

Acts of Grace
I Peter 4:7-11

Our passage today begins with the words - *the end of all things is near*. Christians in the first century were eagerly anticipating Jesus's return. Centuries later we know that God's timing is not ours. But in this passage we hear an urgency for action. We cannot know when that day may come but we should live as if the end is near - as if this is the last day that we have to live in the footsteps of Jesus. The writer of I Peter's first instruction is an overarching thought - *be serious and discipline yourselves*. In the verses right before this he had listed the patterns of behavior they were to avoid and now he lays out the patterns of behavior their new life in Christ demands. He recognized that this new pattern of behavior would take effort and practice for these are not easy actions. They are acts of grace - that when lived into by the community of faith - can change the world. And my friends, these are the acts of grace that we are still called to live into today for when we do others take notice and are drawn to this new way of life.

In a classic study of evangelism in the early church, theologian Michael Green observed that the early Christian made the grace of God credible by a society of love and mutual care which astonished the pagans and was recognized as something entirely new. It lent persuasiveness to their claim that the new age had dawned in Christ. (Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970). And friends, that is what we need to recover today. So what are these acts of grace we are challenged to embody?

First, a disciplined life of prayer. A life of prayer calls us to remember from whom we have the gift of life, to whom we give our honor and allegiance and through whom we are given a model to follow. When we are surrounded by a life of prayer we sense God's presence not just when we are

praying but every step we take in life.

I have a cross stitch picture that hangs in my bathroom. That may seem like a strange place for it to be but it is one of those places that you go regularly no matter what kind of day you are having. And we spend time there out of necessity. It says - *Life outlined with prayer is less likely to unravel*. Every time I see it I am reminded to take a moment and pray. It is not only a constant reminder to pray but I cross stitched it while sitting in the hospital room when my mother was dying. So it is also a reminder that God sustained me through that time of suffering and if I keep my life disciplined with prayer - outlined with prayer on all sides - then no matter what happens my life will not unravel.

The second act of grace is constant mutual love for one another. Now we all know that we can love other human beings. But what is emphasized here is constant mutual love. It is a deep caring for others that is constant - never failing, always available. It doesn't allow for a bad day, a hot temper, lack of sleep or weariness. It is a deep love that is shared. A mutual love that is so strong that it covers a multitude of sins. The writer of I Peter quoted from Proverbs 10:12 - *Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses*. Mutual love that covers a multitude of sins is love that does not notice or call attention to the sins of fellow Christians. It is a love that involves mutual forgiveness. A love that looks for the good in one another, the positive and throws away the bad. It is love that can bind a community of very diverse people together. It is the love a parent has for a child. It is a love that binds a man and a woman to each other for life in marriage. It is the love of Christ. A constant mutual love for one another. That is what we are called to have for one another in the faith community. The challenge of the faith community is to so love others with a constant mutual love that they are drawn to Christ. This only happens when those of us who claim Jesus as our Lord and Savior live in constant mutual love and model that love even to the unlovable. And sometimes it

means speaking up for what we value and honor. That is an act of grace - and it is a challenge.

The third act of grace is to be hospitable to one another without complaining. Hospitality was central to the culture of the first century Christians. They were poor and relied on one another for a place to stay when they traveled. Christians regularly opened their homes to each other and to needy strangers. The Christian faith would not have spread so quickly had it not been for the hospitality of the faith communities. For traveling Christian preachers and teachers relied on this hospitality as they shared the faith to a broader community.

At the root of the word for hospitality is the word *hospes* which originally meant both host and guest. Fred Craddock has said that the implication of this is that when two or more are fellowshiping and it is not discernable who is the host and who is the guest then hospitality is being practiced. The act of grace is that we are hospitable to one another - even strangers - in a way that our homes, our lives and our very beings are shared with a love that makes strangers feel like family. If we have ever experienced this type of hospitality we know it.

