**Ephesians 2:4-10** March 14, 2021

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Lent 4

 *4Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. 6And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. 8For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—9not by works, so that no one can boast. 10For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

 It is good of you to be here the first day of Daylight Savings. Of course, making a 10:30am church service an hour early is no stretch if you are a morning person. But if you’re not, or if you come from far away, or especially across the county line over in the Central Time Zone, it’s a different story. We all are going to have to cut one hour of out of something today! How good of you to not make it this hour.

 On days it is just a bit more difficult to get to God’s house—whether it’s Daylight Savings, or rain, or a headache—remember that God always sets out his best for you in his house. God will always make this hour of worship worth your while. (My weekly prayer is that we leaders and guides in your worship just don’t get in the way.) And remember also these words, *“Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing but let us encourage one another”* (Heb 10:25). It’s not just about what you get out of this hour! Your brothers and sisters in Christ need you here too.

 There’s another reason to be here. The world out there seems to be getting more and more unfriendly. I am not just talking about a culture more and more antagonistic to Biblical Christianity. Our times, our nation, our culture seems less and less friendly in general. Look, I can’t even go into examples, because if I do, I will offend somebody. One side or another will say I am getting political or politically correct or politically incorrect no matter what example I use. No longer are we allowed differences of opinions, or even to hint at them! We have witnessed it often enough that if you use the wrong word once—once in all your life!—all the kindnesses you have ever spoken, all the good you have ever done will be counted as hypocritical garbage and you will be cancelled.

 Our culture has also become very unforgiving of mistakes. In the information age we no longer have room for errors and inefficiencies. No longer is there giving people the benefit of the doubt, or being happy with a best effort. Jesus had said there is one unforgiveable sin. In our day there are any number of unforgiveable sins. Once your misdeed is let out of the box, it will always be counted against you. Maybe with enough groveling and tears and self-humiliation, maybe you can keep yourself from being cast into outer darkness, but you will still be kicked to the side of the road. That’s the world we live in.

 We have lost something very important: the ability to accept other people for what we are: fallen human beings. I’m not taking sides. I’m sitting on the sideline, mourning.

 It is sad because we need acceptance. Oh, what a blessing today’s word of God is! Contrary to what is being shouted from all sides, our reading today tells us that…

**By God’s Grace, We Are Accepted, Acceptable, Accepting**

**I.A.** One of the more barbaric crimes in the world preys on our need for acceptance. I thank God that this is almost unheard of in our nation, but if you hear quite a bit of world news, you might have heard of acid attacks. This crime exposes the deepest ugliness of human nature. Usually these happen over matters of “love” – when someone is dumped or denied or cheated on. In revenge, at a later date, the aggrieved throws acid at the person they are angry with, in the face, with the intention of terribly scarring them for life. They have no intention of taking life. They intend to take everything but life—to leave the victim an empty shell of life, in pain, maybe blind, in poverty, and friendless. And that is how it often plays out. Often these victims are so badly scarred that people stare at them, and then become so uncomfortable they avoid them. The victim becomes self-conscious about their appearance and withdraw. Friends stop coming around. Even family. People, livelihood, future evaporate. Frequently the end is long term mental illness and suicide, because they have intentionally been made hideous.

 These victims are the embodiment of one of our greatest unspoken fears, that others laugh, stare, or worse look away; to be abandoned, to find no acceptance among others.

 Somewhere, it says about God, *“Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong.”* (Hab. 1:13). If that is what God is like, then what are we to make of our reading, ***“We were dead in our transgressions.”*** By nature we are unacceptable to God. At certain times we can fool ourselves that we are decent people. But anyone with the least bit of self-awareness realizes that we only flatter ourselves. Maybe we are better by comparison, but not holy before God. Have you heard news recently that made your blood boil? What about that anger, even hatred? You know that is not what God wants. Have you found yourself speaking idly about another person, especially their peculiar ways, their folly in judgment, the way they parent, the way they spend money? Who are you, O Pot, to call the kettle black? Have you been quick to snap back, greedy, disrespectful, disobedient? Do ever-present suggestive internet ads get your desires moving in a way God doesn’t desire, that Jesus’ himself condemned? And how tough is it to convince yourself to give the first and the best of your paycheck to God? How about a stimulus check—or did that thought never cross your mind?

 If you had no right to sit at the popular kids’ lunch table (and even if you did, please humor me for a moment), how in the world can you claim a place before a holy God. In a million different ways—and that number is surely too low!—we have fallen short of the holiness of God.

