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Worship Theme: *Giving Thanks*

“Double Reverse”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Thanksgiving Sunday, November 22, 2020

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Scriptures: Joel 2:21-27 Matthew 6: 25-33

Joel 2: 21-27

²¹ Do not fear, O soil;
be glad and rejoice,
for the Lord has done great things!
²² Do not fear, you animals of the field,
for the pastures of the wilderness are green;
the tree bears its fruit,
the fig tree and vine give their full yield.
²³ O children of Zion, be glad
and rejoice in the Lord your God;
for God has given the early rain for your vindication,
God has poured down for you abundant rain,
the early and the later rain, as before.
²⁴ The threshing floors shall be full of grain,
the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.
²⁵ I will repay you for the years
that the swarming locust has eaten,
the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter,
my great army, which I sent against you.
²⁶ You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,
and praise the name of the Lord your God,
who has dealt wondrously with you.
And my people shall never again be put to shame.
²⁷ You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel,
and that I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other.
And my people shall never again be put to shame.

Matthew 6: 25-33

²⁵ “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Creator feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?

²⁸ And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will God not much more clothe you—you of little faith?

³¹ Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ ³² For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Creator knows that you need all these things. ³³ But strive first for the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Sermon

The Day of the Lord

From NPR (National Public Radio) yesterday

we learned during the “*Wait, Wait, Don’t Tell Me*” quiz show [\[1\]](#)

that Radio France apologized profusely

because they mistakenly released pre-prepared obituaries
of Pele, Clint Eastwood, Brigitte Bardot and more.

Radio France accidentally published the obituaries from its files,

inadvertently giving us a preview of next year’s Oscar night memorials.

Some of the very-much-alive celebrities and national leaders

were flattered to see what would be said about them
after they are deceased.

Some were terrified,

and have since tried furiously to do something nice for someone,
for once. [\[2\]](#)

The Good News is it is never too late and it’s never too early

to accept the love of God as the guiding principle of your life.

It’s always the right time to reverse the course of your life, if need be,

and draw closer to divine ways.

There is no better time than the present

to decide to be grateful,

to give God thanks for the many blessings you have been given.

Tomorrow is not promised.

But we all have right now, right now to be grateful, to be grace-led, to be gracious.

The Day of the Lord

The Prophet Joel spoke of the Day of the Lord.

“Blow the trumpet in Zion;

sound the alarm on my holy mountain!

Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,

for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near...” -- Joel 2: 1

The Day of the Lord is coming.

The Day of the Lord speaks of God’s loving actions.^[3]

God’s loving action changes the course of history

way back then and here today and for tomorrows yet to come.

When the Prophet Joel speaks of the Day of the Lord,
he is not referring to a 24-hour period of time.

In fact, it is not a definite period of time at all.

Think of the Day of the Lord as associated with a definite divine happening,
a most holy event.

The definite event is an action of God that determines the character of the world.

- The Exodus of the Hebrews from slavery into liberation was such an event.
- The birth and ministry and resurrection of Jesus Christ is such an event.
- The gift of the Holy Spirit to start the Church is another life-altering event.

Such actions are God’s Day,
events that reshape our world.

When God’s Day events happen in our shared history,
we sense the present quality to them.

What happened in our collective past
really feels like it is happening now,
to us, through us, with us.

In other words,
the deliverance of the Hebrews
gives us hope that we, too, will experience liberation in our time.

The life and ministry of Jesus Christ
drenched the world with resurrection power,
and we live into this grace with hearts unbound.

The gift of the eternal flame of the Holy Spirit
that blessed the world with Christ’s Church on the Day of Pentecost
is an ongoing, ever-thriving blessing,
a living faith community connecting us to God and one another.

Joel’s calling out the Day of the Lord
is the Holy Bible’s way of telling us
how God breaks into the world in new ways,

in special ways, in amazing ways
to bring about our salvation.

Interestingly, this oracle of Joel
counteracts the previous understanding of the Day of the Lord.

Amos proclaimed a word of woe:

“Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord!

Why do you want the day of the Lord?

It is darkness, not light...” --Amos 5:18

Joel sees fit to reverse Amos’ harsh viewpoint

with words of light, of grace, of thanksgiving.

Joel sees that we humans have power, we have strong wills, we have influence,

we have the capacity and faith to influence God,

to appeal to God’s loving, forgiving nature,

to petition and persuade God

to draw deep upon the Lord’s mercy and justice.

We can do this, preaches Joel,

by repenting of our wrongdoing

and by being grateful for God’s many, many gifts.

We reverse course.

God reverses course.

Because of this fact, this truth, this hope,

Joel’s oracle is a reversal within a reversal.^[4]

My brothers and friends and I played touch football

on asphalt parking lots, dodging cars on city streets,

and on the green fields of Central Park in Manhattan.

We had plenty of trick plays in our arsenal of plays:

none was more popular than the double reverse,

which is when the quarterback hands the football to a running back

who runs right but suddenly hands the ball to a wide receiver

running past him in the opposite direction,

hoping to catch the defense unaware.

I don’t think we cared as much whether it worked or not.

What mattered was it was fun, creative, had potential.

