

Worship Service for 2022-23 Provincial Women's Bible Study Series

Scripture Lesson

2nd Corinthians 4:5-9

⁵ For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. ⁸ We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

Hymns

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| Tú Has Venido a la Orilla (Lord, You Have Come to the Lakeshore) | # 613 MBW |
| My Faith Looks Trustingly | # 705 MBW |
| Have Thine Own Way, Lord | # 355 red 1969 Moravian hymnal |

Liturgy

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| Discipleship | pp. 40-42 |
| Evangelism (start at bottom of p. 137) | pp. 137-138 |

Intercessory Prayer

Loving and Gracious God, we bow before you as your flawed but willing servants. We have experienced joy and sorrow, we are filled with triumph and despair. We know what it is to walk the mountain peaks of faith and the valley depths of despair. Echoing the cry of the loving father from Mark 9, we call out to you "We believe! Help our unbelief!" We bring all of who we are in worship to you, O Lord, for this is your grace-filled call to us. In a world that so often defines value based on production, your Spirit seeks to remind us that you define value as inherent worth and identity. We are called and loved by you not because of who we are, but because of who you are. We thank you for this grace beyond words, this mercy beyond comprehension. As we look to the very flawed and very faith example of the Apostle Peter, may we receive therein a reminder of what it means to be in relationship with you. As we consider his adventurous journey of faith, may we be reminded of the unique calling that you have placed in our lives. Grant us assurance of pardon through Christ Jesus our Lord, and fill us with your Holy Spirit to take our place in the kingdom work of justice, reconciliation, and love. In Jesus name. Amen.

Sermon

One of my favorite pictures of my son Seth from when he was a little boy was when we took a family vacation to Florida. He wanted to swim in the pool of the hotel where we were staying, but he had just turned four and although he had taken some infant and toddler swim classes, he was still learning. Nevertheless, he had no fear whatsoever when it came to water. Clad in his life vest, he wanted to jump off the edge of the pool into my awaiting arms in the water. My wife Amy managed to snap a picture at just the perfect time.



There's an old proverb that goes "You should never test the depth of the water with both feet." My son had clearly never read that proverb. But the picture is a wonderful photographic example of pure trust and wild abandon.

"Pure trust and wild abandon" might be an apt description of the life of Peter. In the Gospels, he's always the one stepping out, speaking up, and starting first. If Peter were a member of a Moravian Church today, chances are he'd be the one serving on multiple committees at once (likely annoying several people in the process), singing in the church choir and volunteering for the solo parts (even though his vocal stylings aren't exactly top notch), and offering to lead the new community outreach project (clearly scaring the pastor when he mentions something about "going all loaves and fishes" on the neighborhood meal program for seniors). If there's an experience to be had, Peter's having it. If there's something to be said, Peter's saying it. And the results of his life recorded in Scripture pay witness to an evangelistic record that was sometimes beautiful and sometimes beastly.

Peter's sometimes companion and sometimes antagonist the Apostle Paul wrote in 2nd Corinthians 4:7, "we have this treasure in clay jars to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." The treasure is the gift of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the fruits and gifts of the Holy Spirit that enable, empower, and encourage us to share the gospel message. The clay jars are me and you.

An opaque earthen vessel isn't the first choice that anyone would select to display and present a beautiful treasure they've received. That's what display cases, spotlights, and stages are for. It's the natural way of the world – we put the beautiful and impressive things up on a pedestal, and we hide the things that are less valuable or even shameful and dirty. That's what you could use a clay jar for – to store something that you don't need to display (or would prefer not to display).

And yet in the economy of God's kingdom, it's the other way around. Paul also writes in 1st Corinthians 1:27, "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong." In applying this concept to the body of Christ that is the church, Paul says that "those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment" (1st Corinthians 12:22-24). God does this, at least in part, Paul says, to help us see that God's "grace is sufficient for (us), for (God's) power is made perfect in weakness" (2nd Corinthians 12:9). In this light then, we are actually encouraged to "boast all the more gladly about (our) weaknesses, for when (we are) weak, then (we are) strong" (2nd Corinthians 12:10-11).

