volunteer will be there to answer and take your vote directly.

Dana Hearn is here with us today, in leading worship. She is the chair of the Associate Pastor Nominating Committee (APNC) and she will be introducing Ashley to us in just a minute. Dana will also walk us through the extensive search process that committee went through to get us to this point today.

Before I turn things over to Dana, I do want to let you know that two Sundays from now, on Sunday November 22nd, we will be holding a Thanksgiving celebration service. Now I know you might be saying to yourself, 2020, what is there to be thankful for? The fact that we are alive and that we are able to worship, even when we are apart from one another, are two great reasons to begin our thanks to God. But this Thanksgiving Sunday within our church is also our consecration Sunday and we show our gratitude to God by bringing the gifts of our lives as an act of faith and love in response to the love that God has already generously poured out upon us as a church. Since Covid began, we have made a deliberate point of not asking for offering in any of our worship services. We recognize that many members within our church are uncertain about the future. We know today that this reality continues, but in order for the church to continue on, we also need your help. There will be pledge cards going out that you should receive in your homes within the week. You can submit those pledge cards either electronically, or through the mail, or you can bring them live to the church on Sunday, November 22nd, between 11:00 and 1:00 PM. If you choose to bring your pledge cards live, I can tell you we have a special thank you gift for you, but we also will have the bells playing live, as an act of celebration and Thanksgiving. You have the opportunity to bring canned goods when you come to bring your pledge, to help those in our community less fortunate than ourselves as a church. We ask you to prayerfully consider how God is asking you to respond and certainly one of the ways we respond is not only with the financial gifts of our lives but also with the gifts and talents each of us have to serve God.

Today, serving God through their talent, I am delighted to say that we have Jerry Smith and Sharon Smith and various members of their family leading our music today. So for our opening hymn you will see Jerry and Carol and Ron Moon singing. In our closing

hymn Jerry's three children and their spouses will be singing for us. I certainly thank them for sharing their gifts with us as a congregation. I want to thank Mark Hovermale for serving as our liturgist today, and Susan Underhill for putting all of the pieces of this service together.

Friends, it is now my great joy and delight to welcome Dana Hearn who will introduce to us our candidate for the associate pastor position.

Dana Hearn, Chair of Associate Pastor Nominating Committee (APNC) – Remarks

Welcome, friends, to our worship service this morning. We are delighted to welcome Ashley Smith Ashley to worship service today. She will be sharing a scripture- centered sermon at today's online and parking lot services.

After reviewing nearly 100 resumes and interviewing four candidates, it is with true joy that the APNC unanimously and without reservation recommends Ashley to serve God and our congregation as the associate pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth. Ashley comes to us with a Master of Divinity degree and a Master of Social Work degree. She is a current board member of the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary Board of Directors. She has participated in pulpit supply and youth and adult ministries. Ashley was highly decorated, receiving 13 scholarships awards and prizes for superior academic achievement and Christian leadership. Her called ministry was evident in her passion to provide pastoral care and engage the community through mission. Ashley has a faith- filled spirit and has demonstrated grace and compassion in ministry and social work. The APNC feels that Ashley brings bright energy to the living word of God and is ready to share these gifts with us. Led by the Holy Spirit and trusting God's wisdom, the APNC believes Ashley has been called to our church at this time. With God as our compass, we wholeheartedly submit our recommendation to you that Ashley Smith Ashley be confirmed as our associate pastor.

Information regarding Ashley and her ministry can be found on the church's website. You will have the opportunity to vote on Ashley Smith Ashley's associate pastor candidacy today. Emily will be providing you more information on how you can vote and participate in today's congregational meeting at 2:00 PM. We ask for your continued prayers for Ashley, her husband Brendan, and our congregation. May the grace of God bring comfort and peace to you at this time. Thank you.

