

“Grace for the Fish and Shepherds” based on John 21:1-18, Isaiah 49:1-7

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Easter, April 24, 2022, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

On Friday night, we went to Saluda for dinner, to celebrate Grammy’s birthday. Saluda is about the halfway point between here and Asheville and it’s a nice little town to visit. As you drive in, one thing you might notice, is that there are a few crosses on people’s property with messages.

Now, while I don’t find visibility in advertising or evangelism to be very effective, some people love this sort of thing, and so the crosses are there. One of them says these words, “Jesus paid it all.” This touches on a tradition within Christianity of looking at sin through the lens of debt. Our sins have a cost to be paid.

We went to the Purple Onion – one of several excellent restaurants in Saluda – for delicious appetizers, drinks, entrées and desserts, and of course at the end of the wonderful meal there was a cost. So, the bill was paid with our credit cards, and so, the good folks at MasterCard and Visa “paid it all” for us. But they didn’t really pay it all, because within a month or so, we have to pay up, or they will give an extension, for the mere charge of 10, 15 or as much as 30 percent. But don’t fret, use your card and they’ll reward you, sometimes even 1 or 2 percent cash back.

This is all an arrangement we choose, and it’s one that can work to our advantage. You see, even though those interest rates are high, the credit card offers us security. If it is stolen, and someone spends in our name, we are not responsible for it. And so, it increases our buying power, while lowering our risk of loss when we don’t have to carry cash around.

But it’s not just credit cards – in our modern culture, we tend view debt as an advantage. We use it to buy homes. We use it to start businesses. We use it for many things – and if someone cannot borrow because they are excluded from the ability to borrow, we see them as disadvantaged, and, quite frankly, they are. So, then the debt analogy, which has worked so well, doesn’t line up with our modern outlook.

So, I want us to consider debt in the time of Jesus. You see, in the ancient world, debt was a way of life, but not necessarily an advantage, at least not the advantage it is today. Back then, to get rid of a debt, you needed a patron who would cancel a debt for a client as a favor, even if that client hadn’t earned the favor. But this patron was not like the faceless and regulated credit company, but more like a mafia Godfather, to whom the client now belonged. The patron offered ‘grace,’ and the client offered ‘faithfulness.’

These of course are words that sound familiar to us. In this context, they meant that the debt was paid. However, though later on, if the patron needed something, or needed help, then the client was expected to respond faithfully. This could mean giving a special deal to their patron, taking care of someone else for their patron, or even fighting for the patron.

This ancient system of patronage is where we find the root of the words grace, or ‘charis,’ and faith, or ‘pistis,’ come from in scripture. But while these two words were familiar to anyone back then, Jesus, and later Paul and the Christian tradition, blew up that patronage and debt system. Because unlike the ‘Godfather’ system or even the modern credit systems, that grace –

the gift of unmerited favor – was the patron’s own self. So then the faith, or faithfulness, meaning the response to the patron, was first to accept the patron, and then to be like the patron toward others, giving of ourselves as an unmerited gift to others. And what’s more the patron gives freely, coming to even the most unworthy.

The Apostle Peter offers us a tremendous vision of this in today’s reading. Essentially, Jesus in his role as rabbi and leader of the twelve, he is their patron. And time and time again, Peter continues to see him as a traditional patron. Earlier in John’s gospel, when Jesus tells everyone that he is bread from heaven, he is saying that he is the unmerited gift of God just as manna was, and so, everyone who was with him after the feeding of the 5,000 says ‘he’s nuts’ and abandons him. Everyone, except the 12. Peter speaks for the group of their loyalty. He is loyal to his patron, and why he is loyal is that he has an expectation. He says, “to whom else can we go? You have the words of eternal life.” Peter wants something. That is traditional patronage.

At the time of Jesus’s arrest, John names Peter as the disciple with the sword, and Peter strikes the enslaved attendant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. He is ready to defend his patron, but Jesus shuts down this violent defense. Peter has to be really confused at this point. He is now unsure of what to do if he is not to fight for his patron. And so, in the courtyard of the high priest, Peter denies Jesus. At the time his patron is being sentenced to death, Peter does what he would not do before – He denies Jesus, even though he has nowhere else to go. He denies Jesus three times.

After Jesus rises, Peter is the first to run into the tomb looking for Jesus, but he isn’t there. Perhaps Peter wanted to make amends then and there, to prove his worthiness. He wanted to be first, but Jesus reserves privilege for Mary Magdalene. Peter sees the risen Jesus in the upper room, with many disciples, and here, Peter is just one of the many, as Jesus greets them. Then Jesus sees the group again, in the upper room, and Thomas is front and center, not Peter. Then Jesus commissions them all, saying, “As the Father has sent me, so, I send you.”

So what do they do? They go fishing. It seems that many of them are just sitting around, when Peter makes a suggestion. He does not say, “Let’s go into the streets and tell everyone about Jesus!” No, he goes back to what he knows, and declares, “I’m going fishing.” The others follow him, all of them ignoring their patron’s request. They catch nothing, and then they see some guy on the beach. They don’t know who he is. He says throw your nets in again. They do not know that he is their patron, but this is a low stakes gambit for them, so they obey.

When their nets are filled to the brim with fish, they know who this man is – It’s the Lord. And Peter, puts his more formal cloak over his undergarments, and jumps in the water. Again, he wants to be first to Jesus, to make up for his denials perhaps, to be noticed, and Jesus seems to almost ignore him. He speaks to the whole group, because the disciples get there just as quickly, after all they’re in a boat and it’s only 100 yards. Jesus says, ‘Bring the fish.’ And so, again, it is Peter who jumps up, grabs the net of fish, and with all his strength, drags it to Jesus.

