

Hearts Open Wide
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
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2 Corinthians 6:1-13

The Apostle Paul has visited the Corinthians twice by now, and he knows them pretty well.

He knows them well enough to know they are a colony of former slaves - freed persons, those who were formerly held as chattel by the Roman Empire, one of history's largest slave holding societies.

Paul knows them well enough to know that they still bear the brutal scars - emotional, spiritual and physical - of their prior enslavement.

In today's passage, he focuses on grace; more specifically, Paul is concerned that the Corinthians might "*accept the grace of God in vain.*" Now, let's be clear: the reality of God's grace is not under question—it's what we do with it that matters.

Will they accept this amazing grace in vain?
Or will they live a new way in light of that grace?
Will their experience of grace be extended beyond themselves?
Will they pour out grace upon others?

I think it's a question that we still ask today. No, seriously. TODAY. As in Strawberry Festival Weekend.

When our feet are tired and our back gets sore. When our kids start bugging us for the last remnants of cash in our wallets. When we've answered cheerfully for the twentieth time where the port-o-potties are located. Even more, when we're tasked again with cleaning those port-o-potties.

Will we pour out grace upon others, when we are tired and restless?

German preacher and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, executed under the Nazi regime for his dissidence, shared Paul's concerns. Bonhoeffer spoke of "cheap grace": the kind that does not entail discipleship. For Paul and Bonhoeffer, God's grace is free and unearned and abundant—and it makes us accountable.

Accountable to discipleship,
accountable to creating a grace-filled world,
accountable to extending grace to others
accountable to not accepting God's grace in vain.

Sensing that the Corinthians might also be confused on how to live differently in light of grace, Paul reminds them that God hears and helps. He repeats to them the words found in the Book of Isaiah: *"At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you."* And then Paul places the Corinthians in the midst of Isaiah's words: *"See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!"*

God is already listening, and already helping! What good news for the people of God, from Corinth to Monroe: as we struggle to live anew with God's grace and carry it into the world, we are not alone. In the midst of our uncertainty, God is already listening to our hearts, already helping us discover how to receive grace and extend that grace to others.

Paul goes on to describe the trials and tribulations he has endured as a servant of God. Hardships, beatings, imprisonments, labors, hunger.

I hope and I truly pray that is NOT your experience of this Strawberry Festival weekend!

Paul, like the Corinthians, is freshly acquainted with the brutality of imperial power, with the cruelty of the state. Yet in the face of aggression, he recounts triumphs, too, like those moments when he has been able to demonstrate patience, kindness, genuine love, truthful speech in the midst of all the violence that surrounds him.

Paul maintains that his service to God is commendable through it all. Perhaps this is one response to grace: to be good and faithful servants through it all. To build the kingdom of God here and now, even in the midst of injustice and cruelty.

His words call attention to our own times: our treatment of each other is so often different from our true nature. How remarkably we forget the truest nature of God's beloved people, whatever their origins.

Here is the word of God for us: grace requires an open heart. To make grace real for ourselves—and for others, for those who most need it—we must open wide our hearts also.

I think how that happens – how our hearts are opened - is something that each of us can decide for ourselves. After all, only you can say where your own heart has been hardened, or where you have restricted your affections.

What will you find today when you open wide your hearts to your neighbors in Monroe? How can you start by listening? What will you learn is most needed, most longed for, when you listen first?

As you participate today in the 49th Annual MCC Strawberry Festival, remember that whatever your role, you are doing something important: participating in the mission of God in your neighborhood. Do so with your heart pointing outward, not inward. Be vulnerable. Trust in God. Trust in your community. The more you and I do that OUT THERE, the more we will learn about who (and whose) we really are IN HERE.

God's grace and the human heart. For Paul, only by opening our hearts can we build a more gracious world. People of God, let us not accept God's grace in vain. Like Paul, let us commend ourselves as servants of God through it all. Let us make grace manifest... the world simply cannot wait. Amen.