

## Keep on living in the grace of God!

Acts 13:26-43

March 19, 2006

### *Keep on living in the grace of God!*

Now that's good advice! To live in the grace of God means to live unfettered by the past and unafraid of the future. To live in the grace of God means to live with a strength and power and wisdom and courage beyond your own. To live in the grace of God means never being alone. To live in the grace of God means every day is a new day. To live in the grace of God means (responses from congregation):

- being loved
- being free
- being grateful
- being empowered to make the world a better place
- anticipation
- to be at peace with every person)

### *Keep on living in the grace of God!*

That was the advice Barnabas and Paul gave to the Jews and Gentiles in Antioch who were eager to know more about the good news that sets people free. This is not the same Antioch as the Antioch we discussed last week, Antioch on the Orontes, the administrative capital of the Roman province of Syria, one of the leading cities of the Roman Empire, the city some called the "Queen of the East."

That is the Antioch that was home to a fast growing church of Jew and Gentile believers mixed together, the church where believers were first called "Christians," the church where Barnabas and Paul spent twelve months teaching and meeting with the believers and serving the Lord.

That is the Antioch where the church was led by Barnabas and Paul (also known as Saul) and Simeon, the black African, and Lucius, the Cyrene, and Manaen, the childhood friend of Herod Antipas. These five served and prayed and fasted together and together they heard the call of the Holy Spirit:

*Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul, to do the work to which I have called them.*

And so they did. They prayed and laid hands on Barnabas and Paul and sent them off to spread the good news. Barnabas and Paul sailed to the island of Cyprus, Barnabas' native land, and preached the word of God in Salamis and Paphos. Then they sailed to the Asian mainland and made their way to Antioch in Pisidia.

On the Sabbath, they went to the synagogue in Antioch, and joined the other worshippers there. After reading from the Torah and from the prophets, the leaders of the synagogue asked the visitors if they had any words to share. Paul stood up and told them the Good News: the Good News that through Jesus, God has kept the promises made to Moses and to David and to all of their ancestors; the Good News that what God promised he would do, God has done by raising Jesus to life; the Good News that everyone who believes in Jesus is set free from sin.

Both Jews and Gentiles in that congregation were responsive to Paul's message and wanted to hear more. Many followed after Barnabas and Paul when the meeting was

over, and the evangelists from Antioch on the Orontes told them:

*Keep on living in the grace of God!*

It is good advice, because it is the grace of God that sets us free from our slavery to sin and to death. Sin binds us in two ways: by guilt and by shame.

By guilt I mean objective guilt: having done something wrong; having acted in a way that is damaging to ourselves, to another person, to the natural world, or to our relationship with God; the real guilt that attaches to us when we have acted unjustly, unfairly, unkindly, ungenerously.

By shame I mean subjective shame: feeling badly about ourselves; feeling worthless and dirty and small whatever we may or may not have done.

It is possible to feel shame without actually being guilty. We call such people "miserable," people trapped in their own self-hatred, people who have a tragically distorted view of themselves and of God, whether because of abuse or misinformation or an overactive conscience. You and I both know people like this.

It is also possible to be guilty without feeling any shame. We call such people "sociopaths," people without a conscience, people who will go on hurting and destroying and despoiling oblivious to any concerns but their own. Unfortunately, you and I both know people like this.

Both kinds of people are equally enslaved. Both kinds of people are deprived of joy and deprive others of joy. Both kinds of people are equally incapable of genuine intimacy with God and equally incapable of genuine intimacy with other people.

Then there are those people who bear the burden of both guilt and shame. We call such people "sinners." You and I both know people like this. You and I both are people like this! We are trapped by the cycle of brokenness described by the same Paul who addressed the people in the synagogue in Antioch. We fail to do the good we want to do, and all too often, we do the evil we don't want to do. We want to love God and to be loved by God, but at the same time we defy God and refuse to listen to God and push God to the sidelines of our lives.

*Who will rescue me, unhappy man that I am?, Paul cried. Thanks be to God, who does this through our Lord Jesus Christ!*

There are people who are set free from guilt and from shame. We call such people "saved," saved by the grace of God. People set free from shame by God's unconditional forgiveness offered in Jesus Christ. People who carry no more the burden of self-hatred because the relentless love of God keeps lifting it away. People who now see themselves clearly because they see themselves as God sees them -- as beloved children, Jesus' own siblings, Jesus' own sisters and brothers.

But that is only half the story of grace. If grace does no more than remove our shame, we remain trapped in our guilt. If we continue to sin, if we continue to act unjustly, unfairly, unkindly, ungenerously, if we continue to do damage to ourselves, to other people, to the natural world, to our relationship with God, then we are still held fast by our slavery to sin.

Grace is more than semantics, more than making excuses, more than just saying, *It's okay*, more than mere forgiveness. Grace removes real guilt by removing the cause of guilt. Grace sets us free by making us free, by changing us, by utterly transforming us. God's grace makes us new creatures, new human beings:

*The old is gone, the new has come!*

God's grace gives us the strength and power and wisdom and courage to act justly and fairly and kindly and generously. God's grace gives us the power to heal wounds, not to make them. God's grace takes away our shame and provides us with the means and the power to live a new life, to live a new way of life. That's good news. And that's why it is such good advice to *keep on living in the grace of God!*

*Keep on living in the grace of God!*

Let God set you free from the trap of shame. Stop beating yourself up. There is nothing noble or righteous about putting yourself down. Stop beating yourself up and accept the forgiveness God offers you. Right here! Right now!

And let God set you free from the trap of guilt. Let God *transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind*. Let God create in you a new heart. Let God put on you and in you the marks of a child of God: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, tolerance, love.

*Keep on living in the grace of God!*

Unfettered by the past and unafraid of the future. Drawing on a strength and power and wisdom and courage beyond your own. Knowing you are never alone. And living each new day for what it is: a new day!