

Date: Sunday, May 26, 2013

Title: "It's About the Grace"

The Reverend Peter Cook

Scripture Reading(s): Romans 5:1-5

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

On Memorial Day weekend I have discovered that attendance at worship services is always quite low. The weekend in popular consciousness is most known for marking the beginning of summer and all the activities which accompany this new beginning. In Burlington, the street outside our sanctuary will soon be teeming with an explosion of energy and new life in the Marathon, which is glorious after a long winter.

The greeting of summer and its welcome frivolity stands in contrast to Memorial Day which is really a markedly sad time for so many. It is a day when we remember those who have died in service to their country, and those for whom military service was important but who were fortunate to live a full life before passing from this life to the next. But as the Marathon runners whiz by, we also pause to remember that last month there was a horrible bomb explosion which destroyed the joyful nature of Boston, leaving 4 people dead and many more injured.

On Memorial Day we often remember anyone who touched our lives who is no longer with us. So this is a sad weekend when we can reflect and take stock. Today we had hoped to hold this service in the beautiful Memorial Garden which would be a most fitting thing to do on Memorial Day weekend. The garden, which has been lovingly worked on by many volunteers here under the careful guidance of Bill Whitman, has the names of many loved ones whose remains are buried in the earth.

The garden highlights two realities. On the one hand, the garden offers a vivid picture of the joy of summer in all of its glory. On the other hand, the same garden offers a welcome place of contemplation and solace to remember those who are no longer with us. This is place which reminds us that God's love and grace endures in all of its fullness and beauty in this life and most definitely in the next. The love and grace comes to us even when we are hurting and we weep.

The letter of Paul to the Romans tells us that we are justified by faith. Paul aims to say that the gift of God and Jesus Christ comes to living and the dead not because we or they approached any sort of perfection but because the love of God knows no boundaries. That love comes to us in spite of our amazing foibles and limitations. It's all about the grace. It's always about the grace. And through the grace, we come to see the beauty and giftedness of each person—even those who don't seem so loveable sometimes.

In this life, it is pretty easy to be quite judgmental. We carry all sorts of wounds which can shape our perception of the world. The world can be full of evil and cruelty. Those who have seen the horrors of war or terrorism are acutely aware of this reality. But we cannot conclude that the awfulness is the full truth of our existence. Indeed, we need the love of God so desperately to see right from wrong and choose a path towards life. Without God's boundless grace we would just descend into an endless spiral of despair. Grace gives us the strength to endure suffering and develop character which ultimately helps us live with hope.

It is sometimes easy to lose our way or get off track. This is why Paul tells us that we need the Holy Spirit which conveys the love of God revealed to us in Christ Jesus. That Holy Spirit in my view is best embodied in a community of faith where we practice the art of being present to one another and offering our comfort.

The church is a place where we can challenge one another. It's not a place where we nurture deception or Pollyanna-ish thinking. Instead, in the context of love we help each other look at our blind spots and propensity to sin, and then show each other a path forward through Christ. We find in a community the encouragement to give thanks for those who came before us and those around us while not allowing ourselves to be overwhelmed by their shortcomings and ours.

So on this day we have the courage to remember those who have passed away knowing that God made known through Jesus Christ, in a community of faith, brings to us the life and hope that we are seeking and so desperately need. Amen.

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