

Galatians 6:[1-6] 7-16, Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

I'm going to ask you to use your imagination. You've just discovered that your 7-year-old son has been using your credit card number to purchase in game items for his favorite video game.

What do you do? Do you call the cops and have him arrested? After all, if this has been going on for some time then you might be out some serious dough. It's credit fraud. They could face up to one year in jail. Would you do that?

What your child has done is stealing. He's broken one of the 10 commandments laid down by God at Mt. Sinai. So, he's a big-time sinner. You could probably just kick him out of the family. Send him out on his own because he's broken one of God's main commandments, over and over again. You can't associate yourself with someone like that, who deliberately disregards God's law that way, can you?

Now, I'm hoping that both those solutions sound ridiculous to you. This is your child. There will be consequences for his actions to be sure. Punishment of some kind (repayment of what was stolen, extra chores, grounding), a long conversation, a loss of some privileges for a time (no more video games!) until trust has been regained. But one way or the other, this is your child. Part of your family, and you will work to restore them and your relationship with them, with gentle firmness. Showing them your love, even as you show them that what they did was harmful to them and to you. You stay in relationship with them, because they are family.

Paul in his letter to the Galatians reminds us that this is part of our call as members of the Body of Christ that is the church, the assembly of believers. Whenever we detect that someone has transgressed, sinned, is travelling a path other than that laid down by God, we are called,... to attend to them, to come close and restore them to relationship. There may be consequences, there may be a time where trust needs to be restored. But we do this because despite their sin, they are still members of the Body of Christ. They are family... and deserving of love and mercy. Of restoration.

I wonder, though, do we always do this? Or at the very least do we make clear as a people that this is our stance? Do we make clear that when a sibling in Christ crosses boundaries, even major ones, they are still one of us?

I remember when I was serving at First Lutheran we were having staff meeting and someone asked whether we had seen the Smith family recently. I had their twin girls in my Confirmation class and as I thought about it, I hadn't seen them in awhile. When everyone agreed they hadn't been seen in some time, the Senior Pastor made a call on them. It turns out that their business had gone under and they felt like they couldn't show up at church. While there was no sin involved, at worst it was a bad business plan, they felt like they were not worthy of being present in worship. Of being part of the community.

It made my heart ache when I learned this. This is why we exist, to be present for one another in all those ways we stumble, whether through sin, or addiction, or bad business decisions. We are present with and for each other. This is what we are called to. As Paul says later in our Galatians reading, "whenever we have an

opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.”

I have seen the same thing happen when a couple divorces, or someone gets arrested for DUI, something like that. People disappear. Perhaps it is just their own shame over what has occurred, that they had decided that we as an assembly of believers will judge them, not receive them...even of that is not true. But, at the very least, we as an assembly, need to take responsibility for the fact that we all, together, have not made it abundantly clear that you are one of us, regardless.

And perhaps that is because we have not fully accepted our own need for God’s grace in our lives. I was watching a couple of specials on Martin Luther and the Reformation this week in preparation for Confirmation this fall. I have heard the story of Luther’s life countless times. I have watched tv biographies and movies on Luther starting with the old black and white one on reel to reel when I was a kid. I’ve read at least 6 biographies on Luther. But there was something about the moment in one of these documentaries of Luther’s revelation from Paul about God’s relationship to us that gave me a moment of clarity about Luther. Up to that point, despite all of his teaching and pushback on the Roman Catholic Church, Luther still could not reconcile himself with God. Until Luther got it. That we are made right with God not by what we do, but purely through the grace of God shown to us in Jesus Christ. Who welcomed all, who forgave all, who extended God’s mercy with shocking abandon. Enough to earn the reproach of the religious leaders.

In this documentary, watching Luther's revelation unfold, I saw, felt, got it...that it is really only when we understand our own need for God's grace and mercy.

When we come face to face with our own sinfulness, are honest with ourselves about all those ways that our lives fall short. Only then can we truly offer that grace and mercy to someone else. Not with a slight looking down our nose, "Oh you poor person, of course we'll forgive you" kind of condescending attitude, but with the knowing desperation of one drowning woman sharing their life preserver with another drowning woman. With a joyous exultation, "I've found it! We are saved! Here is what we cling to."

This is one of those things we should make abundantly clear. That we who assemble here are not perfect. Not by a long shot. That we don't have it all together. That our relationships can get rocky. That our businesses have troubles. That we are not free of sin.

I'm sure everyone in here right now could name a sin that continues to grip them and their lives. Ones we might label big and small; but sin, is sin, is sin. And sin separates us from each other and the love of God.

We all need the grace that God offers. We all need this community of imperfect people to come alongside us, and seek to restore us, when we falter in those bigger more public ways, when we rupture relationship. We need this community to come alongside us, to restore us, when those hidden sins, the ones we just cannot shake, finally become too much. And in this community of interdependence, when we bear one another's burdens in this way... Paul reminds us that we fulfill the "Law of Christ". The Law that says, go...and do likewise. Do as Jesus did.

And we know that the only way we can bear one another's burdens, that we can come alongside and restore others, is when we fully acknowledge our own need for God's grace and mercy. When we stare at our own sin and know God's forgiveness. When we understand that grace and mercy is not ours to own but only ours to give and share with the same shocking abandon that Jesus did. One that should scandalize the world we live in.

And we are reminded that this restoration and burden bearing is the good work that we do for all! Even if especially for those who are fellow believers. So, our circle of care is for all in need of mercy, whether it is those who have come to our nation seeking refugee status, those who have done us wrong, those who espouse political ideas we will fight to our last breath to end, all of these are ones we are called to show mercy and grace to. All of them!

This is the radical community God in Jesus Christ calls us to. And it is my prayer that we would live this out in such a way that if one who has transgressed pulls away from this community it is not for lack of knowing that we will receive them. And it is my prayer that such a one would be pursued with love, to bring them back into relationship. Into this imperfect assembly of continually forgiven and redeemed sinners.

I have seen people who have had their lives transformed by the grace and mercy of God. I have seen communities who have been transformed when they have risked living as such a community. Intentionally reaching out to one who has transgressed and walking with them in a spirit of gentleness until they are restored. And in those moments, I can speak with certainty that the Kingdom of God has come near.

It is my prayer and fervent hope, that we at St. John Lutheran Church, Emboldened by the Gospel of Jesus Christ and strengthened by the grace and mercy we receive through this meal, would continue to grow in our own love of one another. That we would strive to bear one another's burden's and work to restore all to relationship with one another. That we would continue to be transformed by this love, and grace, and forgiveness. That we would be known for our extravagant love, for bearing one another's burdens, and in so doing, fulfill our calling as the assembled people of God. Let it be so. Amen.