

God's Good Grace for All
Rally Day 2018
September 9, 2018
Trinity Bixby
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[Exodus 34 1-7 \(selected verses\)](#)

[Titus 2:11-15 \(CEB\)](#)

[Ephesians 4: 1-7 \(CEB\)](#)

Grace. It's a word thrown around by Christians all the time – there's at least eight churches in Tulsa that have "grace" as part of their name. The concept is used in business and school life – "grace period" – and, of course, "Amazing Grace" is the most published hymn of all time, finding itself in over a thousand hymnals. Amazing Grace is even projected into the future, with its use in *Star Trek II: Wrath of Khan*. Yet, for all its ubiquity, for all that it's everywhere all the time – it's still not understood as well as it should be.

For instance, you've seen this cross at the front of the chancel every time you've come to worship here – and if you're a visitor, you've probably seen a cross very much like it. This cross, with a vertical beam, horizontal beam, and a circle connecting them is known as a "Celtic cross." This style of cross comes from Ireland and Scotland, and is used by both Catholic and Protestants, as it predates the Reformation. Originally, it started being used because the constant moisture on Ireland led to wooden grave markers rotting away and falling down. When they started using stone in the same "Latin Cross" shape (just the vertical and horizontal arms), they found that their local stone would break after a decade or so of exposure to the elements. It was better, but not as long lasting as they'd hoped. So, they added the circle for support, and it worked – the stone monuments lasted much longer! By the 19th century, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and even England were known for their Celtic crosses, and a revival of interest in them led to visitors asking for their story. Somewhere along the line, this is the story that was designed:

The Celtic cross represents the Trinity, three interconnected parts that make up one design. Like all Christian crosses, it points to Christ's death, and like most

Protestant crosses, it being empty, without a figure being crucified, reminds us that Christ rose from the dead. Within it lie three symbols of God's love for us: the vertical stroke tells us that God plants us where the Holy Spirit chooses, and reaches us in compassion. The horizontal stroke reminds us that we, as the body of Christ, must reach out to the world, and act in Jesus' name and Way. The circle shows us that Grace of God holds us in relationship with each other and God, even when we are too weak to carry on.

God's Love with us – Reaching out in Jesus' Way – The grace of the Spirit sustains us.

God's grace sustains us, so the Celtic cross reminds us. Indeed, right from the beginning, God revealed Godself as a God of grace. In Exodus 34, God tells Moses more about who God is. Moses reports to the people that God told him: "The LORD is God, merciful and compassionate, slow to anger, rich in grace and truth; showing grace to a thousand generations, forgiving every kind of sin and rebellion."¹ Now, there's only one aspect of God that God repeats in that list to Moses, and that's grace. Even in Hebrew, it's the same word, *chesed*² – often translated loving kindness in English, but grace is also correct. *Chesed* is notoriously difficult to translate, as it combines grace, mercy, elegance, loyalty, and love in a single concept. *Chesed* – grace – shows us that God's love will not let us go – that even when we go astray, God remains mercifully good, loyally loving, and lovingly kind.

We recognize this every time we baptize a child, as Shirley Guthrie points out: "[Baptizing infants] makes clear that before we loved and chose God, God loved and chose us. Before we decided to become members of God's family, God adopted us to belong to it."³ You see, we show God's grace extending to us long before we can articulate what it means to respond in God's grace. Once again, like the circle on the Celtic cross, God's good grace holds us up in relationship with God and with each other. One of the earliest Reformed Baptismal liturgies reminds us beautifully of

¹ Exodus 34:6-7a

² חֶסֶד (also spelled hesed) Pronounced with a guttural ch, like in "Loch" or "Chanukah"

³ Shirley Guthrie Jr, "Christian Doctrine," Revised Ed, p. 353

that. This comes from the Huguenot church, translated from French. Picture these words at the font, spoken to the child, but offering *chesed* grace to all gathered.

Little one, for you Jesus Christ came into the world: for you he lived and showed God's love; for you he suffered the darkness of Calvary and cried at the last, "It is accomplished!"; For you he triumphed over death and rose in newness of life; for you he ascended to reign at God's right hand. All this he did for you, little one, though you do not know it yet. And so the word of Scripture is fulfilled: "We love, because God loved us first."⁴

Now, as we make the transition into the Greek Bible – the New Testament – a new word for grace appears. That word is *charis*⁵. It, like *chesed*, is incredibly difficult to translate, having forms that mean joy, charm, or loveliness alongside good will and merciful kindness, or even the effects of grace on a person, how they are changed by grace itself. It's the root of charisma (and charismatic). It even shows up at communion, in eu-*charis*-t, the celebration of good grace and thanksgiving. The apostle Paul loves to use the word *charis* – he spreads *charis* all over the known world, both in person and in his letters.

In the letter to Titus, Paul reminds us that “The *charis* of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people. It educates us so that we can live sensible, ethical, and godly lives right now by rejecting ungodly lives and the desires of this world.” In his letter to the church at Ephesus, he writes, “God has given *charis* to each one of us, measured out by the gift that is given by Christ.” And on and on through letters to Rome, Corinth, Thessalonica, and so on, Paul expounds about the *charis* of God. It is this *charis*, this grace that has so inspired Paul to preach the good news of Jesus Christ. Remember: Paul is one who encouraged people to throw stones at Christians before having a vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus. This is someone who acted abysmally in showing love, yet who rested his faith in God's grace and later changed his whole way of encountering the world. Paul depended on God's

⁴ Qtd by Charles Wiley, <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2016/10/17/regarding-ruling-elders-grace-and-gratitude/>

⁵ Χάρις (also spelled xaris) – pronounced with that same guttural -ch sound, like “loch” or “Chanukah”

charis, and he preached God's *charis* to all who would listen.

If you look at Paul's journeys, throughout the New Testament, you can see just how far and wide he roamed. Indeed, I was struck by the image of him flitting from city to city, staying for a while, and then moving on, but leaving words of encouragement or correction behind. He's very much like a humming bird, strengthening the newly-flowering church, cross-*Paul*-inating to bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit as revealed in the crucified-and-risen Christ. (Please, I pray for your grace on that pun!) Paul understands God's grace as pertaining to all people, not just those who met Jesus in person – which is good, since Paul only “met” Jesus after his resurrection! He was convinced that the only response to that grace, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, was living lives made holy by God in gratitude for all that God has done.

Paul believed in grace for all people so strongly that, even when a great earthquake freed him from prison, he convinced his fellow prisoners to remain rather than cause their jailor to be punished for their escape. He knew that the grace of God extended even to the very people who were agents of oppression – and through his preaching, he caused those agents of oppression to turn to agents of grace and gratitude.

God's good grace for all leads to holy gratitude. Like the circle of the Celtic cross, we remember that God sustains us in grace. Like the baptism liturgy reminds us, God holds us in God's good grace even before we know who God is. Like Paul's hummingbird-like missionary journeys, we know that God's good grace is for all people.

May the Holy One of Grace continue to call you into relationship with God and each other. May the grace of Christ call you always to respond in gratitude and holy living. May the graceful Spirit fill you to overflowing with love and grace in all you do. Amen.