Rev. Jerry Hoffman, a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America tells of a time a number of years ago, when he and his wife, Joan had a unique experience of hospitality. Holly, a member of their staff, was getting married. Holly had been in Japan making arrangements for a group of Japanese young people to come to the United States and spend time with members of their congregation. She was a guest in the home of Tomeko. On a whim, she invited her Japanese friend to attend her wedding, and to her surprise, she came. Jerry and Joan told Holly that they would welcome the opportunity to host Tomeko in their home. They met and sat next to her at the rehearsal dinner. She was a very attractive and expensively dressed Japanese woman. Joan gave Jerry a sharp elbow in his ribs, leaned over and whispered, "Get a good look at the size of the diamonds on her ring!" When they talked to Tomeko about her impending visit to their home, her eyes lit up and she said, "Oh, let me

prepare a Japanese meal for you and your guests.” They had already made arrangements for guests to be in their home in order to meet Tomeko. She seemed pleased and even more insistent. They finally agreed.

They picked her up and stopped at the most impressive grocery store in the Twin Cities. She immediately began to enthusiastically load the basket with jumbo shrimp, filet and other very fine and expensive foods. She started to add the pots and pans necessary to prepare the meal, until Joan was able to assure her that they had the necessary cooking utensils. When they finally arrived at the checkout with a grocery cart overflowing, Jerry was feeling very apprehensive about what this episode was going to cost. She saw him reach for his billfold and at once declared, “I pay! Cheap!”

When they arrived home, they took Tomeko to their guest room. In a very short time she returned in work clothes and literally took over the kitchen. Joan attempted to help, but wasn’t doing it properly and was soon cast out of her own kitchen. About two hours later, the guests arrived. After the preliminaries, they went into the dining room, expecting Tomeko would join them. But she insisted they be seated. She then served them the most fabulous several course meal they had ever eaten. In their efforts to be good hosts to a foreign guest, they ended up being guests in their own home. This obviously wealthy lady emptied herself, took the form of a servant and graciously served them. Just as Jesus, who, though in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be exploited, emptied himself, taking the form of a servant. (“Tomeko: A guest who became our host,” luthersem.edu/stewardship.) And therein lies an example of what it means to be hospitable to one another - whether host or guest we share life and table fellowship without complaining but with joy in our hearts.

Hospitality is central to our life together as Christians. That is one reason this time of sheltering in place has been so difficult for us as a community. At the heart of our life together is sharing our lives in community. And we miss it for it is as we share time together we learn more

about one another and break down the hostilities that may have separated us. Friends, the day will come when we will do this again and what a glorious day that will be. For we will never again take it for granted!

The final act of grace that Peter identified was *to serve one another with whatever gift* we have received. He told them to *be good stewards of the manifold grace of God*. With these words he was probably identifying with certain members of the community to which he wrote. For we know that some of those he wrote to were household slaves. The term steward was the word used for the slave who was the master's steward. That person exercised authority in the household over the other slaves. To be the steward was to be the responsible member of the household who had care of everything in the household. The writer of I Peter went on to say there were two specific ways we serve one another - with the words we speak - remembering that our words are the very words of God, and with our actions - remembering that when we serve we do it in God's name with God's strength behind us.

These words remind us of other places in the New Testament where we are told that we each have specific gifts to share with the body of Christ. We have each been given certain gifts. As we combine our gifts using each to their fullest the community - the body of Christ functions best. Each gift we have been given gives us the unique ability to serve in a certain way. It is when we combine all those gifts that Christ is glorified. We are to serve one another using our gifts as if we are speaking for God using the strengths God provides.

All of these acts of grace have a common theme - they are for one another, done to one another, and enhanced by one another. The acts of grace are acts performed in community. These words from the writer of I Peter are reminders of what it means to be the church - to be in relationship with one another. They are patterns of behavior we are to follow as we seek to live by the will of God. Prayer, constant mutual love, hospitality and serving others. May we continue to be serious and

disciplined as we live into these acts of grace that have the power to change the world.