The Apostle Peter was a man whose life personified those words, even if he likely never truly understood them. Peter, like you and I, believed that weakness was weakness, and strength was strength. Despite being immersed in the daily teachings and examples of Christ, the kingdom values of servanthood, humility, love, sacrifice, and peace were conceptually difficult and practically impossible for Peter; by and large, it wasn't part of his worldview and it certainly didn't encapsulate his understanding of the work of the Messiah. But we mustn't be too hard on Peter, nor must we be tempted into believing that we would've done any better had we been in his sandals. This after all, is the way of things. We have a treasure in clay jars.

Over the course of his life, Peter would come to understand in a deeper and fuller way what it meant to be claimed by grace. His was a humble journey of self-discovery and kingdom embrace. By the time we get to his letters in the New Testament, we find a Peter who has accepted and incorporated the concepts of suffering for Jesus and being open to learning wisdom from God's Spirit as core values of a Christian's sojourn in this world.

A question that is sometimes posed by or for new believers regarding Scripture is this: "What would be a good book to start with?" There are several popular answers to that question: Genesis, the Gospels, Acts, Romans. But I would offer another possibility – start with the life of Peter, trace his growth and his learning from fisherman, to disciple, to apostle, to leader of the early church. His life is a case study laid bare for all to see – the good, the bad, and the ugly. But just as Peter learned, so also we must learn – God receives it all as a gift of worship, and this is what we know as grace.

I close by offering one of the best descriptions of grace that I've ever heard, a description that Peter continuously lived into throughout his days. It's taken from pp. 24-25 of *The Ragamuffin Gospel* by Brennan Manning.

*As C. S. Lewis says in *The Four Loves*, "Grace substitutes a full, childlike and delighted acceptance of our need, a joy in total dependence. The good man is sorry for the sins which have increased his need. He is not entirely sorry for the fresh need they have produced."*

As the gospel of grace lays hold of us, something is radically right. We are living in truth and reality. We become as honest as the ninety-two-year-old priest who was venerated by everybody in town for his holiness. He was also a member of the Rotary Club. Every time the club met, he would be there, always on time and always seated in his favorite spot in a corner of the room.

One day the priest disappeared. It was as if he had vanished into thin air. The townsfolk searched all over and could find no trace of him. But the following month, when the Rotary Club met, he was there as usual sitting in his corner.

"Father," everyone cried, "where have you been?"

"I just served a thirty-day sentence in prison."

"In prison?" they cried. "Father, you couldn't hurt a fly.

What happened?"

"It's a long story," said the priest, "but briefly, this is what happened. I bought myself a train ticket to go into the city. I was standing on the platform waiting for the train to arrive when this stunningly beautiful girl appears on the arm of a policeman. She looked at me, turned to the cop and said, 'He did it. I'm certain he's the one who did it.' Well, to tell you the truth, I was so flattered I pleaded guilty."

There's a touch of vanity in even the holiest men and women. They see no reason to deny it. And they know that reality bites back if it isn't respected.

When I get honest, I admit I am a bundle of paradoxes. I believe and I doubt, I hope and get discouraged, I love and I hate, I feel bad about feeling good, I feel guilty about not feeling guilty. I am trusting and suspicious. I am honest and I still play games. Aristotle said I am a rational animal; I say I am an angel with an incredible capacity for beer.

To live by grace means to acknowledge my whole life story, the light side and the dark. In admitting my shadow side, I learn who I am and what God's grace means. As Thomas Merton put it, "A saint is not someone who is good but who experiences the goodness of God."

The gospel of grace nullifies our adulation of televangelists, charismatic superstars, and local church heroes. It obliterates the two-class citizenship theory operative in many American churches. For grace proclaims the awesome truth that all is gift. All that is good is ours, not by right, but by the sheer bounty of a gracious God. While there is much we may have earned—our degree, our salary, our home and garden, a Miller Lite, and a good night's sleep—all this is possible only because we have been given so much: life itself, eyes to see and hands to touch, a mind to shape ideas, and a heart to beat with love. We have been given God in our souls and Christ in our flesh. We have the power to believe where others deny, to hope where others despair, to love where others hurt. This and so much more is sheer gift; it is not reward for our faithfulness, our generous disposition, or our heroic life of prayer. Even our fidelity is a gift. "If we but turn to God," said St. Augustine, "that itself is a gift of God." My deepest awareness of myself is that I am deeply loved by Jesus Christ and I have done nothing to earn it or deserve it.