

Reformation Weekend: "Three Sheepdogs, 'Just Because,' & GRACE"
October 25-26, 2019
Jeremiah 31:31-34; Romans 3:19-28
John 8:31-36
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Have you ever noticed the presence of 3 sheepdogs in Psalm 23? It's the one that begins "The Lord is my shepherd" and ends (or so thought one dog-lover ☺), "*Shirley, Goodness and Mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*"

Surely, God's goodness and mercy are at the heart of our Reformation Weekend epistle from St. Paul's letter to the Romans in which we hear about GRACE:

*...[we] are now **justified** by his **grace** as a **gift**, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus....* (Romans 3:24)

Shorthand: God has given us the **gift** of a Savior! Not because we deserve a Savior, not because we've won some kind of reward for good behavior, but solely because **God loves us**, God sent the Son to redeem our failures in love.

It's a beautiful weekend of reasons to celebrate here at Holy Trinity this weekend. Avery Rose's baptism Saturday evening, reception of new members Sunday morning, Vanessa Flores & Ross Elliott's wedding Friday afternoon. In the wedding homily I asked them, "You love each other 'just because,' right? Neither of you has **earned** the other's love. God-willing, you will have children someday, and you will love **them** 'just because,' not because they will have **merited** your love, other than simply by being." Vanessa & Ross' love for each other, Christine & Dave's love for Avery Rose, any parent's or grandparent's or great-grandparent's love for a child is like God's love for all of us: **a free gift**, not a reward for good behavior or an award for excellence. Avery Rose's baptismal dress is made from

the wedding gown of her grandmother Linda Rose. What a beautiful symbol of the life-giving power of love, passed from generation to generation, from heaven to earth!

How do we **know** God loves us? We **exist** – and in addition to this precious gift of **earthly** life our Father in Heaven has given us **everlasting** life through our baptism into the life, death and resurrection of His Son, our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. This weekend the “old self” in brand-new Avery Rose is drowned in the waters of baptism and a new creation in Christ is born. She’ll **look** the same **after** as **before** – but she won’t **be** the same. Through water and the Word she’ll mystically be joined to the life, death and resurrection of her Savior, Jesus Christ. The water in the font symbolizes the living water of the Holy Spirit who will drench this little girl in grace not just on her baptismal day but every day of her life. Same for us. We find that lovely water imagery in Psalm 1, verse 3:

*[The faithful] are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither....*

In Jeremiah 17 (vv. 7-8) we read:

*Blessed are those who trust in the LORD,
whose trust is the LORD.
They shall be like a tree planted by water,
sending out its roots by the stream.
It shall not fear when heat comes,
and its leaves shall stay green;
in the year of drought it is not anxious,
and it does not cease to bear fruit.*

May it be so for Avery Rose and for us: our baptism as a steady, ready water table that never dips and spiritually hydrates us even in the driest and most difficult times.

What are the sayings we’ve grown up with?

- “You don’t get something for nothing.”

- “There’s no such thing as a free lunch.”
- “There’s gotta be a catch.”
- “If it seems too good to be true, it is.”

But not so, when it comes to our God. Our Savior, Jesus Christ, is pure gift. To say He’s our **Savior** is to say He **saves** us from our sin. His death and resurrection **save** us from the spiritual consequences of our sins. In Him we find forgiveness. We could never redeem ourselves. We could never pay the penalty of our own sins. We can only receive the free gift of God in Jesus Christ. It is He who paid the price. As we read in the prophet Isaiah (53:5):

*He took the punishment, and that made us whole.
Through his bruises we get healed.*

This is Reformation Weekend and we’re remembering that upstart monk, Martin Luther, who 502 years ago presented 95 Theses, 95 points of debate, to the academic community of Wittenberg University in Germany. One of his most important contentions was that a) we can’t pay for forgiveness (in those days in the form of indulgences), and b) that we don’t need to. Forgiveness is the free gift of God in Jesus Christ.

GRACE: think of it as an acronym, each letter standing for a word:

- God’s
- Riches
- At
- Christ’s
- Expense

We are impossibly indebted to the One Who gives us that gift, but **the only response our God asks is faith: trust** that the gift suffices. That trust is rooted in our belief that Jesus Christ has done everything necessary for us to be saved from sin, death and the devil. Deep and full gratitude of the heart accompanies that kind of trust. It’s a spirit of joyful

thanksgiving that expresses itself in our lives of faith-active-in-love. Performing good works isn't scaling a ladder of virtue and it isn't a bid to win brownie points. As someone has memorably pointed out: "God doesn't need our good works, but our neighbors do." And in all things we remember the two greatest commandments: that we love God above all else and our neighbors as ourselves.

#62 of Luther's 95 Theses is as true now as it was in 1517: "The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God." Luther went on to explain:

"The gospel is a preaching of the incarnate Son of God, given to us without any merit on our part for salvation and peace. It is a word of salvation, a word of grace, a word of comfort, a word of joy."

We rejoice in that Gospel and we rejoice to receive Avery Rose into the blessed salvation, the holy strength, the resurrection hope we find there, within the Body of Christ, within the Kingdom of God. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham