

“Pondering the Solas, Part 1: Sola Gratia”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for October 8th 2017 (Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost/Thanksgiving Sunday)
by Foster Freed

Psalm 118

*O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
God's steadfast love endures forever!*

Permit me to begin with a confession. To commemorate and, yes...in a very real sense...to **celebrate** the Reformation, to offer even qualified **appreciation** for the sequence of events initiated by Martin Luther 500 years ago: permit me to confess the special significance all of that has for me, and the unease it produces within me, given our context as a Protestant Church (in other words a Church that owes its very existence to the Reformation)...a Protestant Church that shares a home with a Roman Catholic parish. In such a context it would be tempting simply to sweep the whole Reformation business under the rug: to pretend that it isn't really all that important, perhaps quietly to imply that it was something of a well-intentioned mis-step. Tempting as that would be, however: in truth it is an option simply unavailable to me. However one regards the Reformation, it is not possible to regard it as an unimportant moment in the history of the Christian movement. Perhaps more to the point: whatever troubling questions we may have concerning the consequences of the Reformation some 500 years after the fact, what surely cannot be doubted is that the Reformation succeeded in bringing to light important facets of our shared Christian heritage: facets to which insufficient attention had been paid during much of what we now regard as the Middle Ages.

And for me—here again I speak personally although I am hardly a lone wolf in this regard—for me much of what is best about the legacy of the Reformation, is readily summarized by what are collectively known as the five solas: five brief statements which summarize that which is at the heart of the particular lens the Reformation came to utilize as it defined the things the Reformation churches held in common, regardless of the fact that there were other things they did not hold in common. And so they spoke of *sola gratia*: by **grace** alone. They spoke of *sola fide*: by **faith** alone. They spoke of *solus Christus*: by **Christ** alone. They spoke of *sola scriptura*: by **scripture** alone. And finally, they spoke of *solus Deo Gloria*: for the **Glory of God** alone. And they made use of these five solas, these five principles, as a way of interpreting not only the substance of Christian faith, but the foundation on which that substance is built. My contention this morning and for the next four Sundays, is that there is great power and promise in all five of the *solas*, regardless of our response to other aspects of the Reformation. Nor, I hasten to add is it simply by chance that we begin with sola gratia: by grace alone.

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That choice, in part, owes something to my spiritual autobiography. I am certain that a key factor—perhaps **the** key factor—that drew me to Christianity, as I struggled to make sense of the world during my 20s, was the appeal of the Gospel of grace. That appeal remains at least as strong for me now, as it did way back when.

A second key factor, no doubt, has to do with the fact that it's Thanksgiving Sunday here in Canada. And if we, as Christians, are not including—within the circumference of our giving-of-thanks, the offer of God's grace, there is something rather deficient in that offering-of-gratitude. That having been said: there's one further factor in my choice of grace as a starting point, and it may well be the critical factor.

You see: if we are going to understand the legacy of the Reformation—as transmitted to us through the five solas—there can be no doubting the fact that there is a special connection between the question of grace, and the story of Martin Luther's own struggles: the story of the remarkable man whose remarkable (but by no means unique) spiritual crisis, helped to launch the movement we now know as the Reformation. While that story is well known, it bears repeating.

Luther was born into a family in which his gifts were quickly recognized: a family—especially his father—who had great ambitions for their son, specifically the hope that Martin would become a successful lawyer. A funny thing happened on the way to that particular goal, however. One day as Luther travelled through a severe thunder storm—he made a promise to God that he would enter a religious order if God kept him safe through the storm. Having made that promise, Luther came to regard it as a vow: a solemn vow. And so—to his father's horror—Martin gave up law, and entered into the monastic life, through the Augustinian order. And yes, to be fair: it was a life for which Luther appears to have been singularly ill-suited. But never mind: a monk he became. A monk, I hasten to add...

...a monk who took his vocation with the utmost sincerity, so much so that I suspect Luther was actually guilty of a tendency (some would call it a sin) that goes by the name "scrupulosity". Scrupulosity. Meaning someone whose conscience is so finely developed, that they have a tendency to obsess about the smallest flaw and the most minute of sins. Which is pretty much what Luther did as a monk, pouring more and more of his energy into his efforts at being righteous before God. As he later recalled: "I lost touch with Christ the Savior and Comforter...

...I lost touch with Christ the Savior and Comforter, and made of him the jailer and hangman of my poor soul." It was from this place of profound dis-ease that Luther came to discover—especially through his reading of the Psalms and Paul's letters to the Galatians and Romans—came to discover what he soon regarded as the authentic Gospel, what he called "the true treasure of the Church: the most holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God." And by grace, in this context, what Luther precisely means is the grace—the unmerited love—that doesn't wait for us to produce righteousness, but which—through Christ—claims us as righteous, claims us as forgiven, and establishes us as beloved daughters and sons of God long before we

ourselves can do anything to demonstrate that we are actually worthy of so noble a designation. When we speak of grace within the faith-tradition established by Martin Luther, we refer, above all, to grace so understood: the Amazing Grace that saves wretches like you and me. But of course...

...while this next point would be true any old Sunday but seems especially true on a Thanksgiving Sunday...