Rev. Mark Hovermale – Opening Prayer

Let us pray. Dear Lord, thank you for today. Thank you for the gift of the beautiful weather we are experiencing. We come before you and are so grateful for Ashley being with us today. We pray your blessing on her and her entire family. We also want to just simply say 'thank you' this morning. We thank you for your grace that we use so often as we fall short of what we're supposed to be doing. We confess we have messed up this week. Please forgive us and grant us your mercy and unbelievable grace. Your grace is indeed amazing, as the hymn recalls. We also want to thank you for the opportunity to just come before you and praise your name this morning, and to spend time learning and applying your Word to our lives. In your name we pray. Amen.

Rev. Mark Hovermale – Reading of Scripture

Our scripture lesson today is found in Ephesians, chapter 2, verses 4 through 10.

Ephesians 2:4-10 (New Revised Standard Version)

⁴ But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵ even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved— ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— ⁹ not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Rev. Ashley Smith Ashley — Sermon

Let us pray. Send your Holy Spirit, oh God, and prepare our hearts to accept your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own, that in hearing we may also obey your will. For Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

I found that, like many disciplines, theology has its own unique language, one that can sound weird or confusing to those who aren't familiar with it. After all, there are more than a few complicated sounding words that we use to describe God, faith, or scripture. Some of my personal favorites include supralapsarianism, exegesis, and pericope, and as you might believe, I have personal and embarrassing stories about how I have either mispronounced or misunderstood each of these words. (Yes, feel free to ask me about them later!) But in addition to a complex vocabulary, theology is also known for ascribing deep meaning to more commonly used words. Our sermon series right now, "Talking Points", takes a look at a few of these, including kindness, gentleness, forgiveness, humility, and today's topic, grace.

I find that grace is one of those words, where if you ask someone if they know what it means, they're going to respond with "absolutely!" But if you press them a little bit to define it, they might pause before giving you an answer. So I decided to test some of my friends and family about how they might describe grace.

Among many of the answers I received, one friend shared the following story: A northerner was traveling through the south. One morning he stopped for breakfast in a small country restaurant. He ordered coffee, eggs, sausage, toast, and juice. When his plate arrived, he noticed that, in addition to the items he had ordered, there was a pile of gray lumpy stuff on the corner of his plate. Confused, the traveler called the waitress over to his table and inquired what this stuff actually was. "Why, sir", she responded, "That's grits." Still confused, the northerner responded, "But I didn't order any grits." With a big smile, the waitress reassured him, "Sir you don't order grits; they just come!"

So there you have it. Grace is like grits; it's an unexpected gift, one that just comes. Searching for a more technical definition of grace, I turned to a helpful little book by a dear friend, entitled, "Presbyterian Questions, Presbyterian Answers." In it, grace is defined as the unmerited favor that God extends to us as sinners. The definition goes on to say that grace is sometimes defined in two ways: First, is God not giving us what we do deserve, and second, is God giving us what we don't deserve.

So let's start with that first claim--grace is God not giving us what we do deserve. Psalm 103 states that God does not deal with us according to our sins nor repays us according to our iniquities. And, of course, we're all familiar with our own sins. These are the ways in which we turn inward, only focusing on ourselves and refusing to prioritize our neighbors or the interests of others. We confess our sins each week at the beginning of our gathered corporate worship service, because not a day goes by that we don't sin against God and each other. But grace is God not giving us what we do deserve. Our selfish ambitions and disregard for God's law should be met with judgment and isolation from God. This, after all, only seems fair and right. We've made our beds and now we have to lie in them. Thanks be to God that this is not the case! There is hope for release from this life, which is marked by sin. This hope is provided by God.

Our passage for today from Ephesians perfectly depicts the second half of the definition we heard earlier: Grace is God giving us what we *don't* deserve. Verses 4 and 5 declare,

“But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.” Friends, God's love for us is not blind. God sees us as we really are. God says to us, “You may fool other people but you cannot fool me. I see you even more clearly than at times you see yourselves. Nevertheless, despite it all, despite the secret and the obvious sins, I love you and I welcome you into my family, into my arms forever.”

