**4th Sunday after the Epiphany – Year C – February 3, 2013 – Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY**

**Based on Romans 10:18-11:6 written by Pastor Paul Horn**

**“It’s Not Fair!’**

*18 But I ask: Did they not hear? Of course they did: “Their voice has gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.” (Psalm 19:4) 19 Again I ask: Did Israel not understand? First, Moses says, “I will make you envious by those who are not a nation; I will make you angry by a nation that has no understanding.” (Deut. 32:21) 20 And Isaiah boldly says, “I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me.”(Isaiah 65:1) 21 But concerning Israel he says, “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.” (Isaiah 65:2) I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. 2 God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew. Don’t you know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah—how he appealed to God against Israel: 3 “Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me” 4 And what was God’s answer to him? “I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” (1Kings 19) 5 So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. 6 And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.*

“It’s not fair!” You ever hear someone say something stupid like that? “It’s not fair!” your child says, because the other kids’ parents let them do it. “It’s not fair!” you say to your boss who considers someone else for promotion. “It’s not fair!” you say to your teacher who assigns a truck load of homework. “It’s not fair!” you say to your doctor who just handed you a prognosis you were not expecting. It’s not fair… to whom? To you. It’s not fair to you. What is fair? It’s fair as long as it is equal distribution, no one is favored more than me, then it’s fair.

That’s describes God’s grace, doesn’t it? God’s grace is his love for all humankind that we do not deserve. “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.” (John 3:16) Why did he love the world? It is full of sinful, disobedient people. Because he chose to love the world. Romans 5:8 “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” This is grace – unasked, undeserved, unearned. Free and faithful and for all.

But grace is not fair – at least to our human reason and thinking. Jesus told a story which we commonly refer to as “The Prodigal Son.” The younger of two sons requests his father’s inheritance, basically wishing his father were dead. And then he leaves town and travels to a distant country. He spends every last dime in wild living, then finds himself unemployed and on the street. He eventually finds his way home. And the father… he does not disown his son. Instead, the father has compassion on his son, forgives him and welcomes him back as his son and throws a big party for his son. The older brother is indignant. He complains that he has been the faithful son, hard-working, and here your recalcitrant son who wastes his father’s money on hookers, booze and drugs comes home and is thrown a party? No party was ever thrown for me!

It is not fair that at times God showers his grace on the ungodly, worldly minded people, those who have not followed God’s will, those who live with no conscience; the murderers, the adulterers, the pedophiles, the corporate presidents who cheat clients out of millions. We do not think grace is fair… that they get a free pass. Take Jeffrey Dahmer for example, a man who lived in Milwaukee, WI in the 1990s and did unexplainable things to human beings the details of which are not appropriate for little ears. Yet, we know that while in prison, the Lord changed his heart, he repented, and believed in Jesus as his Savior. After he was murdered by other inmates, there is no doubt that his spirit was quickly rushed to Jesus’ side by the angels. There is no doubt that his body will be raised to eternal life in heaven, because of God’s grace. But we blurt out, “That’s unfair!”

What I’m really saying is that I deserve to go to heaven because I am more godly, a better Christian, because I haven’t done those things, I don’t run with that crowd. Honestly, what am I going to offer God? The little bit that I do, when I want, where I want… here Lord, here are the 20 years of faithfulness to my spouse, but please ignore the lust that I often harbor in my heart. Here Lord, accept these times I came home before curfew, but please ignore my rolling eyes, my pouting, my complaining to my parents. Here Lord, accept these smiles and good things I said about people but please ignore the times I whispered about them to others. Here Lord, accept all of this money that I’ve given over my lifetime in the offering plate, but please ignore all the money that I selfishly hoarded for myself and withheld my firstfruits and generous gifts.

Is this what I’m going to offer? At my funeral do I want people to say, “He was a good man, a faithful pastor.” Is that what I want my family and friends to cling to for certainty, for the sake of my eternity? Is that what I’m going to say to my Holy, Righteous God, “I was a good man.” You know what isn’t fair? That I, a baptized, confessing Christian, who knows God’s will, and so often refuses to do it, should be showered with God’s grace. That’s unfair.

Thank God, that the Holy Spirit shares these words with us today, lest we think that our good works or worthiness somehow contributes to our salvation and God’s acceptance of us, **“So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.”** (vs5,6)

The Apostle Paul uses the example of the Jews and the Gentiles to showcase the generosity of God’s grace. First, the Jews: in vs21 God says, **“All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.”** For thousands of years had God sent prophets to remind his people of his gracious promise to send a Savior. Time and time again his people ignored the promise. They prostituted themselves with the false gods of the neighboring nations. God discipline them again and again so they might repent. But they refused. They acted like an unfaithful cheating spouse. God ought to have destroyed them completely. But he doesn’t. He chose to save a remnant, a small group of believers, who by faith clung to the promise that the Savior was coming. Sadly today, the nation of Israel rejects Jesus as God’s Son. Again they are falling down to a false god. Yet, God chooses to save some from that nation. Some hear the good news of Jesus. The Holy Spirit turns their hearts. He plants the seed of faith, and by faith they believe.

