

## HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 3-19-2021



Dear Friends in Christ,

A lot of Lutherans have a problem with grace. I know that sounds odd since grace—God’s unconditional love—is at the heart of our theology. It was Martin Luther’s realization of grace as it is presented in Romans that moved him to actions that launched the Reformation. So important is that understanding of grace and how it is received that when Luther quoted Ephesians 2:8, “for it is by grace you have been saved, through faith,” that he would add the word “alone” at the end to emphasize that it is faith in Jesus Christ that saves us and nothing more. I had a seminary professor who would say that “the Lutheran Church, more than any other denomination, can say, ‘Your sins are forgiven. Period.’ Every other denomination puts some kind of condition on that forgiveness.” Lutheran grace is inseparable from faith—alone.

Lutherans love grace. We teach it. We confess it. We cling to it. We know that it is God’s love most clearly revealed in Jesus’ death on the cross “while we were yet sinners” (Romans 5:8) that brings us into a new relationship with God. We don’t have to do anything to receive it. And we don’t have to do anything with it. It is a free gift. It is cheap grace in that it costs us nothing. But it is costly grace in that it cost Christ His life. All we can do is decide how we will respond, how we will live because of that grace.

So, why do I say Lutherans have a problem with grace? Because, though we are really good at claiming it for ourselves, we are not so good about acknowledging it

for and extending it to others. Oh, with those who are in our congregation, we're fine. With those who look like us, or think like us, or act like us, there's no problem. But we're not so good at offering grace to those who are outside our comfort zone and our realm of familiarity. We want grace for ourselves and those we like, but to those who live differently than we do because of culture, or appearance, or behavior, or any of a number of other reasons, we aren't so quick to offer it. Though we acknowledge and cling to the fact that we are saved through faith alone, we regularly set up rules and conditions for others that only by which may they receive grace. But that's not grace. It's only grace when it is given freely on the basis of faith.

That's why involvement in congregations is so important. It is here that we share and receive grace. It is here that we overlook differences, excuse behavior, celebrate shared faith, and seek the God who loves us all. This is where we practice the grace that we are to share outside the congregation. Our challenge is to take that step outside the congregation and to take grace with us. Our mission is to bring others to that saving faith by showing to them grace—the same grace we claim for ourselves. Our lives must reflect the grace we, though undeserving, have received by sharing that grace with all whom we encounter. We free ourselves from our problem with grace by first repeating and embracing these words and then striving to demonstrate it in our interactions with all others: for it is by grace you have been saved, through faith alone!

In Christ's love,  
Pastor Jeffrey