Evidence of God's extensive love is demonstrated in verses 5 and 6 in three ways. First we are told that God has made us alive, next that God has raised us up, and finally, that God has seated us in the heavenly places. Do these reactions sound familiar? I hope that they might! These are the things that God has already done for Jesus Christ. In effect Paul is stating that what God has already done for Christ, God is doing for us. Just as God gave Christ new life, raised him from the dead, and gave him a seat of glory in heaven, so God does for you and for me! However, I want to pause because an important distinction must be made between Christ and ourselves. While Christ was deserving of such blessings and honor because of his own perfection and divinity, these are, of course, attributes that we ourselves do not possess. So how are we able, then, to receive the same blessings and honor? Well, because Christ has extended the benefits of His life, death, resurrection, and ascension to all of us.

When Paul describes the threefold benefits of God's grace, he includes an essential detail: With Christ we are made alive, with Christ we are raised up, with Christ we are seated in the heavenly places. We have done absolutely nothing to earn these gifts. Christ really extends this invitation to us out of his rich mercy, mass forgiveness, and the great love with which he loves us. We can only count on them being true in our lives because they were first accomplished in Christ's. If there was any doubt about whether we participate in bringing about this grace, verses 8 and 9 clear things right up: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”

Not only does this mean that we cannot brag about the ways that we have impressed God, but it also frees us from the endless anxiety that might have us questioning whether we've done enough to earn God's favor. The agent of this dramatic act is God and to God alone can go all the glory.

Friends, this is the good news of the gospel. This is God giving us what we do not deserve. This is God giving us what we cannot ever earn. This is grace!

This passage is Paul's joyous proclamation of what he knows to be true. We have been given new life, raised up, and given a seat in the heavenly places, all with Christ, Amen. The end. Right? No, no of course not! We know that cannot be the end. Now that we can be confident in what God has done for us, we are invited to bear witness to this gift of grace. Paul reminds us of our responsibility in verse 10, "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

We are recipients of a remarkable gift from God, the gift of absolutely everything. Our good works have been transformed from a frantic means to save ourselves to blessed opportunities for us to be vessels through which Christ ministers to the entire world. But what might these good works look like? Well, there are words, indeed, that reflect the character and the nature of God. A good place to start might be the Fruits of the Spirit as found in Galatians 5, love, joy, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are the ways God acts towards us and, thus, they are the ways that we are expected to act towards others.

However, I think it's fair to say that imitating these attributes is challenging enough for anyone under normal circumstances, but the added pressures of 2020 has made this seem downright impossible. Currently, our country stands divided over a number of important issues. Many of us have witnessed our communities and perhaps our own families deal with the strain of a highly contentious election year. A vast range of emotions, from fear to hope, accompany the ultimate result of Tuesday's deadline. The stress and isolation resulting from COVID-19 only intensifies these emotions all the more. As a church we welcome people from all walks of life, from a variety of different perspectives, and my hope is that we might be an example to the wider community about how to embody Christ's loving kindness and to bear witness to the grace that we now know was first extended to us. We must work even harder to display the Fruits of the Spirit, especially now when doing so seems very challenging. After all, Paul reminds us that God has extended grace to us, not only for our own benefit, but so that in the ages to come God might show the immeasurable riches of his grace. We are blessed to be a blessing in the wake of election results, regardless of our own personal feelings.

I want to encourage each of us to think about how our words and actions reflect a desire to see others experience the joy of the gospel. How might we extend grace to those that we disagree with? Earlier this week, the president of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary (PTS) sent out a prayer for the PTS community in the wake of the election. In it, he included the following statement, which I believe reflects a true desire to show grace to others. "Regardless of how the election turns out I will not hold hate, disdain, or ridicule for those who voted differently than me. Whether I am pleased or upset about the outcome, I will seek to understand the concerns and aspirations of those who voted differently, and I will look for opportunities to work with people whom I disagree with."