...grace, so understood, needs to be regarded not as the sole way in which God's grace operates, but as a window through which we can begin to celebrate the many other ways in which grace operates in our world and in our lives. The fact that the Amazing Grace that sets the sinner free is our window, our lens, only makes it all the more apparent that God's unmerited (and in many ways unsought) love is with us—is with the cosmos—from the beginning: creating our world, creating humanity, gifting us with families, with talents, with curiosity and—of course—blessing us with the bounty of harvest, the harvest we celebrate, here in Canada, on the second Monday of October. In short, what the Gospel of grace reveals to us a way of understanding **every** dimension of our lives: grace upon grace upon grace, calling forth—by way of response—gratitude upon gratitude upon gratitude. Which is to say: grace ushering in lives of Thanksgiving.

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Need I add that it is not always the easiest of tasks to live as a child of grace? That's true for us as persons; that's no less true for us as a community of faith.

Part of the challenge, of course, is the challenge of accepting the stark truth at the heart of the Gospel: namely that the good God is the heart of the Gospel. Most of us like to believe that we are the protagonist of our own story. The Gospel starkly reminds us that we are but players—important, beloved, blessed players, but players nonetheless—in a drama in which God is the main actor. In addition...

...well, in addition is the simple fact that our experience of life is not always as gracious as we might want it to be. I'll have more to say about that over the weeks ahead...but let it suffice for this morning to acknowledge that the unending grace of God does not protect us from the implications of life in a fallen world: a world in which death continues to hold sway, a world in which even those of us who lead the most charmed of lives, will eventually come face to face with our limits, will eventually come to experience loss, failure, pain. It can be challenging to remain mindful of the light of grace, when sojourning through the valley of the shadow of death. That having been said...

That having been said: in my humble opinion, the biggest challenge with grace for us as a church, is that the news of God's grace—the news of the God who reaches out for us, indeed who lays down his life for us long before we have done anything to merit such lavish generosity....

...the biggest challenge for us with all of that, quite frankly, is that it sounds way too good to be true. And the person...the person who always comes to mind at such a time is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the courageous German pastor who died in the Flossenburg Concentration camp, where he had been imprisoned for his role in the plot to assassinate Hitler. Bonhoeffer, having struggled with the seeming indifference of the German Protestant Churches in the face of the Nazi onslaught, warned of the danger of what he called “cheap grace”: grace that simply soaks in the love of God as if it’s something to which we are entitled, with not so much as a second thought given to our offering a mature and principled response to that grace. Bonhoeffer was, of course, entirely correct in issuing that warning. And yet...and yet...all the same...

...I’m immediately put in mind of something I once heard from Karl Barth’s son—Markus Barth (a distinguished New Testament scholar in his own right). What Markus said—speaking to a classroom filled with preachers—was quite profound. He said: “You haven’t really preached grace....you haven’t really and truly preached grace...until someone accuses you of preaching “cheap grace”.

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Phillip Yancey—the American Evangelical writer—Phillip Yancey, in his essential book, *What’s so Amazing About Grace*, tells the story of a prostitute who was truly desperate and had done some genuinely awful things. Speaking with a social worker one night, expressing her growing sense of despair, she heard the social worker ask her: “Why don’t you go to a Church and see what help they could offer you?” Her answer: “A church? Why would I go to a Church? They would only make me feel even worse about myself than I already do!”

And you know: with all due respect to Dietrich Bonhoeffer—whose laces I am not fit to untie—the sad truth is that we Christians tend to be pretty adept about guarding against cheap grace. Different churches do that in different ways. Some churches speak of the need for good works, others of the need for faith, others still of the need for the charismatic gifts of the Spirit. What all those things have in common is that they represent a small but potent “but” that we place at the end of our proclamation of the Gospel. God loves you...but! God loves you...but is looking for faith...is looking for good works...is looking for a heart open to the Spirit. And what we fail to realize...what we fail to recognize...is that our “but” tends to drown out the Gospel. We may think we’re still proclaiming grace when we add one or more “but” to the mix; my hunch is that we are kidding ourselves. And you know...

...here I am speaking especially to us as Protestants...

...the fact that we tend to call Luther’s great a-ha “Justification by Faith”...rather than speak of it far more accurately as “Justification by Grace appropriated in faith”: well, that speaks volumes about where we place the accent. The accent should never be on the question: “Do you have faith?” but rather on the joyful

announcement: "God in Christ loves you deeply, and seeks to set you free!" Full stop.
Straight up! No Chaser!!

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Friends in Christ! Given our inevitable tendency to place ourselves at the centre of the drama...given (even those of us less scrupulous than Martin Luther) our tendency to ask hard questions about our walk, our integrity, our love for God, our devotion to Christ...

...given that tendency: let's simply refuse to open any of those doors, this morning. There will be time for all of that next Sunday when we move from *sola gratia* (grace alone) to *sola fide* (faith alone). But this morning...this morning...let's not even glance in that direction. This morning, let's not permit any if, and or but to stand in the way of our hearing the Gospel. This morning let us simply utter our small "yes" to the resounding "Yes" that God has spoken to us in and through Jesus Christ. In the words of the psalmist, let us once again:

*...give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
God's steadfast love endures forever!*

Forever. Forever!

This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ! Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ!