

Grace and Peace to you from God, who invites us to be transformed through Christ – Amen.

After a Gospel reading like this one, proclaiming “grace and peace” to you from Jesus seems a bit cheap...

It’s usually a pretty safe thing to say. Jesus is, after all, the “Prince of Peace,” and we Lutherans do love our grace ... but this week our scripture readings seem ripped out of another book. The message doesn’t feel that gracious, or even comfortable:

Fiery judgement.  
The destruction of peace.  
Division within families.  
And the calling out of our own lies and deceit.

It’s a lot to take in – and if you suddenly make a move toward the back of the church and out to your car, I won’t blame you – because these readings *are* unsettling.

Jesus isn’t pulling any punches here. There isn’t a redemptive parable at the end to make us feel better, or an angelic chorus waiting in the wings to sing the good news.

And that’s likely because there is no way to soften the point Jesus has been trying to make throughout his ministry: that if you want to follow Christ, there will be a cost. And it likely won’t be what you think it is.

Following Christ, following God, changes you. Wholly and completely.  
And that change may put you at odds with your family, your friends, and maybe even your whole community.

Which is why this text hits a little too close to home for so many of us: Jesus isn’t talking about something far off or unknown; He is talking about something we know all too well – potential conflict and pain within our relationships and our world.

We know the grief family conflict can bring: cutting ties, perhaps, after miscommunication. Division between family members – maybe between two people who can no longer be in the same room.

Or the hurt that comes when break ups and fighting shatter what we once knew as home.

Or the ache of losing a longtime friendship over a moment of broken trust.

We know these realities because they are a part of our story as God’s people. And the scriptures are filled with the stories of broken families and hurting people just like us. Whether it’s the story of Joseph’s brothers selling him off into slavery; the sexual abuse and lack of justice Tamar experienced within her community; or even Judas’ betrayal of Christ for

monetary gain. We hear within the bible time and time again that even God's most beloved find themselves in moments of great brokenness and pain.

These moments of division expose our own fragility as children of God, but they also remind us of our wish to be made whole, to find reconciliation within our broken relationships, and to be brought back into community again. We want to hear that we, too, can seek forgiveness even when we feel we have caused harm, and we want God to mend our hearts.

And perhaps this is part of the key to understanding our gospel lesson today: Not that God desires our suffering or pain, but that through the brokenness of our lives we come to see and experience the gospel message of Christ's grace, love, and redemption in a whole new way.

Through our brokenness we come to see and understand what it means to be othered, to be left behind, or mistreated by those we hold most dear.

Yet through Christ, we gain a living knowledge of what it means to be brought back into community, to be called beloved again, and to find a way to live into healing with the support of our family and friends.

Here at Holy Spirit Lutheran, we have our own story of division and healing in how following Christ's call to *welcome all* not only changed us individually, but as a congregation wholly and completely.

We weren't always a church that said "*All are welcome – and All means All*" – in fact, like many churches of our time we weren't fully aware of the pain we had caused the queer community by not welcoming them in God's name in the first place.

And it wasn't until we were confronted many years ago with a same-sex blessing for beloved members of the congregation that our divisions began to appear.

Through many hard discussions, congregational meetings, synodical threats, and even a congregational vote, Holy Spirit Lutheran was learning how to listen for the voice of God in the midst of our divisions, pain, and brokenness.

And while there is much more to this part of our shared story at Holy Spirit than I could hope to sum up in one sermon – the decision to become a welcoming and affirming congregation for 2SLGBTQIA+ peoples was and is foundational to the way we have come to see ourselves as a family of faith today.

And while we lost many equally beloved members with our decision to welcome all in God's name, we also gained an entire ministry of reconciliation and hope with and for one another in intentionally affirming the queer community.

A journey we continue to walk and expand even today as we host our very first all-ages Drag Storytime at Holy Spirit. Today we invite those who would have once been at the margins of our church community – drag kings and queens – into a central role, sharing their gifts with us as a *Reconciling in Christ* faith community. A gift we can gratefully receive because of the way we have learned, grown, and healed through our own time of division and pain to expand what it means to be a community centered in Christ’s love, welcome, and grace.

And I believe this story is part of what Jesus is trying so desperately to help us understand through these scriptures today. Jesus is talking about something central to all of us: the transformational power of God’s in-breaking kingdom – right here, right now, for us and for the whole of creation. Not just for some future day beyond what you or I see will ever know. It’s something Jesus is yearning for his disciples and for us to touch, taste, and see in this lifetime.

We pray for the coming of God’s kingdom every week, here in this place, when we join our hearts and voices to pray the prayer Christ taught us to say:

“Our Father in Heaven,  
Hallowed be your name,  
Your Kingdom Come...”

These are the words we say when we gather here looking for signs of hope. These are the words we say in worship to remind us of our place within our neighborhood and world.

And so, with today’s gospel, I began to wonder how far I would let this prayer go in my life – especially in relationship to the wider world?

When I am thinking about my life, my needs, my wants, my heart’s desires, I want God’s presence to come.

When I think about our church and its place within the world, I want it to be a part of God’s in-breaking hope.

When I have sinned and fallen short, I want to know and hear God’s forgiveness and grace.

When I hear of the world’s poverty, inequality, abuse, and pain, I want God’s justice to rain down, creating real and tangible change.

Yet, what cost am I willing to pay for this manifestation of God’s kingdom?

Am I willing to surrender my own place of privilege and voice if it means others can finally have the same?

Am I willing to let my desires go if it means others would have a seat at the table?

Am I willing to risk confrontation with those I love to stop the spread of racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, and all the other ways our language and prejudice rob our community of equality?

Am I willing to be changed?

It's a hard question to ask, but it's one we are all called to hold as followers of Christ.

It's also a question that brings us back to the waters of Baptism, and the covenantal promises made on our behalf with God: Through the water and the word, God promises us grace upon grace as we walk through this world – offering us life, forgiveness, and hope to live, move, and breathe in the midst of a broken world.

Once you have experienced God's all-encompassing love and grace, you can't help but respond with your whole being. The Word of God's forgiveness and love changes us all to the core, and that transformation is what Jesus is declaring for us all through our scriptures today.

This isn't meant to scare us off from a life of discipleship with God. It's meant to point toward the radical nature Christ's message will have on our lives and our community if we let it. And the best news of all is that Christ is always at work within our lives to change, reform, and remake us into the very image of God.

So just as we are called to the hard work of bringing God's kingdom into our neighborhoods, schools, work places, playgrounds, and coffee shops, we know that Christ is at work within our own hearts – calling us to carry out our baptismal promises:

To place our trust in God.

To live our lives as an extension of the grace of God we have received.

To care for others and the world God made.

To work for justice and peace throughout the Earth.

Jesus' calls us toward a different vision of what the world can be – a world that is truly committed to welcoming God's grace, love, inclusion, and affirmation here and now.

Following Christ, and this Word of God, will change you. *Wholly and completely.*

Will you let it?

May this be so among us, Amen.