This election season and in every season of life to come we will encounter people who we disagree with, those we find hard to love, so in these moments may we be motivated by grace. May we remember that we ourselves deserve *nothing* and yet God has given us *everything* and may we experience the gift of God's grace and then extend that same grace to our neighbors each and every day. Amen.

Rev. Ashley S. Ashley — Prayers of the People

Friends, we've come to that point in our service where we have an opportunity to lift up our joys and our concerns before God. Know that whether you share your concerns with others or keep them silently in your heart, that God knows all things and cares for each of the things we bring to him. I invite you now to close your eyes, bow your heads and lift your heart as we bring our prayers before our creator, God. Let us pray.

Gracious God, because we are not strong enough to pray as we should, you provide Christ Jesus and the Holy Spirit to intercede for us in power. In this confidence, we ask you to accept our prayers. God of mercy, hear us.

Let us pray for the church. We are thankful, God, you formed your church from the despised of the earth and showed them mercy, that they might proclaim your salvation to all. Strengthen those that they may faithfully endure all trials by which you conform your church to the cross of Christ. God of mercy, hear us.

Let us pray for creation's creator of all. You entrusted the earth to the human race, yet we disrupt its peace with violence and corrupt its purity with our greed. Prevent your people from ravaging creation, that coming generations may inherit lands brimming with life. God of mercy, hear us.

Let us pray for the world. Sovereign God you hold both the history of nations and the humble life of villages in your care. Preserve people of every nation from tyrants, heal them of disease and protect them in times of upheaval and disaster, that all may enter the Kingdom that cannot be shaken. God of mercy, hear us.

Let us pray for peace. Judge of the nations, you created humanity for salvation, not destruction, and sent your Son to guide us into the way of peace. Enable people of every race and nation to accept each other as sisters and brothers, your children on whom you lavish favor. God of mercy, hear us.

Let us pray for this election. Under your law we live, great God, and by your will we govern ourselves. Help us to respect neighbors whose views differ from ours, so that without partisan anger we may work our issues out that divide us. We pray for newly elected officials and for the offices yet to be determined. May all who serve public office do so out of a love for justice, mercy, compassion, and a dedication to the common good. God of mercy, hear us.

Let us pray for this community. Merciful God, since Jesus longs to protect Jerusalem as a hen that gathers her young under her wings, we ask you to guard and strengthen all who live and work here. Deliver your people from jealousy and contempt, that they may show mercy to all of their neighbors. God of mercy, hear us.

Let us pray for our families. Holy God, from whom every family on earth takes its name, strengthen parents and guardians to be responsible and loving that their children may know security and joy. Lead children to honor those who care for them with compassion and forgiveness. May all people discover your parental care by the respect and love given to them by others. God of mercy, hear us.

And let us pray for all who suffer any sorrow or trial. Compassionate God, your Son gives rest to those weary with heavy burdens. Today we especially lift up all those who are dear to us, their names have been said aloud or in the silence of our hearts. We ask you to

heal the sick in body, mind, and spirit, the left out, the depressed. Befriend those who grieve, comfort the anxious, stand with all victims of abuse or another crime, awaken those who damage themselves and others by the use of any drug, and fill all people with your Holy Spirit that they may bear each other's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. God of mercy, hear us.

God we know how you see all creation groaning and labor as it awaits redemption, as we work for and await your new creation. We trust that you will answer our prayers with grace and fulfill your promise that all things work together for good for those who love you through Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray together saying,

Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.

Rev. Ashley S. Ashley – Benediction and Blessing

Friends, as we head out from this place, remember that you are recipients of grace, a gift you have not earned, but you have been given out of the great love for which God so loves us. I encourage you to go out and live a life that demonstrates this grace in all the ways that you can, so that whoever encounters you in your daily walk can know that this great truth is real.

And may the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you, and may the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and forever give you peace. Amen.