The Lord offers all of them breakfast over a charcoal fire. It’s the same kind of charcoal fire we saw before, when Peter denies Jesus. And Jesus offers them the bread and fish he has prepared.

Finally, it is after breakfast, when Peter seems to have given up, and is reclined like everyone else, that Jesus goes to him. Jesus meets Peter where he is at, and comes to him to ask, "Do you love me?" As has often been discussed in many sermons, English has one word for love, while Greek...Well, it has three, really four, maybe as many as six words for love. John writes that Jesus asks, '*agapas mei pleyon touton?*' He asks, 'Simon Peter, do you love me more than these?'

John attributes to Jesus the word 'agape' here, a word that until Christians adopted it, was a little used Greek word for love, that meant a preference, but which came to mean self-giving love. Peter answers with 'philo se,' which means, 'I love you,' but it is a different word here, and this is the love of friendship, the love of brothers, think Philadelphia, a mutual kind of love. And so, for today's scripture, I rendered it, "You are my beloved friend."

And so Jesus, the Good Shepherd says to Peter, 'feed my lambs,' which commands an act of self-giving love, of agape, without return. This happens again, and Jesus again gives an agape command. 'Tend my sheep,' before asking yet again, a third time. Just as Peter denied Jesus three times, here is Peter trying to turn back to Jesus, but ever so slightly still in denial, and so Jesus meets him where he is at finally, asking, 'Phileis me?' or "Am I your beloved friend?" and Peter is offended.

Peter responds in words that are reminiscent of Psalm 139, verses 23-24, in which the Psalmist writes, 'Search me O God and know my heart, test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.' Peter does not make amends for his betrayal here, even though he is trying to do that. He does not commit to the level of love that Jesus asks of him, and he takes offense, as if there is not be valid reason for Jesus as a patron to suspect Peter's loyalty. Yet, Jesus is not a patron like the Godfathers of that day, or banks today.

Instead, Jesus comes to Peter, continues to give of himself, and wants Peter to know that he owes Jesus absolutely nothing, and yet, Jesus also wants him to know that he expects Peter to give absolutely everything. He expects him to give himself in self-giving love, agape, for others, 'tending and feeding them.' Jesus does search their hearts, and sees that they will give everything, even their lives.

My sisters and brothers, the grace, or unmerited favor of God, is not simply forgiveness. It is not merely mercy from an often perceived to be distant judge on high. It is not just a gift *from* God. No, grace is the gift *of* God. It is the gift of GOD WITH US in our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom the Creator of all things entered creation for our sake, not for God's. Grace is reconciliation with God, who does not just tell us to come up to him, but comes down to us, meets us where we are, just as Jesus met Peter where he was on that shore.

Indeed, that is what the good news is all about – that God embodied our limited nature – just as the prophet Isaiah wrote, calling the suffering servant to be the embodiment of Israel, fulfilling the calling of Israel, which is, 'to be a light to the nations' and 'salvation to the ends of the earth.' The suffering servant is both the embodiment of the people of Israel, and as the metaphor continues in chapter 53, he is the embodiment of the right arm of the Lord, or God's power. The servant in Isaiah is fully human and fully God, just as the historic faith of the church

sees Jesus. And so, Jesus goes to the cross to pay our debt, as our patron, but also as one of us. This is not because we have earned it, or because the patron needs it, but in self-giving love, to give us new life.

My sisters and brothers, you are beloved – just as Peter was beloved – all of you. This is not just all of you in number, but each of you in your whole being. That means all your failures and your successes. Yes, every bit of you is loved by God, your patron.

And the glory of God is seen in our patron giving us grace, that unmerited gift, the gift of our patron's own self in our humanity, to destroy the ledger, not just to pay a debt, but to cancel it, for real, with one request – to pay it forward. That means to offer that same grace, giving ourselves to others, coming to them where they are at, and loving them enough to feed and protect them.

Our God is not a bank, where we pay in good works in order to make amends for bad ones, nor is our God offering a cheap grace, where anything we do is permissible. No, God's grace is the gift of God's own self to us, to be with us, both in Christ, who died on that cross, but also in us, and among us, empowered by the Holy Spirit. This is for us to be like our patron, and give of ourselves to others without fear. This is what it is to have faith – it is to trust our patron's gift and respond as our patron asks that we respond.

Peter does respond in his life and with the disciples, keeps fishing, but now, not for fish to eat, but for people to feed and people to care for as sheep in Christ's flock. Yes, I know, it's a mixed metaphor, but grace empowers us to love and serve our God, not by achieving things to make us worthy, but by being patrons like God is our patron.

We cast our nets, or evangelize, by our faithful response to embody God's love, not simply in the words we speak, but the way we live as patrons who feed and serve. Our best evangelism isn't done by flaunting our faith with signs, or even as some churches ask, just dragging people to church, but casting our net by being like our patron. Being like our patron who gives unconditionally to others, cancels debts by forgiveness, and meets people where they are at.

We do this not as a means to punch our ticket to heaven, but in gratitude. We are called to be merciful to others, because of God's mercy to us. We are called to love others, because of God's love for us. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus is our grace, it is our gift, given to us while we were still sinners, empowering us to love as we have been loved, to cancel debts and reflect our patron's image by participating in God's ministry of reconciliation, and reaching out to this broken world. Amen.