

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost  
June 20, 2021; Proper 7B  
The Episcopal Church of the Atonement  
The Rev. Nancy Webb Stroud  
*1 Samuel 17:32-49; Psalm 9:9-20; 2 Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41*

*As we work together with Christ, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.* That is St. Paul, writing his second letter to the new Christians in Corinth. What would it look like, I wonder, to accept the grace of God in vain? I guess we would have to know first how to accept the grace of God in earnest.

Here at the Church of the Atonement, we like to say that we are *drawn in* by grace. There is something about God's grace—God's undeserved favor and strength given to us—there is something about grace that is attractive. We want it, even when we are not sure what it is. Yesterday, I spoke with a young couple planning their wedding. I asked, as I always do, why they want to be married in the church. The bride told me that when she was a little girl, long before she attended this church, she used to drive by it and dream about her wedding here. She said it wasn't a spiritual reason; it was because she wanted to be a princess—and this building looks like a place where a princess would be married.

I had to disagree with her about the spirituality of her reasoning. It is not at all hard for me to see the hand of God in the wishes of that little girl. Imagination and desire can, indeed, be spiritual gifts. In this case, they may have been God's tools, because the bride continued her story and told me that years later, when she began to worship here, she found a whole community of love and support.

I have heard that before in other conversations—in thank you notes after funerals in this place, thanking our whole congregation for welcoming family and friends from far away. In news reports of our Strawberry Festivals, and Farmers' Market, and music programs, "The Episcopal Church of the Atonement once again welcomes the community." The community that we have here is a sign of God's favor and strength in this little corner of God's kingdom.

Imagination, desire, welcome, support, love—these are hallmarks of God's grace. There are others, of course—strength, wisdom, intelligence, faithfulness are some of them. God gives us these gifts—but not because we earn them. And not because we deserve them. These are gifts that God gives simply because God gives. That is who God is.

So, these gifts—the ones that we have discerned here at Atonement—the ones each of you have discerned on your own—the ones we read about in the Bible—the dozens and dozens of different particular ways that God gives to us to show us who God is, and who God wants us to be—have you noticed something about these gifts? Each one calls us to DO SOMETHING.

God's gifts are not like merit badges that we wear on a sash on our chests, or diplomas to hang on the wall. Those things are earned. They are recognition of work we have done in the past, and often enough, work on our own behalf. Instead, God's gifts call us to work

going forward, and to work for others. God's gifts empower us. And they empower us for a specific purpose.

And that may be why we read about David and Goliath in today's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures. You know, David was just a little shepherd boy, the youngest of seven sons when God chose him to be the next king of Israel. The only problem was the first king of Israel wasn't dead yet. Then, David learned how to be a minstrel in the king's court. His music was said to help King Saul with his migraine headaches. And next comes the episode we have today. Nobody really expected the boy David to triumph over the champion Goliath.

It's a violent little story—not the kind of thing peace-loving believers want to think about God. God gives David the gift of leadership, and so he becomes a shepherd, a musician, and a killer? But maybe that is not what the story is telling us. Maybe the story is an early encouragement to understand that God will send us the gifts we need when we need them.

This would be a great place to talk about each one of the things on my list of things to do here at the church. We have walls that need painting, and a fence line that needs weeding. We have Coffee Hour to re-imagine. We have all been given the gifts we need, so doesn't that mean that we can all keep busy right here in this church?

But busy work is not the point! The point is that God empowers us. That is, God shares God's power. Take a look at the Gospel for today: Jesus is asleep on the boat, and the disciples are sailing to the other side of the lake. It's a trip of several miles, a couple of hours if the wind is right—just the right length for a little nap. And so Jesus sleeps. And he keeps sleeping, even when the wind kicks up enough to beat the waves of the sea into the boat. And very quickly, the disciples go from being empowered by their friendship with Jesus to being overwhelmed by the natural events of the day. *Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?* they cry.

I don't think it is too much of a stretch to listen to this story and say that it sounds like the last couple of years. Do you remember as far back as January and February of 2020? Here at Atonement, your Vestry was feeling empowered to get to work on renovations to this building. But we weren't just staying busy in house—we were in conversation with a couple of city feeding ministries to see if we could partner with them. And we had just taken on a new Strawberry Festival beneficiary. And we were feeling pretty good that we had been drawn in by grace—to the point that we could also reach out in love.

Meanwhile, there was troubling news about a respiratory illness half-way around the world that seemed to be taking hold in the state of Washington. And very quickly, we went from feeling empowered for ministry to figuring out how we could minister to one another and not catch a deadly virus. And, I will speak for myself, I cried out for God to help us. I tried to remember my faith, even through my fear. And for long months, the storm has swirled around us.

Every week, I receive a public health bulletin about the current status of COVID 19. For the last three weeks, there have been fewer than 1 in 100,000 cases reported in Westfield. I know that it doesn't mean that the pandemic is over. But it does mean that vaccinations are working! The story of the development of these safe and effective vaccines is the story of people using the intellectual and scientific gifts they were given for the good of all people. And in that way, the vaccines are nothing short of gifts from God. There is no denying that the storm has abated for now.

Back on the boat, when Jesus stilled the storm, *he said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"* And Jesus is right: it is easier to remember our faith when he has stilled the storm!

All of which leads me back to my original question. *As we work together with Christ, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.* What would it look like to accept the grace of God in vain? It would mean that we would see the unearned and undeserved gifts of God as our own possession. It would mean that we would list the gifts—wear them on a sash over our clothes or hang them on the wall—strut with them as though we had anything to do with where they came from. And then those gifts—they would do good for whom? Only for the one to whom they were given.

What about those who are hungry, or oppressed, or dying of a virus? Well look, the vaccines are only gifts from God when they are actually shot into the arm of a person at risk. We accept the grace of God not in vain, but rather so that we can work together with Christ, to care for the world that God loves.

And of course, the world does not understand that kind of power. The power to love and care for others more than we care for ourselves? Self-giving love? Loving the way Jesus loved the disciples, the way Jesus loves us? There is nothing vain about it! *We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see-- we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.*

And so, while the world shakes its collective head, we open wide our hearts, and work together with Christ.