 But God has more virtues than holiness: ***“Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.”***

 Our merciful, loving God looked on us dead in our sins and had pity on us. That’s what the word ***“mercy”*** means, it emphasizes God’s pity that caused him to act. The word ***“grace”*** emphasizes how undeserved is the favor he has given us. Even the word ***“love”*** in our reading is not the sort of friendship love we usually think of, where one person sees endearing qualities and shared interests in another. That’s another word entirely. This ***“love”*** is God’s one-sided interest in and concern for people, whether they realize it or not, appreciate it or not, accept it or not. God has accepted us for no other reason that he has decided to accept us.

 Every day of our lives is a testament to why we should not be acceptable to God. Yet God’s overflowing mercy, love and grace tell us, “I accept you the way you are. Not *because of* the way you are, but in Jesus.” Like the father wouldn’t even let the returning, formerly rebellious prodigal son explain all the ways he had sinned and all the ways that he didn’t deserve to be back under his father’s roof, our heavenly Father welcomes us home. He tells us to silence our fears and reservations. He tells us we don’t have to worry about him finding out. “Hush, and speak of it no more,” he tells us. He has accepted us. It’s done, in Jesus.

**I.B.** And then we start to realize that because we have been accepted in Christ, we are acceptable. Which sounds obvious, but it’s not. How many a Christian who knows that Jesus is their Savior still lives under guilt! They say that they “hope” that God will forgive them.

 Listen in verses 8 and 9. Listen to how many different ways we are told that God’s has brought us close irrespective of who we are: ***“It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”***

 Because God has so loved us, how can we not be concerned for what our God wants! But we realize that at no point does our acceptance depend on what we do. And even now as believers, it is not dependent something we need to do now. We don’t need to make a covenant. We don’t need to do better. It is expressly ***“not by works, so that no one can boast.”*** Day by day we go to God, asking his forgiveness, basking in his patient acceptance, that covers all sin, and that looks forward to the day when all that remains in us that is objectionable to God, will be finally wiped clean.

 He has done everything for us. Everything. Totally grace. Now what for us?

**II.** My wife and I were recently watching an old black and white movie from the 50’s. The title isn’t important, but two lines from the movie were for our message today. The movie is constructed around a man who is accused of murder. Early in the movie an attorney interviews the accused man’s wife. A decade earlier, this man had been a combat soldier. At the end of hostilities in a foreign land, he married this local woman, delivering her from her war-torn, impoverished, famine-stricken country and bringing her to a land of plenty. One could argue that he had saved her life. Knowing this, trying to figure how she fit into the murder case, the attorney asked the woman, “He did marry you and brought you safely to this country. Don’t you think you should be very grateful to him?” She dryly replied, “One can get very tired of gratitude.” (*Witness for the Prosecution*)

 Yes, one can get tired of being able to do nothing other than showing gratitude. To only labor under the knowledge that we are undeserving and have been given a gift that we can never hope to repay, and to be stuck in that position forever, that could become tiresome.

 God has known this well enough. When he saved us from what we once were, lost and condemned sinners, he not only saved us from that—he not only loved the unlovable, accepted the unacceptable—he has also saved us *for* something. He has made us not just objects of his mercy, but also to be beacons of that mercy in our own world. ***“For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”***

 In Christ we are recreated for action. We are not museum objects on a pedestal in God’s library. God has greater plans for us in this world than mere trophies. He has made to be, understood correctly, to be like God in a fallen world. God ***“made us alive with Christ”*** Not only that heaven *will* offer us a new life, but that he made us alive even now. You have been made alive not just *by* Christ, but *with* Christ. As he lives, so you live. This new life is to live what God has done for us. Even as God has mercifully accepted us, so are we are accepting.

 Which answers the question of why our times are so unaccepting and unloving. Our nation once had a great many people, perhaps even at some points a majority, who knew about their God and their Savior Jesus Christ. No more. While a majority still call themselves Christians, most would define “Christian” as a moral code, what a “Christian” should act like, rather than knowing the One who has saved us, to being accepted by God in Christ Jesus. Unless we realize we are forgiven, we cannot be forgiving. One must realize they are accepted for who they are, to be accepting of others.

 What a time to be a Christian! Who can stand out like we can? As in the old pagan world, we have a chance not seen in centuries. In a time of so little grace and forgiveness, we have been freely and generously given a gift that this world so badly needs. Acceptance from God to us, and from us to the world. Amen.