Paul used his own conversion as a testament of God’s grace. He, too, was once one of those who thought the Jewish religion worshiped the true God. He persecuted and murdered Christians. Once he stumbled upon the good news of Jesus, and the Holy Spirit brought him to faith, did he understand the vastness of God’s grace. That God would pull Saul, the persecutor and murderer of Christians, from the darkness of unbelief, the chief of sinners, and transform him into Paul, apostle to the nations.

Paul uses the example of the Gentiles to showcase the generosity of God’s grace. In vs20 he quotes Isaiah who wrote, “**I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me**.” Here were the Gentiles, the non-Jewish people. They were uneducated (in the Scriptures)… they knew nothing about the promises from God. They were unenlightened. They lived according to their hedonism and heathenism. They were ungodly, not seeking God. Yet, God sought them. He made sure they heard the Word of Jesus. The Holy Spirit created faith in their hearts and they believed.

The stories in the Bible are proof. The story we heard this morning about the widow at Zarapheth (a place from where the worship of a false god called Baal came to corrupt the people of Israel). The prophet Elijah was sent there instead of to a widow in Israel. She was expecting to die, but God was looking for her to give her life, not just physical life, but spiritual life. Like a man who remodels his home and under the floorboards stumbles upon a hidden treasure, this woman stumbled upon the treasure of God’s free grace, even though she was not looking for it.

This is the story of our conversion, the story of how God showered his grace on you and me. We did not seek out God, he sought us. Why did he look for us? Not because of our works, not because he knew we would believe, then grace would not be grace. Grace is undeserved love. By grace alone God chose to save you.

It is by grace that God chose not to look at you and me and decide to save us. He instead looked at his Son, Jesus. Remember how we tried to offer God the little that we do and told God to ignore the things we leave undone? Jesus could offer his entire life to his Father. He never had lust in his heart, but pure thoughts, always. He never rolled his eyes at Mary and Joseph, but was obedient to them in everything. He never spoke badly of anyone, but always built others up. He always gave generously all he had to offer – and he offered all to the Father on our behalf.

Jesus had to provide a life of perfect obedience. He also had to provide payment for our sins. When we talk about what is fair and unfair, what seems unfair is that Jesus had to provide that payment for sins, the payment of suffering and death. But by his own will, Jesus allowed sinful men to bind his hands, march him to court, beat him, falsely sentence him to die, stretch out his hands, nail them to a tree, and freely allowed the Father to accuse him of our sins, an innocent man, condemned to suffer and die for us, the guilty ones.

And then Jesus stood before the Father on our behalf, slide his perfect life across the table, along with his innocent death. Was it enough for us? Yes! The Father raised Jesus from the dead as proof! By God’s grace the Father looked at all that Jesus provided for us and decided since Jesus did everything well that he would choose us based on Jesus’ work and Jesus’ merits and Jesus’ efforts, and Jesus’ worthiness – that’s why God chose you.

By his grace then, God chose to send your parents to the baptismal font, cradling you in their arms, and through the power of his promise and the water, he chose to create faith in your heart. Or maybe for you it happened that later on in life by his grace God the Holy Spirit made sure that someone shared the truths of the bible, of how great your sin is, and how much greater God’s grace is through Jesus, and through that message the Holy Spirit created faith in your heart. Faith that now looks to Christ alone for salvation, faith clings to Jesus’ death as the payment for sins, faith clings to his resurrection for eternal life.

Isn’t this comforting? To know that it is not my works, but Christ’s that saved me. To know that on my worst day, when life isn’t fair for me… God still loves me and still accepts me because of Jesus. Isn’t it comforting to know that even on my best day, God looks not at me and my works, but at Jesus?

And when I look around at others and think, “They don’t deserve God’s grace,” it’s nice to know that God will tap me on the shoulder and remind me that I didn’t deserve his grace either. God’s grace gives me confidence, knowing that if I encounter some wandering soul, who is not looking for God, and point them to Christ, that the Holy Spirit can use that message to save them. I pray that he gives us all the opportunity to do that every day! And lest I say, “It’s not fair,” I all I need to do is to look at what he did for me, apart from me, for me – he saved me by grace alone, through Scripture alone, through faith alone, because of Christ alone. Amen.