

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

January 16, 2022

Do what?

[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.

Here I thought I was being clever, but I may have inadvertently shot myself in the foot recently. You might remember two Sundays ago I preached on John 1, in particular verse 16 of John 1, "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." In that sermon I made the point that verse 16, in particular that part about "grace upon grace," is what the entire gospel of John is about. Just about everything that follow verse 16 is an example of what "grace upon grace" looks like.

I was soooooo clever in that sermon! I went on to explain how those examples work to show "grace upon grace." I pointed out that in the Wedding at Cana "grace upon grace" is exhibited in an abundance of the best wine right when you thought the party had to end because you ran out. See, I thought I was being clever, after all we're in Year C of the lectionary cycle which means we're focused on Luke's Gospel this year; it's not like its Year B, which focuses on Mark, but since Mark is so short we get a lot of John too. No big deal, I thought to myself, so what if I cover half of John's gospel in one sermon. Well, now I'm back in John and what am I supposed to say now? But wait there's more?

Actually...wait...there **is** more! While I do believe that the main point of this sign at Cana is to clearly illustrate "grace upon grace," there is a lot more to delve into in this text. For instance, did you notice how out reading begins? "On the third day..."¹ Third day from or of what?? It's an easy detail for us to just skim right over, but it helps shape the narrative, and not just to keep things in chronological order. "Third day" raises in the minds of Christian readers thoughts of the resurrection. This word choice could be laying that groundwork already, or it could be something else. Some commentators like to point out that if you keep track of all of the time markers in John 1

¹ John 2:1a (all scriptural quotations from the NRSV)

you can add them up to find that this “third day” is also the seventh day since the Gospel started making notes on timing. Seven days not only reminds us of creation, but in Hebrew culture seven also indicates perfection or wholeness. So this amazing sign is being introduced with allusions to the resurrection, to perfection, and to completion or wholeness.

Then there’s the interchange between Jesus and his mother. Much ink has been spilled in trying to interpret this conversation! From our point of view the tone can be hard to interpret. Jesus addressing his mother as “woman” can sound terse to us. But it’s actually the same way he addresses her the only other time he speaks directly to her, which is from the cross in John 19, “When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’”² And that latter statement is certainly not terse. So what do we do with Jesus’ response in verse four? I’m not sure I have a great answer for that.

Then there’s “My hour has not yet come.”³ What does **that** mean? Generally when Jesus talks about his hour in John’s gospel he is referencing his crucifixion. But we’re 17 chapters away from that narrative! Perhaps this interchange is trying to illustrate Christ’s humanity. Perhaps it is foreshadowing other themes in the gospel. How you interpret this exchange is likely shaped by how you interpret the tone of the conversation, and tone is hard to communicate in written form. As I have delved into the text I think those are reasonable interpretations, but I also wonder if we get so bogged down in the first exchange that we skip over what might be the most important part of the conversation: the result!

As a result of this odd conversation, what happens? Mary turns to the servants and says to them “Do whatever he tells you.”⁴ I’m more and more convinced that this statement is actually the main purpose of this exchange between Jesus and his mother. It clearly lays out that Mary trusts that Jesus can do something about the wine running out. It exhibits an amazing amount of trust in Christ. Remember, this is the first of Jesus’ signs, as far as we know the only indication Mary might have had about Jesus’ power is his miraculous birth (which this gospel omits). Mary is inviting the servants to trust Jesus. And since the tense of the Greek is present, Mary is also inviting **us** to trust in Christ’s power.

² John 19:26

³ John 2:4b

⁴ John 2:5b

Now, if you pay attention in the first six chapters of John's gospel you will find that the topic of trust gets repeated numerous times until it ultimately comes to a head in this exchange from chapter six: "Then [the crowd] said to him, 'What must we do to perform the works of God?' Jesus answered them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.'"⁵ Or, to put it another way, believe what I'm telling you! Follow my teachings! Trust that I have the power and authority to heal, to make whole, to liberate, to judge, to forgive, to save, and to love the cosmos so completely that it is reconciled to God.

Again and again in John's gospel trust is the answer that Jesus gives when asked what people are to do. He gives it to Nicodemus, to the Samaritan woman at the well, to disciples and would-be disciples, to the crowds, and through all of them to **us**. In the fullness of Christ God has showered the cosmos with grace upon grace. Christ then teaches that our response to this amazing gift of grace is to trust in Christ. Trust in God as the source of grace, and mercy, and healing, and love, and freedom, and salvation.

Grace upon grace is God saying to us, "You're perfect just the way you are and I love you completely." The teaching of Christ, which calls us to righteousness, is God saying to us, "You're broken and I want you to do better, and here's the example I've given you to follow and to trust in: Jesus Christ, my only beloved son." These may sound paradoxical, but we're Lutheran! We love paradoxes! After all, our theology teaches that we are both saint and sinner. It teaches that in Christ, the Kingdom of God is already come, and yet it's not here (fully) yet. Our theology says that God is perfectly just, and also perfectly merciful. Luther taught in "On the Freedom of a Christian," that followers of Christ are perfectly free and subject to none, but also that we are perfectly dutiful and servants to all. So if there's any group that should be comfortable with paradoxes, it's us Lutherans!

Which brings me back to this paradox. We are loved and saved by the grace upon grace found in the fullness of Jesus Christ, and through no thought, word, or action of our own. We are also called to live out our faith in thought, word, and action by doing as Christ taught us. Or, as Mary said to those servants, and to us: trust Jesus and do whatever he tells you to do. So go and follow Mary's advice. Know that you are saved by God's grace and through no action of your own. And know also that God calls you

⁵ John 6:28-29

to action for the sake of your neighbor and the cosmos which God so dearly loves. Amen.

- Pastor Jon Nelson