

“God’s Amazing Grace”

Romans 5:1-11

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We live in a world of secrecy, confidentiality, privacy. We need keys to get behind locked doors. We need photo ID's to get past security guards. We need passwords to access computer files. We need PIN numbers to get money out of the ATM or to purchase groceries with our debit card. Some buildings are now so technologically advanced that you have to use a fingerprint, a handprint, maybe even an eye scan to get access to secured rooms.

How many different passwords do you have for your computer, tablet, smart phone, smart watch accounts? 1, 5, 10, more? Do you keep them in a hidden notebook, or do you try to remember them all by memory? What happens when you try to access an online account with the wrong password? The computer screen flashes: "Access Denied." No matter where we go today, whether it's online or through airport security, we have to have the right information to gain access – driver's license, social security number, passport, three forms of photo ID. If we don't know the secret password, the secret combination, the secret number, the secret handshake, or carry the right mixture of ID cards, we will be denied access.

In this morning's Epistle reading, Paul writes to the fledgling Christian church in Rome. He tells the Romans that it is through Jesus Christ that "we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand." The password to access the grace which God offers is Jesus. Jesus is the key – the combination – the code – the password. To gain access through the door that leads to everlasting life, it simply requires the nail-scarred hands of Jesus.

After the chapel service had ended, a sophomore student came up to the college chaplain and asked if he could speak to her. She directed him to a pew and they sat down. "How can I help you," she said. The young man paused a moment, and said, "I grew up in the church, and I have heard about the salvation of Jesus all my life, but it is hard for me to believe that God would forgive my sins. I just cannot believe that God will forgive me if I simply turn to Jesus. It seems too cheap."

The chaplain thought for a minute, and then began to question the young man. "Did you grow up in a nice home?"

"Yes," the student answered.

"Did you always have enough food to eat, a warm bed to sleep in, new clothes to wear?" the chaplain asked.

The student answered "Well, yes I did. But I don't understand what any of that has to do with the cost of salvation."

"How much did you pay for all of those amenities?" the preacher inquired.

"I didn't pay anything; my parents did." the man said, beginning to look a little puzzled.

"Did your parents give you a bill on your 18th birthday to cover the cost of raising you? You know, the average cost of raising one child to 18 years old is about \$240,000."

"Of course they didn't charge me. They loved me and they wanted to take care of me." Then he paused, and said, "It was free for me, but I guess it cost a lot for them."

The chaplain smiled, and said, "There you have it. God paid an infinite price for our salvation. It does not come inexpensively to the one who has paid the cost, no matter how cheap it might seem to us. And it comes to us

only by God's grace and our faith, not by anything we might try to do to repay the cost."

And so, we all have access to the most wonderful gift in the world. Free, no cost, no hoops to jump through – we don't even have to send in a deposit so grace can be released to us. We have obtained access to God's grace.

Years ago, before I entered ministry, my family and I were living in Alma, Michigan, which is about 50 miles north of Lansing. One Saturday morning, in the fall, we were heading down to visit friends in Ann Arbor. After passing Lansing, and as we got closer to Ann Arbor, the traffic really started to pick up. There was no construction that I could see, so I thought maybe there was an accident ahead. Then, I started to notice that many of the cars heading south with us were flying Michigan State Spartan flags. Suddenly, a terrible realization hit me. Today was the annual Michigan – Michigan State football game – and we were stuck in the middle all of the Michigan State fans heading to the game in Ann Arbor! We were able to detour off the expressway, and take surface roads, but even those roads were busier than normal.

Now, as I reflect upon that memory, I wonder why the streets aren't just as crowded on a Sunday morning when folks are headed to church. I don't know how it is around here, but in southern Indiana, where I am currently serving a church, Sunday morning traffic is almost non-existent. The church parking lots are half empty, and there is always plenty of room to get a good seat in the church sanctuary for worship.

No traffic jams. Plenty of parking spaces. Lots of elbow room in the pews? How can that be? Eternal salvation for the taking, and few takers?

I'll bet if McDonalds was giving away free Big Macs, folks would be lined up around the block. What do you think the NCAA Championship venues would look like if tickets were free and there was no occupancy limit in the arenas? A hamburger vs. eternal salvation? A basketball game vs. eternal salvation?

If access to God's grace has already been approved, why aren't people flocking to embrace it? Could it be that we have a hard time believing that grace can come to us so freely. There must be a cost. No one gets something for nothing – it just isn't the American way! And so, either we as individuals, or we as communities of believers or denominations, feel the need to set up roadblocks, rules, and regulations to gain access to God's grace. You must do this – you can't do that! And even if you follow the rules, there are still no guarantees. NO! The ultimate price has already been paid, and it's offered to us as a free gift from God.

Some people think that a particular denomination will save them! Many people believe being a Catholic, Presbyterian, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, etc. will save them. Salvation only comes through God's grace.

Some people believe pilgrimages are important for salvation and that this will save them. A Muslim my go to Mecca, to some Shrine, a Christian my go to the Vatican or to Israel to see the Holy Land. Salvation only comes through God's grace.

Some people think that a certain type of miraculous experience will save them; maybe a vision of Angels or a near death experience, etc. Salvation only comes through God's grace.

Some people think family connections will save them. I grew up in a Christian home, or my dad is a pastor, or my grandmother was a missionary in China. Salvation only comes through God's grace.

Some people think that following church laws and ordinances will save them; or baptism, confirmation, a blessing, communion, etc. Salvation only comes through God's grace.

We are denied access to God's grace only by our refusal to accept it. God will not deny us. Jesus Christ will not

deny us. Only we can deny ourselves the grace of God. Only you can deny yourself access to God's freely given grace.

Abraham Lincoln went to a slave auction one day and was appalled at what he saw. He was drawn to a young woman on the auction block.

The bidding began, and Lincoln bid until he purchased her - no matter how high the bids got. After he paid the auctioneer, he walked over to the woman and said "You're free."

"Free? What is that supposed to mean?" she asked. "It means you are free," Lincoln answered, "completely free!" "Does it mean I can do whatever I want to do?" "Yes," he said, "free to do whatever you want to do." "Free to say whatever I want to say?" "Yes, free to say whatever you want to say." "Does freedom mean," asking with hope and hesitation, "that I can go wherever I want to go?"

"It means exactly that you can go wherever you want to go." With tears of joy and gratitude welling up in her eyes, she said, "Then, I think I'll go with you."

This story illustrates what God did for us. We are bought with a price and it was costly - the life of God's own Son. Once our new master paid the price for us, he set us free. And out of gratitude, we choose to spend our freedom following him.

And so, I challenge you to live in the peace of knowing what Jesus has done, and let your life reflect his victory over death. Access to God's grace is not denied, unless you deny it. The grace of God, freely given, overflows and your sins have been forgiven. As we continue our Lenten journey, I pray that each of you will be so filled with the peace of God's Holy Spirit that you won't be able to help but keep your heart and mind in Jesus Christ. And I pray the love and peace of God will so overflow in your life that others will see it and seek the source of your joy for themselves. AMEN