

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

January 2, 2022

Grace Upon Grace

[Readings](#)

[Bulletin](#)

Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Gospel of John is just jammed pack with all sorts of theological goodies! Any time I get to preach on this Gospel I uncover more gold that I can incorporate into my theological understanding. I've shared before that one of the foundational texts of my theology is found in John 13, where Christ explains that his followers are known by the love they bear for one another and for the cosmos that God so loves.¹ Another foundational text for me is found here in the prologue of John, specifically John 1:16, "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace."

Why is this such an important verse? Two reasons. The first being the powerfully universal nature of this verse (and the entire prologue). From Christ's fullness we have **ALL** received. Christ's fullness is enough for all people...for the whole world...for the cosmos! And it's not just this portion of the prologue that is so universal. Verse 3a: "**all things** came into being through him." Verse 4b: "the life was the light of **all people**." Verse 7b: "so that **all** might believe through him." Verse 9a: "The true light, which enlightens **everyone**." We are told from the start of the gospel that the Incarnation is for everyone. God's salvific action in Christ Jesus is for the whole world...for the whole cosmos. Or, to use more church-y language: God intends salvation for all people. And I need to be reminded of that fact regularly.

The second reason this verse (that is, John 1:16) is so important to me is that it gives you a road map for the rest of the gospel of John. From the fullness of Christ we have all received what? Grace upon grace! Now what does **that** mean? Grace is a tricky concept, and now we're going to double it? Christ's fullness is not **just** grace...it is grace **upon grace**! John must have realized that if we humans are bad enough with just grace, we'd be

¹ John 13:31-35 (all scripture cited is from the NRSV translation)

even worse in understanding grace **upon grace**, so he spends much of the rest of the gospel providing us with examples of what grace upon grace looks like.

So, what does grace upon grace look like in the Gospel of John? It looks like an over-abundance of the best wine you've ever tasted right when you thought you'd run out completely.² It is being freed from the economic and religious systems designed to control you and to get between you and God.³ It is patient and loving teaching even in the face of misunderstanding and cluelessness.⁴ It is the unequivocal statement that "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:16-17).

We're barely three chapters into the gospel and we've already found numerous examples of grace upon grace. But I want to pause a moment and savor the next example because its one of my favorites. Grace upon grace is being someone who is so ashamed of themselves that they only collect water in the heat of the day when no one else is around to see them. Grace upon grace is being that person and encountering Jesus Christ who tells you that you need not be ashamed anymore and that the water of eternal life is for you too!⁵ God's grace is for the Samaritan woman at the well! Grace upon grace is being seen for who you truly are, broken, shame-filled, sinful; and being loved and accepted anyway!

I can go on and on and on with these examples from John! Grace upon grace is healing a man's son, despite that man being the servant of an enemy⁶; it is healing on the sabbath, flaunting the rules of the religious elites because human need is more important than rules and traditions⁷; it is providing more than enough food for all in the crowd to be filled with plenty left over⁸; it is the bread of life free and accessible to all⁹. If you're following along in the gospel you'll know that I've only gotten as far as the

² John 2:1-11 (The Wedding at Cana)

³ John 2:13-21 (Jesus Cleanses the Temple)

⁴ John 3:1-21 (Nicodemus Visits Jesus)

⁵ John 4:1-42 (Jesus and the Woman of Samaria)

⁶ John 4:46-54 (Jesus Heals an Official's Son)

⁷ John 5:1-18 (Jesus Heals on the Sabbath)

⁸ John 6:1-15 (Feeding the Five Thousand)

⁹ John 6:22-59 (The Bread from Heaven)

sixth chapter of John's gospel, roughly a third of the way through it. Perhaps when a theme gets hammered on repeatedly like this, it's important, don't cha think?

Grace upon grace, salvation, freedom from injustice, oppression, sin, and death; this is the why of the Incarnation. This is what Christ came to show us. This is why we're here this morning. This is why we're followers of the Way of Christ. At some point, we have experienced this grace upon grace; perhaps from a friend or family member; perhaps from a powerful spiritual experience; perhaps from nature; perhaps from some other source. But wherever we encounter grace upon grace, we encounter Christ.

Take a moment now and reflect on grace upon grace. When have you experienced that deep love, mercy, and forgiveness? When have you felt accepted for who you are? When have you cried tears of joy for the knowledge that you are loved, completely, wholly, and unconditionally? And having reflected on your own experiences of grace upon grace, how might you share that grace upon grace with others?

Christ in the gospel of John gives us plenty of examples of what grace upon grace looks like, if only we are willing to extend it to others. It's not always easy though. Grace upon grace means forgiving others, even when it's hard (though as I will always say, sometimes forgiveness cannot lead to reconciliation in this life, if you are in an abusive relationship, please get help and get out). It means prioritizing human needs over religious, economic, or political systems of power and control. It means letting go of our shame and not shaming others. It means generously and abundantly taking care of others and the world God made.

As with most things God-related, having experienced the love and grace of God, following the Way of Christ means sharing that love and grace with others. Having been fed and nourished we are called to feed and nourish others. Having been shown the Way of Christ we are called to invite others into it. Having been freed from sin, death, and the devil we are called to help God free others! Having had our eyes opened to God's grace upon grace for us we are called to heap grace upon grace on others. Amen.

- Pastor Jon Nelson