We speak here of a spiritual double reverse

that is creative, has potential, and may be fun.

We change, God changes, and the world is never the same.

The Day of the Lord

Joel points to the amazing grace of God when the Lord changes direction
in order to save rather than destroy,
in order to redeem rather than punish,
in order to lift up rather than toss away God's people
in light of their – our! –
acts of repentance and heartfelt gratitude.

The double reverse – we change, God changes –
is the groundwork for a celebration,
a celebration of giving thanks,
a new Day of the Lord
when the whole people of God gather wherever they may be
to offer thanksgiving for the mercy and grace of God.^[5]

We who are the beneficiaries of God's grace
are invited by Jesus Christ to pass it on.

Who do you know who needs to hear a good word today?

We who are the recipients of grace extended by family and friends and strangers
are invited to extend grace to someone else, to many, many "someone else's".

- Who encouraged you?
- Who reminded you that you are a child of God?
- Who in your sphere of influence hungers for an encouraging word?

We who believe and doubt, wonder and question
are invited to see that what matters most is how we practice what we believe.

It is not in vain that we share, that we testify from our hearts, that we bear witness
with our bodies and words, our actions and listening presence.

Practice and proclaim what you believe,
and it will not be in vain
because neighbors will come to believe and practice grace
in their own way and time, and God will be praised.

The Day of the Lord

The late Fred Craddock shared that "grace is love in action."
Gerald May defines grace as "the active expression of God's love."
Grace is a blessed gift of God,
whose nature and nurture are synonymous with graciousness,
and whose work of art is to make us gracious, as well.

The word grace in the New Testament Greek reads *chasis*.
Chasis was a Christianized modification of the Hellenized greeting of *chairein*.

In other words, early Christians said "Grace and peace"
when they met folks, friends and strangers alike.

You may read in Paul's letters to churches his own words of greeting or benediction,
saying to the people of God, "Grace and peace."

For example, Paul began his letter to the church in Ephesus (1:1b-2) by saying,
*"To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus:
Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ."*

For Paul, even though he used it often, this was never a routine greeting!
Such an attitude of gratitude changed him,
reversing his life and fortune and faith,
and it can reverse ours as well.

Paul and God experienced a double reverse, together, a personal Day of the Lord.
Why not you?
Me?
Us?
Indeed, why not us?

True grace transforms us into the kind of people who remember and give thanks.

To say to another person, "Grace and peace" is to desire
God's unlimited, unmerited, generous grace and favor upon one another.

To say grace and peace to one another
is to testify to the character of God-with-us.

To say to another person, "Grace and peace,"
without distinction or prejudice
is to desire God's unlimited, unmerited,
generous grace and favor upon a neighbor.

Giving thanks and saying grace
are intertwined in the language of our culture and church.

Another word for communion is Eucharist, which means...thanksgiving.

How do you say *thank you* in Spanish?

Rowan Atkinson plays the mime character Mr. Bean.

In a film about Mr. Bean's trip to France,
a Parisian asked him if he wanted cream in his coffee.

"Oui!"

"And would you like sugar?"

"No."

"You speak wonderful French." she said.

"Gracias!" said Mr. Bean.

The Day of the Lord

The more grateful we are the nearer we draw to the embodiment of grace.

Our good and faithful stewardship of God's many blessings
is rooted in being grateful to the source.

Does it follow that bad stewardship, that greed and selfishness
are rooted in forgetting the One from whom all things flow?

Are we so full of ourselves and our possessions and our busy-ness
that we lose track of whom we owe our gratitude?

Are we moving with and toward God's grace, or running away?

Is it time for us to pull a double reverse, to address the Day of the Lord?

A number of years ago I found myself in a difficult circumstance.

I prayed about it, talked with my support network,
and approached my therapist for advice and counsel.

My therapist provided words to live by, saying, *"Be grace in graceless situations."*

Be grace in graceless situations.

Be grace personified,
for you may be ushering in the Day of the Lord.

Be grace, and the civility you practice
has the power to change the world, one relationship at a time.

Be grace,
with some skin on it.

The first step to doing so, being so, becoming so
is to be grateful.

Returning to our beloved Fred Craddock,
we recall his teaching,

a lesson that has the capacity to spark us to reverse and rearrange
our ways as we look to ***the Day of the Lord:***

"Above all, I urge you to be grateful," said Craddock.

*Of all the virtues, if I could have selected just one for my children,
I would have asked God to make them grateful.*

*People who are genuinely grateful are never greedy or jealous,
never bitter or small; not self-centered or hateful.*

If they are able to see every day as a gift from God

*and see what they have not as their own,
but as what God has given them for a while,
they are what we call gracious people.*

*To be gracious, you must first be grateful.
I hope that you are grateful.”*

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

^[1] From NPR & WBEZ Chicago, 'Wait Wait', Nov. 21, 2020.

^[2] NPR, Ibid.

^[3] Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, After Pentecost 2, Soards, Dozeman, McCabe, Abingdon Press, 1993. Pp. 165-167. Quoted and adapted.

^[4] Soards, et al. Ibid.

^[5] Soards, et al. Ibid.